Review Essay
Before King Was King: Reflections on the Development of a Drum Major for Justice

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Seldom do collections of college and seminary papers receive public attention. It is just as rare that the first volume of an edited collection of a public figure’s papers published by a university press receives front-page newspaper coverage before publication. But then Martin Luther King, Jr. was no ordinary student or public figure, and the questions and controversies raised by the first volume of his papers have already prompted reevaluations of the public and private life of perhaps the most influential American of the past 50 years. The controversy over whether King plagiarized in his papers written while he was a student at Morehouse College and Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, overshadowed what will be a more likely long-term effect of the publication of the papers—a full-scale reassessment of the social, intellectual, and theological sources of the vision of a beloved community and the strategy of nonviolent resistance which made King a “drum major for justice.”

As a documentary collection, the first volume of the King Papers is a monument to modern scholarship and editorial judgment. The “Introduction” helps place the documents in context and provides a helpful mini-biography of King through his years at Crozer Seminary. It avoids the temptation of interpreting and analyzing King’s early years in the way a full-scale biography would, allowing readers to form their own opinions and leaving to later historians and biographers the task of interpreting King after more of the volumes appear.
The selection of documents is superb, annotations are invariably helpful and concise, and a “Calendar of Documents” lists both documents included and ones left out. The index is complete and is something of a revelation in itself as a glimpse of the breadth of King’s early life [the first two entries are Peter Abelard and *The Achievements of Morehouse Men*, the last two are Zion Hill Baptist Church (Atlanta) and Zoroastrianism.]

Most of the biographical details that emerge from the papers are already familiar to King scholars—a close-knit family life, growing up in the black church,
early experiences of discrimination, graduation from Morehouse College in Atlanta and Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. Some surprising details emerge from the documents, however. King matured early. He entered Morehouse at age 15 and Crozer at 19. King's recollections of encountering racial discrimination in his youth, a staple of King biographies, sometimes emerge in an unaccustomed light. The editors note that his well-known account of finding at age six that his white playmate and best friend would not be able to play with him anymore because King was black, described in King's "Autobiography of Religious Development" (1950)² becomes a story of two white playmates when it is recounted in Stride Toward Freedom.³ Still, King's account of his parents having to explain prejudice to him for the first time are moving.⁴

An incident in Maple Shade, New Jersey in 1950 (King was working in the North that summer with dozens of other African American college students), appears in a different light with the reprinting of a statement by a restaurant owner accused of discrimination. The owner claimed that one of King's companions insisted on buying liquor and beer on Sunday. The group left when the owner refused, but it returned later. The owner proceeded to chase them out of the restaurant with a gun, firing a warning shot in the air. While the owner's pleas that he had served other Negroes with no problem doesn't lessen what seems to be a possibly racially-inspired overreaction to King and his friends, he does at least provide a different view of the incident than in King's writings and King biographies.⁵ The overall effect of the additional information provided by the documents is to suggest that King's accounts of his early experiences of discrimination were fashioned after the fact to make a point, and cannot be taken absolutely literally. This should introduce a note of caution to King biographers and civil rights chroniclers, who must now look beyond King's own accounts to be assured of accuracy.⁶

Although King's career as a minister seems foreordained—he was, after all, the grandson and son of ministers—the documents make clear that King hesitated to pursue a life in the church. For one thing, he did not have the kind of intensely emotional conversion experience expected of a Baptist. In "An Autobiography of Religious Development," he recalls that he initially joined the church at age seven "out of a desire to keep up with my sister" when she answered an altar call. He grew into the church, following a pattern more typical of Roman Catholic church members. When he finally accepted a call to the ministry it "was not a miraculous or supernatural something, on the contrary, it was an inner urge calling me to serve
King’s parents, Martin Luther King, Sr. and Alberta Williams King, brought King up in a way which led him to write that “It was up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present” (“An Autobiography of Religious Development,” *King Papers*, p. 360 [1950]). Here the Kings are pictured in Utah on their way to California for a meeting in September 1949 of the National Baptist Convention, the nation’s largest black religious denomination.

