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A Response to Professor Albert J. Raboteau's Paper, by Walter Capps

I found Professor Raboteau's paper on "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Tradition of Black Religious Protest" unusually stimulating and provocative. I must say that the paper is as thoughtful and inspiring as any I have read in a long time. All of us carry certain instrumental religious and intellectual influences with us as we go about our day-to-day activities, and we muse on these, turn the thoughts and ideas over and over in our minds, and, when possible, conduct ourselves accordingly. Professor Raboteau's paper will continue to have this influence on me, I am certain, for a long time to come.

Part of its strength lies in the narrative form in which it is written. It is commendable stylistically to begin with an event that occurred on December 1, 1955, progress from there to fill in the appropriate background so that the event gains greater significance, and then, having achieved these objectives successfully, continue to draw additional conclusions as well as to point in the direction from which further elaboration might come. I am suggesting that the outline of Professor Raboteau's paper is compelling.

There is strength, too, in the manner in which Professor Raboteau makes his most fundamental point. One cannot read the paper without

being drawn into the dialectical inversions -- black vs. white, marginality vs. centrality, exceptionalism vs. having fallen from status, slave vs. free, et al. -- and yet Professor Raboteau states the obvious with such gentleness (as in "perhaps we too can learn from their voices....") that his own voice becomes an exemplification of the mode of non-violence that his paper describes. In this respect, it is significant that the message of the paper is present in its temper as well as in its content. Sometimes such elements are antagonistic to each other. Professor Raboteau's paper is marked by aesthetic consonance.

It is significant too that a study project on "revising America" would include a section on revisionist history. This, in my judgment, is how Professor Raboteau's paper registers. It takes familiar facts and orders them in strikingly unexpected ways. It does this, of course, because it illustrates how significant events in American history can be read via a perspective that, for most, has not yet been accepted as the majority viewpoint.

Counter-culture perspectives can perform the same function. Indeed, it is possible now to read much of recent American history in light of the re-interpretive abilities of the transpositions that are possible within appositional relationships. Professor Raboteau's paper illustrates how America is perceived when attitudes that may be understood to be peripheral (because they gain expression in the experience of minority peoples) are transposed into a central position. Colin Wilson has undertaken a similar task in his book, The Outsider (1956), when describing the creative process. That process, as Wilson illustrates, involves a translation of a perspec-

tive gained from some crucial and earned position of marginality into language and genre through which a new normative identity can be stated. Recent studies of the career of the Counter-Culture of the 1960s and early 1970s have documented the extent to which recommendations that were first perceived to be marginal to the society have gained a more fundamental place. And the examples range from dietary considerations to ecological and environmental sensitivities to changes in the content of liberal arts curricula to revisions in attitudes about relationships between nations, peoples, races and even religions.

If I may add a personal word, I became acutely aware of the power of such transpositions while studying contemporary monasticism. Monastic institutions -- by intention and reputation -- are designed to support, as Thomas Merton phrased it, an "alternative way of being human." Consequently monks seems content to live on the edges of society, and do not wish the way of life to which they are committed to assume a socially normative status. My supposition, then, was to view them in contrast to what has been generally accepted as normative, and this is a supposition that can be supported attitudinally as well as on the basis of much of the literature on the subject.

But one comes to strikingly different conclusions about monasticism when one allows the force of the transposition to register in one's interpretation. How would the picture change, one must ask, were the monastic way of life approached as being normative (as it surely is for monks) and that to which it stands in contrast seen as being marginal or peripheral. I recall the precise moment when the power of this interpretive

transposition struck me, that is, while I was sitting in the people's section of the chapel of the Abbey of Citeaux as the monks were chanting the liturgy. I mention all of this simply to illustrate that the inversions that Professor Raboteau points to can have a powerful affect upon ways in which all Americans might come to view the world. And if coming to view the world this way, they will also gain new insight into the nature of their own experience.

