

Martin Luther King Jr.  
and the Image of God

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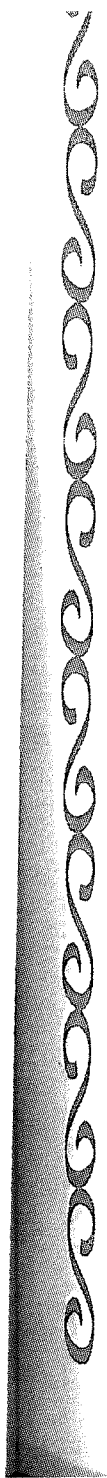
# King's Theological Implications

From his outlook as theologian, King drew at least four major conclusions from his explication of image of God, which ultimately formed the basis of his civil rights appeal and the core of this book's development of his theological anthropology. The first two conclusions are strikingly similar to that of his early black church and abolitionist predecessors; the third and fourth advance King into new and somewhat uncharted theological terrain. <sup>4</sup>

First, all individuals, as children of God, were equally valued inasmuch as they were birthed with an inherent dignity. Second, human beings had an intrinsic worth that in and of itself became the requisite for the bestowal of just and fair treatment. Third, in addition to warranting just treatment by virtue of their having been created in the image of God, humanity thus created possessed the capacity to cooperate with God by living out the mandates of their moral conscience, such that the desire to choose to do that which is socially good can actually be translated into the deed itself. Fourth and finally, image of God provided the existential common ground for genuine community-building, making beloved community, in its broadest sense, a distinct historical possibility.

Each of these four considerations shall be summarized with thought given to how King related to the church theologically. In recent years, numerous references have been made to King's identification with black church theology; few attempts, however, have been made to delineate the subtle ways in which King adopted and yet distinguished himself in a theologically critical manner. Admittedly,

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while a work focused on King's thought and life cannot possibly be expected to provide the contoured analysis often provided by black church historians, if the claim is that King's *theology* was a product of, and therefore identifies with, the black church, greater care should be taken by all disciplines of study to then accurately convey and substantiate their respective theological orientations over a given time frame, assuming that King's and the church's theological views have, in fact, been sufficiently clarified and/or understood. The following reflects a summary of that attempt to bring such clarity to the subject.

#1 Imago Dei and Human Dignity

The first of four implications identifiable in King's theological anthropology was the belief that all human beings were individuals of dignity. In short, everybody was somebody of significance. In keeping with arguments raised a century before his, King echoed the need to counter the false claims of human superiority and inferiority, particularly those that were premised upon false notions of race. Racial assumptions erroneously affirmed the dignity of some while systematically denying the humanity of others. As in the case of the activists who preceded him, the underlying basis for King's civil rights appeal and its emphasis on the question of human dignity was not sociopolitical but theological, although he certainly understood the relationship between the two. As King so often acknowledged, few sociopolitical documents captured and expressed the dignity of the human spirit as did those within the American political context. The language was celebrated by him for being succinct and unsurpassed in its potential to model the social good. In fact, Lewis V. Baldwin rightly acknowledges King's high regard for the ideals conveyed in the language of the nation's founding documents. According to King, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation were political writings that captured and communicated something of the sublime. By leveraging the democratic principles embodied by these documents, King hoped to usher America into a fuller realization of liberty and justice for all its citizens. His was not an anarchistic campaign of unconcern or disregard for democratic principle. Rather, he sought to honor and work within the legal boundaries of America's sociopolitical system, while attempting to hold it accountable to the millions of African Americans who were being denied their rights. At bottom, King rightly regarded the "sacred political documents" and the democratic governmental process that allowed for their implementation. Particularly within a social scenario that allowed for the choosing of that which was evil as a result of humanity's fallenness, the protection of human rights and human dignity via

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King liked the language from founding documents

political process represented a necessary good. King, however, understood that the documents, while providing the theoretical model for democratic process, were slow to inspire a consideration of all as persons of human dignity, and therefore required a call to accountability.

If the nation's founding documents proposed to acknowledge and protect human rights on the basis of life as sacred, their proposal had not extended far enough to include the dignity and worth of African Americans. King alluded to this apparent inconsistency in his graduate student papers: "America," he explained, "gave its full pledge of freedom 75 years ago. Slavery has been a strange paradox in a nation founded on the principles that all men are created free and equal."<sup>1</sup> Though King presumed that the documents were written with the potential for a more inclusive read, the recurring self-evident fact was that the abolishment of slavery and its resulting social failings were not a real consideration in the minds of those who first conceived of an American democracy in which "all men are created equal" and therefore guaranteed "certain unalienable rights." This uneasy social climate defined King's involvement in a civil rights movement that spanned three U.S. presidencies, those of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. As signs of resistance to the movement increased, King found himself grappling with the disheartening realization that the political documents he evoked in his earlier appeals for civil rights were not, in fact, originally written with Americans of African descent in mind. This renewed awareness of the framers' original intent and the "strange paradox" of its lingering sociopolitical ambiguities led King to conclude years later that the Declaration of Independence "has never had any real meaning in terms of implementation in our lives."<sup>2</sup> While referencing the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Emancipation Proclamation with obvious frequency, Lewis Baldwin and Michael Dyson are correct in their assertion that King minimized, and all but withdrew his reliance upon, the "sacred documents in American political life" during his final years (1965-1968).<sup>3</sup> While the documents guaranteed the protection of rights for a vast majority of Americans, those of African descent essentially remained unattended. In their original intent and, therefore, in their implementation, the documents required the kind of fluid interpretation that would one day allow for the marginalized to be brought into the mainstream.

The same, however, cannot be said of King's unswerving reliance on the theology of image of God and the ways in which he considered its original intent with respect to the human condition. Whereas the sociopolitical statements were in need of being expanded in scope with regard to meaning and inclusion, the theological narrative attached to the creation of humanity provided a self-evident expression of God's intent for all humanity from the beginning.