humanity.” His father’s influence, he adds, was also important: “He set forth a noble example that I didn’t mind following.” King ends “An Autobiography of Religious Development” with a statement that should serve to remind all historians of the centrality of religion for King and the Civil Rights Movement: “Even though I have never had an abrupt conversion experience, religion has been real to me and closely knitted to life. In fact, the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life.”
Much of King's hesitation about entering the church stemmed from his own discontent with its literal approach to Scripture. His Morehouse College and Crozer Seminary papers indicate that he very early adopted a modern, "scientific" approach to scripture, which he found still allowed for a viable faith. In one of the few papers published here from his Morehouse years, written on "Ritual" as a junior or senior, King begins by saying "The present study represents an attempt to apply the scientific [method to an] analysis of ritual." Later in the opening paragraph he announces that "I will attempt to be as unbiased and scientific as possible."*

Most of the papers in this first volume of the King Papers were written during his seminary years in Pennsylvania. These seminary papers consistently reflect the "higher criticism"—interpreting the Bible in light of archeological, linguistic, and historical evidence—as opposed to "lower criticism," which took the words of the Bible as literal and attempted to explicate their meaning. In a paper titled "Light on the Old Testament from the Ancient Near East" King writes: "With the rise of the science of archeology many valuable facts have emerged from behind the fog of obscurity into the light of understanding."9 "The present study," he adds, "represents an attempt to apply the scientific method to an analysis of the old testament in the light of these archeological findings."10

Rather than see the Scripture as primarily the revelation of God, and thus infallible, King opts for a consciously modern approach: "one must consider the Old Testament in relation to all the ancient civilizations of the near east. Modern archeology has proven to us that many of the ideas of the Old Testament have their roots in the ideas of the surrounding cultures."11

King wrestles with the question of whether the resurrection can withstand the scrutiny of a scientific approach. In this, he adopts a familiar, modern line of reasoning, not remarkable until one imagines how "Daddy King" and many of his parishioners would react. King, Jr. observes that the early Christians "could only express themselves in terms of the pre-scientific thought patterns of their day." The "resurrection story" (not "event," but "story") "symbolizes [again, note the choice of word: "symbolizes"] the ultimate Christian conviction: that Christ conquered death."12 King is unwilling to insist on a literal resurrection. The important point for him is to understand what the early Christians understood about Christ, which will provide guidance for his own, modern, understanding.

Adopting the scientific approach and using reason did not rob King of his faith. Throughout the papers it is clear that although the stories of the Bible might not themselves be literally true, for King they represent an authentic experience of
the mystery and spirit of God. King argues that "the search for God is a process, not an achievement." Religious experience is "the awareness of the presence of the divine," and "a lasting acquaintance with God."\(^{13}\)

The portrait that emerges from his Crozer Seminary papers is of a committed modernist, comfortable with new intellectual currents. King thus abandoned at a very early stage of his intellectual and religious development the belief in the literal accuracy of the Bible that marked much of the nation's black Baptist churches. Having done this, King was poised to appeal to the socially conscious churches of white America who had also adopted modernist approaches.

Given his later social activity it is not surprising that many of his seminary papers address the moral and social implications of religion. The heart of God's message, based on the attention King gives such topics in his papers, lies in moral guidelines. Human beings are sinners, but also rational, free, and responsible human beings.\(^{14}\) King writes favorably of the ethics of late Judaism, calling attention to its stress on temperance, simplicity, compassion, forgiveness, and brotherly love.\(^{15}\)

The moral heart of what was to become King's civil rights message is contained in a Crozer Seminary paper written in 1959 or 1960. King repeats a story familiar to black churchgoers:

During the years of slavery in America it is said that after a hard day's work the slaves would often hold secret religious meetings. All during the working day they were addressed with unnecessary vituperations and insulting epithets. But as they gathered in these meetings they gained a renewed faith as the old unlettered minister would come to his triumphant climax saying: 'you—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God's children.'\(^{16}\)

"You are God's children." That message, and the confidence it inspired, justified claims to equality and furnished the necessary foundation for the hope, patience, and willingness to suffer that made King's strategy of nonviolent resistance such a potent force. Already, at age 20, it had become part of his stock of ideas.