The transpositions are crucial, too, because of the increasing influence of third and fourth world perspectives. More specifically, at some point in our discussion of the dynamics of "revisioning America," we must think carefully about the influence of growing global awarenesses on ways in which a national identity is being reconceived. In my judgment, the perspective that is being cultivated via the aspirations of third-world countries to overcome the diminishment of the human spirit that are implicit in poverty, hunger, economic inequality and racial injustice seems to be growing in conviction and acceptance. It is easy, too, to interpret the most crucial events of our time in light of the dictates of the inviolability of these fundamental aspirations.

When the global stakes are portrayed in these terms, it is an open question as to whether the perspective Professor Raboteau describes is really minority or majority. In terms of political power -- political analysts have suggested that both the United States and the Soviet Union prefer a contest between two super powers to a recognition of third-world aspirations as a legitimate motivating force -- the minority perspective may remain that way, perhaps for awhile. But in the longer range, a transposition beyond mere protest seems inevitable. As this occurs,

the revisioning of America will be something much more than a convenience. It will be a necessity. As Professor Raboteau phrases it, we have much to learn from the voices of protest. It is gift of grace, it seems, and testimony to the work of Martin Luther King Jr., that such voices can continue to be looked to as constituting "the wisdom of the brothers."

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Martin Luther King, Jr. and the
Tradition of Black Religious Protest

Ever since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America has manifested a schizophrenic personality on the question of race. She has been torn between selves -- a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy. The reality of segregation, like slavery, has always had to confront the ideals of democracy and Christianity.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

On December 1, 1955, a black seamstress, named Rosa Parks, boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Buses in Montgomery, the "Cradle of the Confederacy," had always been segregated. Blacks sat in back; whites up front. If the bus were full, blacks were supposed to give up their seats to whites. Bus drivers frequently insulted black passengers and occasionally made them get off the bus and re-enter through the back doors, after they had paid their fares. The bus system in Montgomery, like others throughout the South, served as a daily reminder of the tenacity of Jim Crow.

Mrs. Parks found a seat in the front of the section reserved for "Colored" and sat down. As the bus grew crowded, it became apparent that no seats were

left for new passengers boarding the bus. Whereupon, the driver ordered Mrs. Parks and three black passengers next to her to get up and give their seats to whites. The others complied. Rosa Parks stayed in her seat, until a policeman came and placed her under arrest. Later, she would explain that she refused to move simply because she was tired. News of her arrest spread quickly in the black community. That evening, several black women, some of them active in a local Women's Political Council, concluded that blacks should retaliate by boycotting the buses. They approached E.D. Nixon, director of the Montgomery NAACP chapter, with the idea and he began phoning black ministers and other leaders to mobilize a boycott. For almost a year, blacks in Montgomery stayed off the buses. Despite court injunctions and police harassment, despite threats and bombings, despite the arrest, trial, and conviction of their leaders, they stayed off the buses. And on November, 13, 1956, they won: the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court decision declaring Alabama laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional.

The Montgomery bus boycott initiated a new era in the struggle of American blacks for racial justice. As the first successful mass protest mounted by black people in the Deep South, it signaled and inspired a new militancy among Afro-Americans. Montgomery attracted the attention

of the nation and dramatized for more Americans than ever before the reality of segregation. During the boycott, tactics evolved which would be used again and again in the protests of the 1960s. Moreover, Montgomery catapulted to fame the twenty-six year old pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr. He better than any other leader would articulate the religious meaning of civil rights for the nation. In so doing, he would move thousands of citizens, white, as well as black, to "revision" America.