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problem: founding docs don't include AA

King believed away from founding docs in final years

*As such, the rationale for the bestowal of human dignity and humane treatment, like the Declaration's, was consistently centered in this theological premise that all humanity were created equally in the image of God. All humanity, therefore, were fundamentally endowed by God with dignity upon birth. This resolute commitment to that truth formed the basis of his appeal for civil rights from Montgomery to Memphis. As previously noted, this is not to say that King did not incorporate secular reasoning into his overall conception. As would be expected, King integrated the best ideals of his liberal democracy into speeches and addresses that were necessarily prepared for audiences that were representative of the public square.<sup>4</sup> His ideological center, however, was not socio-political but theological. His mediation of terms, political and otherwise, was unapologetically interpreted and developed through theological lenses. After all, King considered his role as a Baptist minister/public theologian foremost and the biblical text, from which his framework originated, as normative.<sup>5</sup> For him, as in the case of the early black church, certain liberal Protestants, and abolitionists, imago Dei, as the scriptural rationale for human egalitarianism, "contained real meaning in terms of implementation" despite the Declaration's failure to do so.<sup>6</sup>*

*↓ see p. 27*  
To affirm one's place in the world as a "child of God" made in the "image of God" was to affirm one's sense of self-worth. For King, to embrace this theological statement as true was to refute the myths of racial inferiority, thereby providing a historically oppressed people with the psychological ability to move beyond centuries of oppressive socialization bent toward the creation of an impotent labor force. Few, King reasoned, would challenge a denial of their rights as long as their perceived place in the world dictated that they were somehow undeserving of, and unfit for, first-class citizenship and the rights thereof. More than a violation of law, an image of God framework brought attention to the violation of one's personhood. Lives conditioned by low thoughts of inferiority acclimated to the social status; to have been made in the image of God, however, radically reoriented that perspective. Contrary to the view that "Negroes" were destined to be "toters of water and hewers of wood," King held to the belief in the dignity and worth of all humanity. To acknowledge and affirm one's relationship to God was to assume a newfound dignity. It also called for a radical rethinking about how human beings relate to others. At bottom, his decision to assign individual meaning and worth to the disenfranchised by virtue of one's creative origin, while not degrading the worth of others, established the grounds for a proper personal assessment. Theologically, King understood the difficulty in attempting to love others apart from having the capacity to affirm and love self. In the wake of questionable sociological and biological analyses of the "Negro" plight, King offered an alternative theological analysis as a means

of reorienting one's worldview toward the accommodation of a more generous regard for self. King often spoke of the damaging influences of history and the need to alter one's sense of self by reintroducing those with an incorrect sense of self to this image of God view. The primacy of this belief was presented in his description of religion's role in firming up one's sense of Somebodyness:

Once plagued with a tragic sense of inferiority resulting from the crippling effects of slavery and segregation, the Negro has now been driven to re-evaluate himself. He has come to feel that he is somebody. His religion reveals to him that God loves all His children and that the important thing about man is not "his specificity but his fundamentum, not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin but his eternal worth to God."<sup>7</sup>

If individuals were deserving and worthy of rights that were civil, it was a result of divine declaration, not simply the Declaration of Independence. "The Negro," as King explained, "came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children and that every man, from a bass black to a treble white, is significant on God's keyboard."<sup>8</sup> Apart from this profound sense of basic human worth, which was common to all, a movement for rights that were civil seemed less plausible, given the alarming record of sociopolitical reluctance and resistance to integrating African Americans into the social mainstream. King, therefore, saw in this theological description of the human condition an occasion to raise the once latent hopes of those considered "the least among us." If no other doctrine or creed spoke definitively to the question of human identity, the idea of existing as a "child of God" made in the "image of God" certainly did. Human life has been infused with meaning, significance, and dignity. As a result, when King confronted power with love, he did not do so with a "hat-in-hand" approach. An appeal for civil rights was not a matter of social service panhandling. Rather, it represented an engaging moral discourse on the basis of an egalitarianism that theologically warranted the assurance of civil treatment for all. In his estimate, every human being was a deserving recipient of justice and goodwill because, simply stated, every human being was equally recognized as a child of God. And it was this sense of "being in the world" that essentially fostered a spirit of restless determination to carve out a sociological reality that would catch up with this theological hope. King explains: "And that's all this whole thing is about. We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying that we are God's children. And that we don't have to live like we are forced to live."<sup>9</sup>

*Every human being is a child of God = (cf. p. 27)*

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In its most basic form, King's appeal for civil rights was premised upon the theological fact of "Somebodyness," the understanding that everybody was "somebody" because everybody was created and conceived in the image of God. Irrespective of ethnic origin, persons defined by this shared sacred origin merited serious unbiased acknowledgment inasmuch as the image of God assigned the highest degree of Somebodyness and worth upon all human life. The idea of humanity created in the image of God provided the basis for attempts to level all provincial ideas that were developed with the intent of systematically devaluing certain populations within a given society. For King, this immoral tendency toward the insidious assignment of artificial stereotypes not only eroded human personality but also stifled the potential creation of just and caring relationships within a given society. As such, the image of God represented King's chief argument against the racially induced claims of Negro inferiority and all the associated acts of systemic discrimination. In essence, this concept of human life as dignified represented the bottom line insofar as the idea of mutual regard was concerned. It served as the universal invitation to fulfill the so-called Golden Rule by treating others as they themselves would want to be treated. In keeping with this idea, Rufus Burrow writes, "The universe is created in such a way that everybody ought to be treated with dignity and respect just because they are."<sup>10</sup> Beyond a narrow, and at times faulty, biological analysis of the self and others, King understood that one might entertain a more thoroughgoing account of human being by acknowledging humanity's essence. In the final analysis, an individual's worth and dignity were discovered in consideration of who they essentially were, not in what they may or may not have possessed materially. King explained: "This innate worth referred to in the phrase the 'image of God' is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator."<sup>11</sup>