King's God was a God of love. As he states in one of the central pieces of the book, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," "It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances."\(^{17}\) In this very early recollection, one sees the germs of the ideas present in such classic speeches as "Our God is Marching On!" delivered from the statehouse steps of Montgomery, Alabama after the Selma to
Montgomery March. That speech is built on an argument that reflects King’s early family experiences. These led him to believe that a loving God presides over a just moral order and will rescue His people from bondage.\textsuperscript{18}

For a further indication that the foundation for King’s civil rights work was well in place in his early years one can turn to the speech he gave for an Elks competition as a junior in high school.\textsuperscript{19} The structure of the argument anticipates the best known of King’s speeches, “I Have A Dream.”\textsuperscript{20} King told the Elks that “America gave its full pledge of freedom seventy-five years ago.” Yet, “[b]lack America still wears chains.”\textsuperscript{21} Nineteen years later the “I Have A Dream Speech” began “Fivescore years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” Then, a paragraph later, “[b]ut one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free; . . . ”\textsuperscript{22} By the time of his “I Have A Dream Speech” King could call on an arsenal of rhetorical devices, particularly repetition (“With this faith . . . ,” “I have a dream . . . ,” “Let freedom ring . . . ,”)\textsuperscript{23} yet the basic argument and structure of the speech, and one of the central claims of the Civil Rights Movement, is present in the Elks speech King gave at age 15.
King’s theology stressed not only the moral aspects of religion but the social implications of Christian commitment. Even as a student, King argued that religion must not be merely a personal quest. “Religion is not a private matter. It is intensely personal, to be sure, but not therefore private. It is completely social as we human beings are.”\(^{24}\) King didn’t stop there. Not only was religion social, it was necessarily prophetic. He concluded a paper on “The Significant Contributions of Jeremiah to Religious Thought” with the argument that “Jeremiah is a shining example of the truth that religion should never sanction the status quo.”\(^{25}\)

By these years King had also come to a startling conclusion which historians and biographers have attributed to him in only the last few years of his civil rights activity: “I am convinced that capitalism has seen its best days in America, and not only in America, but in the entire world. It is a well known fact that no social institution can survive when it has outlived its usefulness. This, capitalism has done. It has failed to meet the needs of the masses.”\(^{26}\)

The cumulative effect of these documents of King’s early years is to make a strong case that the essential elements of his theology, his social attitudes, even his strategy for social change, were formed well before he had extensive contact with white teachers and intellectuals. His family and the black community—particularly the black church—were the crucibles of King’s early development. It is in his Morehouse and, especially, his Crozer years, that the early ideas present in his Elks speech became part of a well-considered theology and social philosophy. Although firm conclusions must await further volumes, the preliminary indications from this first product of the King project are that interpreters must look to King’s very early years to explain the sources of his ideas, strategies, and power.

Some odd glimpses of King’s early life emerge from the documents. Academically, King is what would now be called a “late bloomer.” He received mostly B’s and C’s at Morehouse, but mostly B’s and A’s at Crozer. In his last year at Crozer he received all A’s (one A-), and was named class valedictorian. Curiously, in his first year at Crozer he received a C in “Public Speaking.” One can only marvel at what must have been the high accomplishment of Crozer’s other students that left King with a C.

The evaluation of King’s field work is equally curious. The report judged that King’s strongest points were “superior mental ability, clarity of expression, impressive personality, thoroughness in preparation for academic tasks.” It is the “chief weaknesses” that are the surprise: “An attitude of aloofness, disdain & possible snobbishness which prevent his coming to close grips with the rank and file of
At first blush, this seems wide of the mark. Who came to grips with his people better than King? Nevertheless, this prompts some reflection about King’s leadership and leadership in general. There was about King a sense of confidence, and an assurance that he was doing God’s work, that drew followers to his movement. That his followers sensed he was different, even superior, may indeed have been part of his attraction, since he seemed to have lifted himself out of the despair that undermined their own efforts to change their situation. One is also reminded of the nickname his younger lieutenants bestowed on King—“De Lawd—for the prophetic and sometimes grandiloquent speaking style King developed.

As important as these indications of King’s intellectual and social development will be for future historians and biographers, this first volume of the King papers drew widespread public attention because of news reports that the volume contained evidence of plagiarism. The editors, who had already come to the same conclusion, had hoped to delay discussion of the issue until it could be addressed.
in a scholarly setting, but the modern media could not wait. Soon after the news stories broke, the scholarly discussion of the issue did appear, in the *Journal of American History*.²⁸

What can a reader make of the charges of plagiarism? To my mind, however it is defined, King committed plagiarism. He took phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from the work of others without acknowledgment. The editors have been scrupulous and diligent in tracking down the sources of King's unattributed passages in King's college and seminary papers. There are easily more than a hundred such instances. Two examples will suffice.