Montgomery, then, was a watershed. It marked something new in the history of race relations in this country. And yet, it also represented something old -- the perennial exhortation to the nation to "rise up and live out the meaning of its creed," as King declared at the 1963 March on Washington. Montgomery, and in large part, the civil rights movement which ensued, was a revival, an attempt to reawaken the nation to ideals upon which she was founded. This revival, like those of the past, echoed the old Biblical themes. Once again, the God who had acted in Israel's history was acting in America's. "God had decided to use Montgomery as the proving ground for the struggle and triumph of freedom and justice in America," remarked King in his narrative of the bus boycott. The tendency to cast political and social events as scenes in the drama of salvation is a familiar habit to Americans,

accustomed to envisioning the United States as God's New Israel and themselves as a Chosen People. Over the years clusters of images had formed into a complex and powerful myth. Some of these images were scriptural in origin, others derived from the rhetoric of the Revolution and the republican tradition of the Constitution. Whatever their source, these images conveyed the durable belief that America is special. She, of all the nations, has been singled out to save (or help save) the world. Within this myth of exceptionalism, Americans from diverse lands, diverse faiths, and diverse peoples, embraced a common identity, invented a common history, and projected a common destiny.

The
myth

King, and those he spoke for, invoked the national myth. But at the same time, they reaffirmed another set of beliefs which rose out of the profound ambivalence that Afro-Americans felt toward the self-same myth. Denied first freedom and then equality, in America, blacks had protested by decrying slavery and discrimination as fundamental violations of American ideals. To the extent that they criticized white Americans for simply failing to live the national creed, they tended to assume the myth of exceptionalism. But as racism proved intransigent and as blacks continued to be defined as aliens in their own land, they began to protest that the myth itself was wrong.

Tradition of Protest

As soon as British colonists in North America began to claim that their rights had been violated by England, enslaved Africans took the occasion to claim their right to liberty upon the same grounds. In 1774, blacks in Massachusetts petitioned the governor and the general court to grant them freedom on the grounds that

. . . we have in common with all other men a naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever. But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest frinds and sum of us stolen from the bosoms of our tender Parents . . . and Brought hither to be made slaves for Life in a Christian land. . . . There is a great number of us sencear . . . members of the Church of Christ how can the master and the slave be said to fulfill that command Live in love let Brotherly Love contuner and abound Beare yea onenothers Bordenes How can the master be said to Beare my Borden when he Beares me down with the Have chanes of slavery and operson against my will

This and several more petitions like it were ignored.

But in a few years, the Revolution and its aftermath did bring freedom to some slaves. However, for the vast majority, slavery "within a free and Christian nation" would still be the lot of their children's children.

During the late 18th century, another revolution held out a promise of freedom to black Americans. The spread of evangelical Christianity, with its emphasis on the necessity of conversion, tended to level everyone in the eyes of God, and, for a while at least, in the eyes of men as well. Social status and racial hierarchy were undercut by the biracial religious communities formed in the Methodist class meetings and the Baptist conventicles. In these gatherings, the poor, the uneducated, and the slaves were encouraged to pray, exhort, and even preach. In the emotional tumult of the revivals, racial barriers were momentarily transcended when whites converted blacks and blacks converted whites. When the Methodists and some Baptists condemned slavery as a moral evil, it seemed that white and black Christians were about to preach the same gospel of freedom. But the evangelical revolution, no less than the political revolution, proved, in the end, to be incomplete. By the turn of the century, the Methodist General Conference had retreated reluctantly from its earlier antislavery legislation in the face of stiff opposition from southern Christians. Meanwhile, the Virginia Baptist Association

advised its members to leave the disruptive issue of slavery to the legislature. It was a political, not a religious problem. Moreover, the increase in African Methodists and Baptists was disquieting to whites who began to feel uneasy about worshipping in the company of so many blacks. Seating them in galleries and back pews kept them out of sight, if not out of mind. Even separate black congregations suffered discriminatory treatment from white clergy anxious to keep control over the "brethren in black." By 1821, disputes with white elders over the control of black churches had led black Methodists to organize three independent denominations: the African Union Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Bethel), and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Zion). As far as these black evangelicals were concerned, biracial fellowship really meant white control.