If segregation and racial discrimination helped foster the institution of inferior and unequal social categories on the basis of race, an image of God conception offered an alternate worldview through which alienated members of the human family could view themselves and others as ontologically equal. This sense of connectedness provided the precondition to the development of relationships defined by their sense of genuine regard for the other. In so doing, the affirmation of one's genuine self and one's true place in the world consequently created the intellectual space for one to imagine new possibilities for relationships. In King's estimate, individuals were not somebody over others but somebody with or among other somebodies, and as such there could be no "graded scale of essential worth." Hence, to affirm the idea of our likeness

to God was to affirm the idea that no one was essentially "less than." To suggest that all were created in the image of God was to establish a baseline with regard to human self-understanding. As such, he interpreted the sociopolitical in theological terms, with an imagining of *imago Dei* and its implied meaning for the fundamental adjustment of all social relations.<sup>12</sup> For King, this kind of far-reaching shift in the way the other was viewed established the locus, as in the case of the antislavery advocates preceding him, for the development of his mid-twentieth-century social justice framework. From Montgomery to Memphis, one could readily recognize Douglass's passionate appeal for the abolishment of slavery and justice similarly voiced in the "image of God" language appropriated by King a century later. Basic to King's appeal was the shared sentiment that injustice could no longer be viewed as being compatible with their reaffirmation of God's work in the nation and world. Persons were expected to march, protest, and participate at the dictate of human dignity. At bottom, all individuals were deserving of just social dealings, in response to and as an expression of their innate human dignity. As such, human dignity called for a response to life's indignities.

In his book *Somebodyness: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Theory of Dignity*, Garth Baker-Fletcher provides helpful insights into King's understanding of what it meant to have been created in the image of God. While there are clearly a number of language similarities, the emphasis of the present work tends to be considerably nuanced. Whereas Fletcher appears to place the idea of human dignity as the centerpiece of King's image of God conception, this work sees King's explication of human dignity as one of several complex implications for image of God and its meaning for human(e) living. As opposed to reading human dignity as the center, this work develops the idea of human dignity as a logical starting place for the way in which King argued at least three additional progressively related positions. (Hence, King could say, since we are created in the image of God, therefore. . . .) Also, Fletcher presents the idea of human dignity as an ideal that King somehow hoped humanity would work toward achieving. This work, however, contends that King understood human dignity as a matter of human awareness and not one of human attainment. While civil issues requiring the desegregation and integration of society were in need of being attained and realized, human dignity simply required an awareness of a given human quality. King believed that human beings, those who were made in the image of God, were by nature persons of worth and dignity. For King, human beings did not have to march and protest to somehow achieve dignity. They engaged in marches and protest as a result of the dignity that defined their human existence, with hopes that the more favorable social circumstances external to their lives would catch up with their inherent spiritual condition.

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Instead of striding to achieve human dignity, as one would stride toward freedom, they were simply in need of cooperating with the Eternal by acknowledging and living with an awareness of that which they possessed upon birth.

Hence, in seeking to undergird the denigrated and disenfranchised with a philosophy of "Somebodyness" that was universally and unconditionally accessible, King offered his image of God concept with a theological understanding that one's sense of human worth was not ultimately derived from the conjecture and status claims of our horizontal existence.<sup>13</sup> The assignment of human worth was not a product of human agency. Human agency could describe and define human worth, but it could not dictate who the recipients should or, as in the case of African Americans, should not be. For King, all human beings were individuals of assigned value simply because God deemed them so. Human beings were created as the objects of God's love and holistic concern. The indelible reflection of God's image was the sublime characteristic that most distinguished the state of being human and was thus considered the quintessential affirmation of human personality and the fundamental explanation of one's personal worth.

## 2) *Imago Dei* and Human Rights

As discussed in chapter 4, King's understanding of human nature suggested that human beings, while born with a propensity toward evil, were also birthed with an inherent sense of worth and human dignity. Moreover, he reasoned that all of "God's children," inasmuch as they have been birthed with inherent worth, should have a basic threshold of justice made available to them. In this nonprovincial sense, King concurred with a broad Jeffersonian interpretation of the ideal that "all men are *created* equal, and that they are endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable rights." Prior to any natural consideration and apart from any politically administered social contract, human relations warranted a high degree of social parity as a result of the moral law and the sacred nature of human existence. Unlike Tocqueville, who in the 1830s observed that the American colonizers were "born equal instead of becoming so,"<sup>14</sup> as a result of their "state of democracy," King essentially embraced an appeal that associated civil rights with birthrights that were validated as a result of having been birthed in the image of God, irrespective of geographic locality or political affiliation. In so doing, King imagined civil rights as a divine endowment that was in need of being equally protected inasmuch as all human beings were equally created. That is to say, the circumstances of one's birth should not obviate or occasion his experience of the basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of

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happiness. As such, the enjoyment and/or denial of rights that were civil could not be based on race, class structure, or religious persuasion and be considered morally correct. In contrast to egregious regimes and states typified by feudal and caste systems, the Declaration of Independence provided King with a political framework that indiscriminately protected the basic rights of every human being of American citizenship, irrespective of class, culture, or creed. Irrespective of the original intent, or the lack thereof, that document of independence gave voice to the disenfranchised masses as well. King affirmed this truth when he wrote:

For in a real sense, America is essentially a dream. . . . One of the first things we notice in this dream is an amazing universalism. It does not say some men, but it says all men. . . . And there is another thing we notice in this dream that ultimately distinguishes democracy and our form of government from all totalitarian regimes that emerge in history. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state. To discover where they came from, it is necessary to move back behind the dim mist of eternity, for they are God-given. Very seldom if ever in the history of the world has a socio-political document expressed in such profoundly eloquent and unequivocal language the dignity and the worth of human personality. The American dream reminds us that every man is heir to the legacy of worthiness.<sup>15</sup>

This rudimentary belief in the American dream, and in human beings as persons of worth, established the theological rationale for bridging theoretical and practical aspects of just living. His was a theology that bridged the hope for justice with a working methodology to achieve greater degrees of justice. For King, theory and application merged within a social context defined by mutual regard and acts of unrequited benevolence. As King explained, "And when we truly believe in the sacredness of human personality, we won't exploit people, we won't trample over people with the iron feet of oppression, we won't kill anybody."<sup>16</sup> In other words, when we genuinely believe the dream, when we believe that all are created by God with certain basic rights, our creeds will be translated into constructive action plans that are designed to elevate the least among us. In this respect, King thought it not inappropriate to involve himself in so-called political affairs. After all, he understood himself to be advocating and advancing the rights chartered for children of God, not simply citizens of a nation. More than local citizens, the elderly who were discriminated against on Montgomery's buses and the disgruntled sanitation workers who were denied fair wages and working conditions in Memphis represented God's precious "children."