**Example 1**

King, "How Modern Christians Should Think of Man," (1950), *King Papers*, p. 275:

Any such generalization about man is preposterous unless it be merely an inaccurate way of stating the fact that man sins on every level of moral and political achievement.


Any such generalization about man is preposterous unless it is merely an inaccurate way of stating the fact that man does sin on every level of moral and spiritual achievement.

**Example 2**

King, "A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification" (1950), *King Papers*, p. 264:

From the middle ages on until now, there has appeared by way of reaction from other systems of doctrine, the Moral Influence Theory of the work of Christ. Here the emphasis is not on the Godward but on the manward side of the atonement. According to this theory, the atoning work of Christ was a revelation of the heart of God, not intended to remove obstacles to forgiveness on God's side, of which there was no need, but designed to bring sinful men to repentance and win their love to himself. First formulated as an independent theory by Abelard in the twelfth century, it was rejected by the Church. But in modern times
it was revived, and under the influence of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and others gained wide currency, becoming the dominant theory in progressive theological circles, so that it is often referred to as the modern theory of atonement.


Opposed to this Latin or forensic type of theory is the moral or personal type with its emphasis not on the Godward but on the manward side of the atonement. First formulated as an independent theory by Abelard in the twelfth century, it was rejected by the church. But in modern times it was revived, and under the influence of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and others gained wide currency, becoming the dominant theory in progressive theological circles, so that it is frequently referred to as the modern theory of the atonement.

In the first passage King repeats his source, Bennett, almost word for word, without attribution. But in a pattern typical of King’s papers, he properly cites another passage of Bennett’s later. In the second passage, King has constructed his own beginning to the paragraph, then used Knudsen virtually word for word in the rest of the passage. Once again, he cites the author, for a different passage, later in the paper.

What is one to make of this? First, it must be said that this is plagiarism. To those outside colleges, universities, and seminaries, the issue must seem trivial, given King’s later accomplishments, but the questions raised by King’s writings are nonetheless troubling. The “Introduction” to the King Papers (pp. 49-50) finesses the question. The only discussion of plagiarism is in the following:

Although King’s essays for Davis were more reflective than those he had written during his first year, they were still flawed by unacknowledged textual appropriations from theologians King consulted. His bibliography or notes nearly always identified his sources, but the lack of adequate citations and quotation marks obscured the extent to which King relied on the work of others. The available documentary evidence does not provide a definitive answer to the question whether King deliberately violated the standards that applied to him as a student, yet his academic papers do contain passages that meet a strict definition of plagiarism—that is, any unacknowledged appropriation of words or ideas. At the same time, his essays also contain views consistent with those
expressed in papers and exams at the time; thus, even though King’s writings were often derivative, they remain reliable expressions of his theological opinions.

The writer(s) of the “introduction” have been far too lenient, more lenient, one suspects, than King would have been on himself. These passages meet even a mild definition of plagiarism, and form a pattern apparent in virtually every paper at Crozer and in his Ph.D. dissertation at Boston College. In presenting the documents themselves, the editors have been scrupulous and exceedingly diligent in tracking down and acknowledging King’s unacknowledged appropriations. Also to their credit, the editors arranged a full-scale, probing, scholarly discussion of the issue which appeared in the *Journal of American History.*

For those who admire King, as I do, it is painful to assess King’s plagiarism. Should it revise our image of King? Does it detract from his contributions to American society? King does list the books he draws passages from later in his papers or in his bibliographies, which suggests he wasn’t hiding his sources. If King did not intend to deceive, why didn’t he acknowledge his appropriations?

It should first be noted that King was very young for a seminary student. He wrote these papers when he was about 20, while his fellow students would have been 23 or 24. His educational background for these theological topics would have been weaker than that of many of his classmates. Perhaps out of defensiveness, or worries of inferiority, King used the words of those more fluent in the abstruse theological topics of his papers. King may have hid behind the words of others to avoid having to face the challenge of working through such complicated issues himself. Or, like many students, maybe he decided that since others had said it so much better, why not rely on them? It is also unclear precisely what understanding King (and his professors) had of what constitutes plagiarism.