Despite evidence to the contrary, Afro-Americans, in the first decades of the 19th century, insisted that American liberty and Christian brotherhood were meant to include them. Most refused to believe that America was a white man's country or that Christianity was a white man's religion. When, for example, the American Colonization Society was formed in 1817 to support the emigration of free blacks to Africa, a whole host of black orators protested that America was their native land, bought with the sweat and blood of their ancestors.

When white Christians discriminated against them in church or preached that slavery and Christianity were compatible, they built their own churches, if possible, and preached that Christianity and slavery were antithetical. Christianity was not false, the American version of it was.

When whites, in the antebellum period, spoke of America as a Christian nation and predicted that the millenium would begin on these shores, blacks protested that any Christianity which compromised with slavery corrupted the religion of Jesus. Implicit in this criticism of "slaveholding religion" was the assumption that black Americans were the true disciples of Christ in the nation. The act of calling America to account for betraying her covenant with the Lord placed the black critics, as they well knew, in the long line of biblical prophets, apostles, and martyrs. The Fourth National Negro Convention claimed as much when it remarked in 1834, "our very sighs and groans like the blood of martyrs will prove to have been the seed of the church." Similarly, the American Moral Reform Society in 1837 exhorted blacks to consider themselves as "so many Bibles that shall warn this guilty nation of her injustice." The images varied, but the message was clear: it was the destiny of black Americans to save the nation. Had not the Redeemer, Himself, come as

a "Suffering Servant?" If so, who in America resembled him more, the master or the slave?

The redemptive mission of blacks clashed with the dominant myth of America. Nothing displays this cultural dissonance more clearly than the image of an American Israel. While white Americans depicted the nation as the New Israel and the country as the Promised Land, blacks asserted that they were the Old Israel, waiting for the Lord to free them from bondage in Egypt land. Slaves heard the story of Exodus and, as the Spirituals eloquently attest, appropriated it to account for their own experience as a people. Free blacks expounded on the analogy between Egypt and America and explicated the similarities between Israel and Afro-America in scores of addresses, sermons, and pamphlets. God, they insisted, would act again, as He had of old, to save His people; their oppressors, He would destroy. In the words of a widely circulated jeremiad, published by a free black, named David Walker, in 1829:

God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears and groans of his oppressed people, and being . . . just and holy . . . will . . . one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed,

and arrest the progress of the avaricious . . .

And in terms strikingly prophetic of the Civil War, Walker warned America that God overthrew oppressors by causing "them to rise up one against another, to be split and divided . . . to oppress each other, and . . . to open hostilities with sword in hand."

The War and Emancipation seemed to validate their identification with Israel, but blacks discovered that racial oppression showed no signs of abating. Decades after Emancipation, they still hadn't entered the Promised Land. During the late 19th century, the situation of blacks in America seemed to be worsening instead of improving. Against the background of disfranchisement, lynching, pseudo-scientific racism, and institutionalized segregation, blacks struggled to understand what their destiny in America might mean. One interpretation of black destiny explained that God had permitted, but not approved, the enslavement of Africans, so that they could learn Christianity and Western Civilization in America before returning to Africa to christianize and civilize Africans. Though proponents of this interpretation, often criticized America as materialist, racist, and militaristic, to the extent that they acknowledged the superiority of Western Civilization and Christian Democracy, they mirrored the current national myth.

Another interpretation of black destiny

contradicted the myth of Redeemer Nation. Western Civilization, in this view, had been tried and found wanting. The mission of christianizing the world had passed to others. Walker stated as much in 1829:

"It is my solemn belief, that if ever the world becomes Christianized . . . it will be through the means, under God, of the Blacks, who are now held in wretchedness, and degradation, by the white Christians of the world."