shows how American identity is God-given

As such, the Constitution could not justifiably withhold the bestowal of rights that it did not, and in fact could not, originally confer. In his confrontation with injustice, as in the case of the antislavery and pro-Reconstruction voices that preceded him, King resorted to a theological anthropology that related the dignity of human worth to the guarantee of certain basic rights.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, King appropriated and followed the freedom tradition of the early black church and its nineteenth-century interpretation of *imago Dei* quite closely. As King reminded his Memphis hearers:

\* We don't need any bricks and bottles, we don't need any Molotov cocktails, we just need to go around to these stores and to these massive industries in our country, and say, God sent us here, to say to you that you're not treating his children right. And we've come here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda—fair treatment, where God's children are concerned.<sup>18</sup>

The appeal to the city officials was simply for the exercise of fair treatment. Fair treatment, said King, not simply where the taxpaying citizens of Memphis were concerned but fair treatment insofar as the plight of "God's children" was concerned. If colonial citizens once revolted over the idea of taxation without representation, certainly there should be a massive outcry over the mistreatment of those who were also created to experience a destiny of dignity. As such, image of God represented one of the civil rights movement's chief cornerstones. Rightly understood, it was an insight that centered the conversation's premise for the fair treatment of others in the arena of theological fact. While recognizing the potency of political documents to describe the idea of human dignity and to protect the notion of fair treatment through judicial process, King joined abolitionists of earlier centuries in centering his hopes for the granting of civil rights in the sublime yet pragmatic idea of having been created in God's likeness. While making frequent reference to political jargon as a means of shaping his public discourse, ultimately he understood that the idea of fair treatment as a moral condition was derivative of yet another realm of meaning. As theologian, King grasped for ideas, language, and concepts that for him reflected ultimate and even universal meaning. Beyond the question of constitutionality, King, not unaware of the historical debate, viewed civil rights as the championing of human treatment that was God-granted. Fairness, as an expression of just dealings in human relations, was expected by virtue of humanity's relatedness to God and one another as persons created in the image of God. On the eve of his assassination, a fatigued King, unapologetic in his insistence that one's inherent human dignity warranted civil and humane treatment, called for an additional march to advocate and further protest the unjust

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treatment of those fashioned in God's image. The level of suffering among many African Americans could no longer be ignored and, insofar as King was concerned, could no longer be tolerated. Upon his arrival in Memphis, King said: "Now we are going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be. And force everybody to see that there are 1,300 of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That's the issue."<sup>19</sup>

That was the issue for King, as it similarly was the issue for those who preceded him—advocating the rights of individuals made in God's image, individuals abandoned to "wonder how things were going to come out." Whether the circumstances spoke to the inevitability of emancipation or the fair employment of sanitation workers, the issue remained the same: humans created in the image of God warranted civil treatment. For King, an anthropology developed upon an image of God premise could not ignore the cause and effects of human suffering, nor could it dismiss the complex discussions related to ways of minimizing it. By no means did King live under the illusion that human suffering could be eliminated altogether. He did, however, believe that human beings should genuinely work toward an existence that would bring the human family closer to an expression that more perfectly reflected what it meant to be created in God's image. To accept, therefore, the theological fact that all were made in the image of God was also to suggest that the disadvantaged, voiceless, and powerless among us should not be overlooked, neglected, or, worse yet, exploited by the advantaged. While the poor and suffering were said to "be with us always," the issue raised by King suggested that they did not have to be the same poor always. Those who were of considerable means and influence were compelled to consider the plight of the poor, particularly those who were impoverished as a result of intentional denial and/or restricted opportunity. As King traveled the country and witnessed the disparities in housing, health care, education, and economics, it was clear that not near enough attention was being directed to narrow the gap between rich and poor. His concern, while national, also took on a global perspective, making King's scope in this regard was quite broad. At bottom, King supposed that the material wealth and resources of the world were sufficient to benefit the residents of the world, not simply a privileged population that seemingly benefited most from their demise. Whether citizens of America, Asia, South America, Africa, or wherever poverty was perpetuated, fellow travelers created in the image of God should neither morally justify nor comfortably adjust their conscience to that desperate condition.

Much more was at stake than the denial of basic human goods. King believed that much more was involved than the fundamental denial of food,



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clothing, shelter, and health care. More than the neglect of human services and material goods, to neglect the poor was to neglect an aspect of self. Since life was understood as being interrelated, to deny others was to deny self, even though that act of denial may have been thought to be done in the interest of so-called enlightened self-interest. King would argue that injustice and the neglect of the poor are rarely if ever reflections of enlightened activity, and certainly not in accordance with one's self-interest. Irrespective of one's social status, although separated by an economic gulf, all members of the human family were considered morally bound by the tie of their common humanity, and moreover by their common sacredness, having been created in the image of God. The social implications of this theological anthropology were profound. To ignore the poor was to concurrently ignore self; it was to ignore a deeper spiritual impulse that defined what it meant to be human(e). To do harm to another was to harm and debase oneself. In a 1962 address prepared for an annual church conference, King spoke to this issue of sacred worth and the degree to which an embrace of the idea ought to translate into meaningful, nonoppressive interrelationships. To do otherwise was to violate, and to even do violence to life as intended along the horizontal social plane. King said, "So long as the Negro is treated as a means to an end, so long as he is seen as anything less than a person of sacred worth, the image of God is abused in him, and consequently and proportionately lost by those who inflict the abuse."<sup>20</sup> More than judicial debate about the ethics of civil treatment, one's soul and the soul of the nation were at stake. King, therefore, believed that the bestowal of rights was a necessary implication of what it meant to be made in the image of God not simply for the good of the one who became the recipient of that right to life opportunities but for the sake of the advocate as well. In short, to come to aid, to protect and preserve the rights of others, was to aid, protect, and preserve the soul of that individual, that community, and that nation.