Many comments on the issue of plagiarism have offered a cultural explanation which, if it does not excuse King’s plagiarism, puts it into context. Academia is a curious place, with its own code. Knowledge is supposed to be new, and is the private property of the “finder.” In the setting with which King was most familiar, the African American church, a different understanding of knowledge and words applied—they are community property. Few sermons were entirely original. They repeated old sermons or drew from a wealth of anecdotes, illustrations, stories, and messages that any self-respecting Baptist preacher learned early in his (and in a few cases, her) career. The racial aspect of this should not be overemphasized. This was a common pattern in white evangelical churches as well. King was nur-
tured in a milieu where words were common property. They were, after all, saving words, words that meant the difference between salvation and damnation. How selfish of someone to presume she or he owned such words.\textsuperscript{30}

Still, I would argue, King was in an academic setting when he wrote these papers, and the work must, to some extent, be judged by the academic code that prohibits plagiarism. Plagiarism is a significant violation of the academic code not just out of some selfish desire of academics to own ideas as private property, but as an instrumental value designed to require students to develop their own ability to inquire and express their views, and not rely only on the authority of others. The code against plagiarism is designed to foster critical inquiry, one of the central values of the academy. King's work violated that code.

What importance does this have for our understanding of King? He did not make the academy his life work, and he moved into an arena where words and ideas are shared. Indeed, he shared his in a way that built a community ready for social change. It seems like special interest carping, given such an accomplishment, for an academic to overemphasize King's plagiarism. That he violated the academic code reminds us that he was a human being, with human failings, and that he lived in a number of cultures—black and white, academic and church—each with its own code. Taking due note of his plagiarism complicates the work of King interpreters and biographers. He often reminded his listeners and himself that he was a human being, not a god, not a saint. Future historians and biographers will have to wrestle with what King's plagiarism tells us about both his private and public character. It is not enough, to my mind, to dismiss the plagiarism due to his youth or his greater familiarity with the church tradition of community knowledge.

King's failings must be acknowledged, but also put into perspective. It is not his plagiarism that is so striking about his early or later life, but the fact that a flawed human being could so move a nation. Out of these early years at home in Atlanta, in college at Morehouse, and in Crozer Seminary emerged a complex man with the ability to touch the hearts and minds of millions with a message of equality and love. He had the wisdom to devise a powerful strategy of social change embodied in the philosophy of nonviolence, and the persistence to carry that philosophy into the nation's public life. As a consequence, he altered the landscape of American culture as few have before or since.
Notes

1. King uses this image in one of his best known addresses to describe himself: "Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness." James M. Washington, ed., "The Drum Major Instinct" (1968), in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 267.


Recent explorations of King's thought and activity include: James A. Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991); Keith D. Miller, The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources (New York: Free Press, 1992); Lewis V. Baldwin, There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1991); Lewis V. Baldwin, To Make the Wounded Whole: The Cultural Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992); John J. Ansbro, Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

Washington, ed., A Testament of Hope, provides the most complete collection of King, at least until the Papers are completed.

7. King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," pp. 361, 363. All quotes from the King Papers are reproduced as printed there. The editors have refrained from correcting King and from littering the texts with "[sic]."

8. King, "Ritual" (1946-48?), King Papers, p. 128. The bracketed passage was inserted by King.


10. Ibid., pp. 163-64.

11. Ibid., p. 180. King adopts a similar approach in "A Study of Mithraism" (1949), King Papers, pp. 211, 224. See also "The Ethics of Late Judaism as Evidenced in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs" (1949), King Papers, p. 196, where King goes so far as to say that "many of the works of this period were infinitely more valuable than those that received canonicity."

12. King, "What Experiences of Christians Living in the Early Christian Century Led to the Christian Doctrines of the Divine Sonship of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, and the Bodily Resurrection" (1949), King Papers, p. 229. See also, for an insistence on a scientific approach, "The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope" (1949-50), King Papers,
15. King, "The Ethics of Late Judaism as Evidenced in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs" (1949), King Papers, pp. 195-209.
23. Ibid., pp. 219-20.
27. "Crozer Theological Seminary, Field Work Department: Rating Sheet for Martin Luther King, Jr., by William E. Gardner" (1950), King Papers, p. 381.