Having considered the role of the advantaged and their relationship to the less-advantaged and the disadvantaged, King also gave thought to the role and responsibility of the recipients of injustice. Not only did the privileged need to see the less privileged as worthy recipients of justice, the less privileged, those often stereotyped as somehow inferior, had to see themselves as persons of worth and great dignity. In so doing, King understood the relationship between self-esteem and self-determination. He understood the relationship between one's ability to translate a healthy sense of self-worth into a distinctive form of self-help. In this regard, the image of God assertion represented that internal dynamic that could favorably empower and direct one's destiny when affirmed. As outlined in the previous chapter, King believed that human beings possessed the ability to choose, and that those who were oppressed could choose to

celebrate their humanity by asserting their shared right to life. Notwithstanding the absence of an affirming social infrastructure external to oneself, "image of God" informed individual awareness via this internal deposit of human dignity. Persons could affirm, "I am somebody" because of who they intrinsically were and in direct proportion to that reality consider themselves worthy of certain basic rights. American citizens who realized their true place in society could also realize the significance of their stand for first-class citizenship in a first-class nation, despite the maltreatment that might have suggested that they were otherwise undeserving. King, therefore, reasoned that a "child of God," made in the image of God, possessed sufficient standing in and of himself to commence and determine a reordering of his own social paradigm. The relationship between self-awareness and self-determination, therefore, came as a reminder that relationships with others could be altered due to one's relationship with God. As a child of God, one had the civic and moral obligation to oppose laws that were inconsistent with the moral law and its prescribed sense of justice. To acquiesce was to deny one's "birthright" and to essentially become complicit with the conveyors of injustice.

For King, to participate in the civil rights movement was to participate in a modern-day great awakening of sorts. Unlike Rip Van Winkle, the fable character whom King often referenced to illustrate the tragedy of sleeping through a great revolution, those who struggled against the injustices committed against them were likened to those awakened from the slumber of willful nonresistance. While King understood that persons conform to oppression and injustice for a variety of complex reasons, their break from that cycle of victimization began with an embrace of self as created in the image of God. Persons who understood the profound implications of life as sacred became weary of tolerating life's injustices. Instead of accommodating the abuses of humanity against humanity, those who assigned to their own existence a status of Somebodyness could no longer take the abuses in stride. As persons worthy of unalienable rights that were God-granted, those created in the image of God were called upon to be "true to oneself" by engaging in the discipline of passive nonviolent resistance against the evils of human oppression. Above all else, it was their identification of self as one created equally among others that insisted upon challenging and resisting injustice. While attempting to avoid all forms of violent resistance, believing that violence begets violence, King refused to compromise with, or conform to, any social standard that did not support and further the cause of human dignity and decency. As a final resort, the decision to dramatize the reality of injustice by engaging in civil disobedience corresponded to King's desire to reconcile ruptured humanity by merging familiar activist strategies with certain innovative theological conceptions

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of liberation. His 1968 address to Memphis sanitation workers was clear and emphatic. King announced that as children of God, "we are determined to be." For King, a reconsideration of one's self and the state of one's social existence should translate into a reconsideration of one's "place" in the world and hence a fuller realization of and intolerance for the unacceptable experiences of injustice. King understood that a proactive, nonviolent determinism could ensue as persons embraced definitions of themselves through the lens of an image of God theology.

3) First two points are in continuity with black church Imago Dei and Human Capacity

The first two of four implications delineated earlier in this chapter placed King's theological anthropology in sync with that of the early black church in America. King, as did the early black church, believed that all human beings are individuals of worth and dignity, and should therefore enjoy the safeguard of basic human rights. His hope in human nature, and its capacity for good, however, began to move King in a different theological direction. In contrast to the less optimistic view of the early black church, King's theological approach to this carefully framed anthropology was developed by resorting to liberalism as the school of thought offering the broadest possibilities for optimism about human nature.<sup>21</sup> While not necessarily committed to a specific liberal ideology, it could be said that King, unlike his ancestors, demonstrated an unapologetic allegiance to a distinct process of liberal methodology that resulted in not only a firm commitment to reconciling intersecting truths but also to integrating racially, socially, and economically divided populations. This theologically mediated anthropology, while providing King with a basis for his civil rights appeal, theologically distanced him from a number of traditional views regarding human nature and its capacity.<sup>22</sup> King examined the veracity of this theological assumption, which essentially asked whether or not human beings were collectively capable of exercising moral judgment on behalf of others, even when doing so did not appear to serve their immediate economic and social interests.<sup>23</sup> Was the human capacity such that nonviolence, moral suasion, and direct action could effectively bring about the necessary societal changes given these various ideological distinctions? Or would social progress, as in the case of mid-nineteenth-century emancipation, require the additional exercise of violence (a struggle alternative embraced by Frantz Fanon) and physical force?<sup>24</sup> What were human beings capable of achieving insofar as the transformation of the social landscape was concerned? What kind of capacity do human beings have in this regard? Could the theory of human worth and rights premised

side B (King's ethical of peaceful resistance) shaped the dilemma by side A

was, however, with whom he embraced liberalism

upon that fact actually become translated into a society characterized by the reality of freedom and justice for all?

This line of inquiry led King to a thorough analysis of the complex relationship between his understandings of human dignity, the subsequent demands dignity required of one another, and humanity's ability to exercise this moral obligation to "love thy neighbor as thyself." King needed to determine what that level of human capability looked like. Unlike the romanticized visions of utopian society, King acknowledged humanity's capacity for evil and developed an anthropology that accounted for the kind of individual and societal sins that were both historically and experientially self-evident. Humanity was created in the image of God and as a result of their intrinsic worth became recipients of rights that were God-granted. The bestowal of rights, however, did not somehow exempt members of the human family from the power and penalty of human corruption. While not fully convinced of reformed conceptions that described humanity as utterly depraved and utterly helpless, King did agree with the basic doctrinal conclusion that human beings were fallen creatures. He embraced the idea of human imperfectability, although his sense of what it means to have "fallen" was considerably nuanced, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Conversely, and unlike the overly pessimistic assessment of human nature provided by proponents of the Reformation and Neo-orthodox thinkers of his day, King concluded that the greater propensity of the human will created in the image of God was toward a realization of the good and that which was most attuned to God's good intent for the human family. Although humanity was flawed and hence prone to evil, King fostered an anthropology which declared that many of these stifling contradictions could be overcome as a result of God's work through the agency of human efforts. Not even Niebuhr's argument regarding the possibilities of "moral man" and the impossibilities of "immoral society" could dissuade King. For King, both the individual and the societal group possessed the capacity to consider, desire, and do that which is morally good. As such, King held to a position that allowed fundamentalism and liberalism to overlap, thus creating a reconstituted theological center that merged aspects of both positions. In the end, King arrived at a theological center that still provided a rather generous assessment of the human condition and human possibilities.

This interest in the discovery of "truth wherever it may be found" provided King with a perspective regarding human capacity that was informed by a number of sources. In seeking to determine the extent of humanity's capacity to perceive and achieve the good, King consulted theological as well as historical, psychological, and biological sources. His primary interest was in determining where the intersection occurred, that place that most nearly approximated an

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not fully convinced of reformed conceptions that described humanity as utterly depraved and utterly helpless

generous assessment of human possibilities

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understanding of human potential. If an overreliance upon God to correct social maladies represented a fundamentalist barrier to social activism, the essence of King's criticism insisted that "to believe that God will do everything while we do nothing, is not faith but superstition." By the same measure, if humanism's liberal assumptions regarding human perfectibility denied the place of Divinity within the process of human progression, King theologically tempered its too naive assumptions regarding humanity's *inevitable* evolution toward the perfect society with a slightly more neo-orthodox view of evil and sin. In the end he includes the idea of human failure, but he does so without totally rejecting the spirit of optimism attached to the idea of human capacity. Hence, King's optimism regarding human nature and its capacity for community was developed to include concepts of sin and evil. His hope, however, in humanity as good-willed and capable of dramatic change was not relinquished. As such, his theological outlook could best be described as a cautious celebration of human possibilities. He affirms and celebrates humanity's ability to creatively forge a future that is in keeping with what it means to have been created in the image of God, but he does so with the understanding that human beings also have the ability to make choices that are contrary to the good. For King, God was that one who initiates the transformation of the social landscape; human beings created in God's image are simply in need of sensing the movement of God and exercising their capacity to choose to cooperate with God's transforming will for human society.

To be sure, there are several similarities that might warrant the identification of King's thought with that of the church's traditional belief system, although even here we must not run the risk of oversimplifying the idea by suggesting that there was a "single" belief system that defined all churches in each historical period. The church was far from monolithic in its observance of doctrine and practice. Thanks to a number of authors, the gradual development of the early black church during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its nuanced theology and cultural practices, has been thoroughly documented. If there is a common theme that places King and the church on the same page, as it were, it may be found in the fact that neither labored under the illusion of inevitable human progress. Carol George, Ronald Walters, Lewis Perry, Michael Fellman, Albert J. Raboteau, Evelyn Higginbotham, C. Eric Lincoln, Vincent Harding, Gayraud S. Wilmore, and Henry H. Mitchell are a few who concur in their views that the black church rarely, if ever, bought into the liberal assumptions of humanity's inevitable evolution into kinder, gentler beings. Overall, the content of biblical and sociopolitical documents associated with America's religious and political independence was diffused through the experience of African tradition and struggle, as church converts during the previous two centuries

sought to bring a sobered blend of theological meanings that would make sense of the duration and nature of their egregious suffering. As in the case of King, the themes of "American dream" that were gleaned from this glowing ideology, though clearly appropriated from Western visions of a liberal democracy, were culturally adjusted and recast to distinguish them from those of the concept's original presentation. Both King and his predecessors came to certain theological conclusions that were informed by the material of their experiences and cultural traditions. Henry Mitchell explains:

The most important African survivals of all may very well be in the belief systems, African traditional religious doctrines, as closely related to and merged with the orthodox Christian faith. At some points, the parallels are amazing, as with the omnipotence, justice, omniscience, and providence of God. None of these attributes of God had to be learned first in slavery. And all of these cross over [into] African beliefs so amazingly well in America because they served so well to support African American psychic survival under oppression.<sup>25</sup>

With this as the presumed theological orientation of the early black church, it would not be surprising that certain basic epistemological and theological similarities did, in fact, exist between King and the early black church. Their mutual tendencies toward eclecticism, the avoidance of liberal ideologies that pointed to the inevitability of human progress minus God, and the embrace of a holistic theological bent that affirmed God's liberating character are evident. God was embraced as the liberating God of the Exodus. Consistent with his nineteenth-century appropriation of *imago Dei*, King reached back to recapture some of these aspects of the early church's "black sacred cosmos."<sup>26</sup> The black church's recasting of the raw theological material from within its context of suffering led to an emphasis upon God's liberating work and a corresponding cynicism concerning the slaveholders' nineteenth-century reluctance to oblige this divine mandate to set the captive free.<sup>27</sup> Although President Lincoln was widely revered and celebrated for his political role, ultimately the early black church believed that it was the Lord, not Lincoln, who graciously intervened in history and secured their emancipation from slavery; a reflection of the degree to which human capacity was minimized. Polly, a slave of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, eloquently expressed to her mistress the meaning she derived from religion: "We poor creatures have need to believe in God, for if God almighty will not be good to us some day, why were we born? When I heard of his delivering his people from bondage I know it means the poor African."<sup>28</sup> With little or no thought of inevitable human progression, the early black church in essence confessed, "If it had

King's thought  
can't be that much  
different from  
the early church

not been for the *Lord* on my side, where would I be?" The black church primarily held to a theology of hope in God and God's work in the world. Their optimism and hope for deliverance rested squarely upon their belief in the omnipotence, justice, omniscience, and providence of their God.

Many of these shared expressions of liberation, however, were significantly eclipsed by King's nuanced anthropology. Whereas King aligned himself with his predecessors by denouncing liberal positions that denied God's involvement in humanity's forward journey, he moved beyond them by also embracing a view of human capacity that is much more generous than they would have allowed. His conclusions concerning that which constituted human being placed him well beyond the theological scope of his contemporaries and the black church from earlier periods.<sup>29</sup> For King, there seemed to be sufficient cause to vest considerable hope in humanity's capacity to do the moral good. Given the proper conditions and circumstances, human beings have the ability to make choices that are compatible with the aspirations of freedom and justice for all. Unlike the theological models developed by the early church, and even the church of his own era, King held to a shared optimism in both God and humanity. Richard Lischer is correct in concluding that "the black experience in America left no room for optimism about human nature."<sup>30</sup> In keeping with the early black church, King affirmed the centrality of God's role in human emancipation, but he did so while "leaving room" for the place of human participation in a manner that had rarely been done hitherto. Carol George records such an account: "In his Episcopal address to the AME conference in 1851, Bishop Quinn charged his listeners to honor their commitment to preach despite the difficulties created by 'prejudice and persecution.' Advising cooperation, he said, 'We should work together. Nine times out of ten when we look into the face of a white man we see our enemy. A great many like to see us in the kitchen, but few in the parlor. Our hope is in God's blessing on our wise, strong and well directed efforts.'<sup>31</sup> While King shared their emphasis upon God's liberating work, he did not share their cynicism concerning the conversion of Pharaoh, especially during the earlier years of the civil rights movement. It was not simply the release from Egypt's oppressive clutch that interested King. He was ultimately interested in a theological anthropology that imagined Pharaoh and Moses sitting together "at the table of brotherhood." For King, the idea of liberation included the reconciliation of Egypt with its former oppressed citizenry.

As we, therefore, consider King's thoughts about human capacity, we can see the careful ways in which his theology was differentiated. It is over this question of human capacity that King begins his departure from some of the more common anthropological views adhered to in the ecclesial mainstream.

His thoughts are more attuned and more readily shared by his academic mentors and peers with whom he studied. It was a framework that captured the theological tone and tenor of a school of thought known as Personalism. As he contemplated human capacity, King imagined the results of free-willed beings who could choose the direction of their chartered path, a view clearly rejected in the more fundamental circles from which he was accustomed to seeing during his youth. As McKanan explains, "Many social reformers had to conclude that their understanding of God's presence in humanity was at odds with traditional Protestant doctrine, which stressed God's difference from humanity and the awesomeness of divine power."<sup>32</sup> Despite the dogmatism in either theological camp, King explored concepts that stood the test of time, consulted the findings of recent scholarship, and developed his theological anthropology. He was not bound by the thinking of his Baptist tradition or the unbridled optimism of the pacifist or evolutionist. While hearing, and at times even borrowing, concepts from both, his would be a position that docked in neither. While King believed that integration, voting rights, decent affordable housing, educational equity, and economic justice were in society's best long-term interests, not simply that of African Americans, he also understood that there were a host of segregationists who failed to embrace his vision of human life as interrelated and inextricably bound, gradualists who scoffed at his sense of urgency, and liberals who affirmed his goals but denounced his process. King, however, believed in the inherent goodness of the human condition and despite these evidences of opposition held to his theological hope in the conversion and redemption of human society.

As indicated in chapter 1, the early church, abolitionists, and antislavery proponents drew upon the idea of humanity created in the image of God to frame arguments for the discontinuance of slavery. That human beings were created in the image of God and were therefore justified in their pursuit of just treatment were views that were fairly consistent in both King's and his predecessors' positions. In this respect King and his predecessors stand in close agreement regarding the meanings that were attached to how they understood human existence and its possibilities. However, unlike the black church of the preceding century, King proceeded to develop a scholarly explication of human nature so as to personally determine whether or not human beings actually retained sufficient capacity to desire, pursue, and realize the genuine well-being of others. It was, after all, one thing to say that humanity "merited" and therefore should be moving toward a more perfect union, in which justice was experienced by all. It was quite another to suggest that that kind of theological theorizing was indeed humanly possible within the context of a pluralistic society.<sup>33</sup> As King contemplated what it meant to be human through the lens of

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Theology of Personalism  
unusually important

an image of God theology, he concluded with an anthropology that celebrated humanity's capacity to desire and do that which is morally constructive. As a result of having been made in the image of God, this idea regarding human capacity represented a significant shift in King's thinking. King would often liken the social climate through which he journeyed to days that were both "dark and difficult." Notwithstanding the serious challenges, King maintained a theological orientation that affirmed humanity's ability to experience change and to then participate in the process of ongoing change that would be redemptive and reconciling in nature.

#4

#### Imago Dei and Beloved Community

This fourth and final implication of King's image of God conception continues to demonstrate his distinctiveness from that of the black church by broadly identifying beloved community as an intended goal of the civil rights movement, a position that stood in stark contrast to Booker T. Washington's concession with segregation and the more Garveyian voices who later saw emigration and black separatism as the only viable alternative for genuine black independence, a notion that did not escape the early black church. As Carol George explains, "By the 1850's, a separatist undertone pervaded the message of most black churches, which is not surprising given the increasingly oppressive racial climate of opinion."<sup>34</sup> More than black independence and separatism, however, and even more than American independence, for that matter, King ultimately became interested in an idea of human independence that necessitated a reconfiguration of the narrow ways in which the idea of community was viewed and defined. Robert Franklin illustrates the extent to which King sought to modify the provincialism that so characterized his faith tradition: "Not content with merely inheriting his 'Daddy's' religion, he [King] reached intellectually beyond it into other great world religious classics and traditions to discover the true height and depth of a universal God."<sup>35</sup> His belief in the idea that individuals were created in the image of God, led King to consider the promising implications of humanity's interrelatedness and the tragic consequence of this unacknowledged possibility. As detailed in the following chapter, King imagined an existence beyond the realization of a desegregated just society, wherein individuals chose to work toward the imminent creation of a community of the beloved, and they did so in terms that sought broad, universal accessibility.<sup>36</sup>

As we think about this final implication, it is important to note that King's concept of beloved community moved beyond the boundaries of traditional church life. That is to say, his sense of community was not circumscribed or

→ "beloved community" was broader than the church

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strictly defined by church membership. While believing Christianity to be the clearest revelation of God to humanity, King also believed that there was sufficient overlap in our common status as persons made in the image of God for unjust societies to adjust and move toward a harmonious whole.<sup>37</sup> As Franklin points out, King was interested in describing and discovering the "true height and depth of a universal God," a universal God who was concerned with the universal suffering of humanity. If human suffering and disenfranchisement represented the tragic "isness" of life, the freedom struggle's emphasis upon the creation of beloved community signaled an equitable and hopeful move toward the "oughtness" in life. In this sense, beloved community represented the epitome of human possibility. For King, the prevalence of oppression, exploitation, and separation did not have to be the normative indicia by which human existence was measured. Rather, beloved community implied that "the disconnected aspects of reality" could be brought "into a harmonious whole," with broad application and currency that reached across religious, race, gender, class, and cultural lines. A beloved community premised upon the principles of mutual regard thus collapsed the ways in which superficial social categories were allowed to create a rationale for the provincial assigning of worth and the subsequent manner in which individuals could adversely be viewed and disengaged. At bottom, the image of God as a theological construct provided King with an engaging, inclusive social framework, in which a collective vision of mutual regard could be practiced.<sup>38</sup>

← Imago Dei provided social framework  
As in the case of the previous implication regarding human capacity, King's concept of community also created a place of ideological and theological departure from conventional thinking. Whereas a community of the beloved was restricted to the fellowship of the converted that were located within the circle of congregational and church life, King defined community to include every member of the human family. Every human being was made in the image of God, every human being was birthed with a degree of dignity, every human being possessed the capacity to desire and do good, and therefore every human being was viewed as having been invited to participate in the community of the beloved. While the "choice" to work toward beloved community may have required a conversion of one's attitude and will, King certainly did not have an evangelical Christian conversion in mind, no more than he would have expected Mohandas Gandhi, Kwame Nkrumah, or Abraham Heschel to convert to Christianity as a prerequisite condition to sharing in the commonwealth of this community and working to further its goal of global goodwill. While thoroughly Christian in his personal theological conviction, King anthropologically understood the image of God to be that universal condition that interrelated all humanity at its most basic level.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, image of God preceded religious belief inasmuch as individuals were

birthed with the former and developed the latter at some given point in one's life. As King often stated, "All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men [and women] are brothers [and sisters]."<sup>40</sup> Although belief in a particular religious tradition may vary from person to person, all persons created in the image of the one God could affirm the employment of nonviolent resistance in the cause of freedom, justice, and the creation of global community.

Consequently, the believer in nonviolence has deep faith in the future. This faith is another reason why the nonviolent resister can accept suffering without retaliation. For he knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. It is true that there are devout believers in nonviolence who find it difficult to believe in a personal God. But even these persons believe in the existence of some creative force that works for universal wholeness. Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.<sup>41</sup>

The faith, therefore, that constituted this fraternal tie within the context of the civil rights movement could not have been a reference to the evangelical saving faith preached from most mainstream pulpits (although King genuinely embraced this aspect of his own Baptist Christian experience), but another more universalized faith that he believed was commonly available to all humanity everywhere as "children of God" made in the image of God. It is here that Lischer may have overstated his claim regarding King's retreat from liberalism. While King's views were clearly chastened by the sheer weight of defiance to the civil rights movement, his eschatology remained a testament of his reluctance to abandon the liberal framework altogether.<sup>42</sup> In fact, King's eschatology described the degree to which he remained theologically connected to liberalism, contrary to Lischer's suggestion that the "liberal optimism was blown away," and the degree to which he remained theologically distanced from the black church, contrary to Lischer's assertion that King returned to "the bedrock of black eschatology." King's eschatology, though approaching the "bedrock," was actually quite distinguishable from that of his contemporaries and his nineteenth-century ancestor's more radical view.<sup>43</sup> After all, his was not a view that subscribed to the violent overall destruction of this evil world and the creation of another; rather, King continued to envision a period *in history* when the "lamb would lay down with the lion, and nations would study war no more." The latter allowed for a social order that held forth the possibility of being salvaged and reconciled as opposed to destroyed and re-created. This, unlike the

liberal eschat  
claims that Lischer overstated

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distinction with the black church was subtle but significant

theology of the church, was an eschatological outlook that King embraced, particularly during the earlier days of the movement; that was not interested in retribution but rather in reconciliation and the formation of beloved community. His shift to a position not commonly held by those within his faith tradition is further evidenced in his affirmation of an eschatological view that remained committed to a belief in the possibility of a reconciled community. "in time" as contrasted to the more orthodox and even violent eschatological visions of divine judgment and the subsequent creation of a new heaven and earth.

As such, the theological distinctions between King and the church can be said to have been subtle, yet extremely significant. In contrast with positions that uncritically identify King's theology with that of the black church, King's appropriation of the black church was actually less cognitive and more intuitive, less literal and more visceral, less theological and more practical. Although he never abandoned the influences of his youth, insofar as many of them were synthesized into his overall conception, King's conclusions suggest that his theological anthropology was far-reaching and more dissimilar than similar particularly with respect to the degree of confidence he placed in human nature and its capacity to cooperate with God's desire for the created order. Hence, while not undercutting his belief in God's primacy in the historical development of any human progression, King's theological anthropology explicated image of God and its relationship to civil rights in a manner that substantiated a kind of generous optimism in humanity. Moreover, King acknowledged the universal significance of beloved community as the civil rights movement's ultimate goal and humanity's chief common destiny. In time, however, this glowing theory, despite its dramatic successes through 1965, would have to be reconciled with the agonizing realities of human regression that would follow. Although King did not concede altogether to the growing skepticism witnessed during the final three years of his life, with their increase in violence and drastic decline in support of the civil rights movement, he does moderate the measured optimism of his earlier years with a return to the less optimistic views of human nature espoused by the early black church of the nineteenth century. In so doing King rediscovered a recast theological view that minimized his focus upon human efforts, emphasizing instead the time-proven trust in God's Providence and justice.

As indicated at the outset of this chapter, King's sobered appreciation for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution coincided with the revision of his anthropology, which later necessitated the introduction of a more eschatological interpretation of the movement and its uneven progress. With his ties to the White House all but severed (due largely to his unpopular stand against the Vietnam War), King continued to envision the realization of beloved

community via the organization of an interracial, cross-cultural, international community of the dispossessed. In keeping with his high hopes for humanity, King looked toward edging the nation and world closer to the ideals of a liberal democracy and a fuller realization of freedom and justice for all via his organization of the Poor People's Campaign.



## PART III