The fullest articulation of this argument was written by an A.M.E. clergyman, T. G. Steward in 1888. In his treatise, The End of the World, he intended to debunk Josiah Strong's paen to the mission of the Anglo-Saxon race in his book, Our Country (1885), by using scripture and history to demonstrate that America had been displaced in the drama of salvation. It was impossible for America to convert the world to Christianity, Steward argued, because America had turned Christianity from a world religion into a clan cult. Americans preached and practiced Anglo-Saxonism, not Christianity. Assessing the militarism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and materialism of the time, Steward concluded that the civilization epitomized by Europeans and Americans would soon destroy itself in fratricidal warfare. A new age was about to begin, during which the darker peoples of the world, long oppressed by Western Civilization, would create a raceless, classless, weaponless Christianity that would convert

the world and welcome the arrival of "the universal Christ."

Thus, by the end of the 19th century, the protest of Afro-Americans against slavery and racism had evolved several distinct but related themes which challenged the adequacy of the nation's dominant myth. First, blacks asserted that slavery and discrimination were more than aberrations or anomalies in the overall progress of the national destiny; rather, these were fundamental barriers to the achievement of that destiny. Racism, institutionalized in slavery and segregation rendered the entire experiment a failure. Secondly, blacks by criticizing white America assumed a position of moral authority which made them appear to be the true exemplars of Christianity in America. This role blacks symbolized in the image of themselves as Israel, a metaphor which contradicted the image of whites as the American Israel. Thirdly, blacks declared that America was failing its commission to redeem the world. If America would repent, and incorporate the Christ-like virtues of the black people in her midst, it might not be too late for her yet to construct a just and free civilization. Finally, some concluded it was too late. America's apostasy was so great that she had been displaced. The long course of Western

Civilization was finished and other peoples would at last put into practice the gospel which Americans had only managed to preach.

*Plays into
Third World
Theory -*

Starting with an acceptance of the myth of American exceptionalism, black critics in the 19th century pressed toward a theory of history in which American exceptionalism was denied. Oscillating between these two poles, the tradition of black protest registered the degrees of black alienation from the dominant cultural nationalism. At the turn of the 20th century, though some had lost faith in America or Christianity or both, the mind and the mood of most of black America was profoundly ambivalent.

Black protest in the 19th century was also profoundly religious. Many of the protest leaders were ministers. Churches served as the major forums for organizing and articulating protest. And the primary symbols of protest were religious. During the first decades of the 20th century, new variations on the traditional themes of protest emerged. Though some scholars have argued that protest was secularized during this period, the black church remained more political and protest more religious than some have thought. The involvement of clergy, for example, in the organization of such "secular" protest organizations

*the spirit of
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as the NAACP and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), especially on the local level, was extensive. Although neither the NAACP or the UNIA developed any formal relationship with religious bodies, they did justify their goals by appealing to religious ideals. It was republican or civil, rather than biblical religion, however, on which they based their appeal. In its long struggle to desegregate the nation, the NAACP attempted to get the republic to practice its faith by using the guardians of the faith, the courts of law. To the degree it succeeded, the NAACP preserved the religion of the republic for black citizens still denied full participation in the civic rituals of voting and public education.

Marcus Garvey, architect of the largest mass movement Afro-America has ever seen, founded his Universal Negro Improvement Association on the principles of Democracy and Christianity, which he hoped to embody in an African republic, a black empire destined to unite all the scattered Africans in the world. Garvey denied that his movement was anti-white and professed unwavering faith in the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. Though Garvey and his followers despaired of achieving justice for blacks in America, they remained loyal to the ideals of America and sought to transpose them to their Republic of Africa. Garveyism inspired civic

piety among the black masses and structured their piety around symbols appropriate for a black civil religion. The UNIA offered blacks a cultural nationalism of their own, freed of ambivalence and alienation. Garvey appreciated the religious character of his movement and encouraged it by instituting UNIA hymns, services, catechisms, creeds, and baptismal ceremonies.

While the Garveyites sought to replace the American civil religion with one of their own, some black Americans began to formulate for themselves an entirely new religio-racial identity divorced from American mythology. As we've noted, blacks had generally adhered to Christianity while attacking the behavior of white Christians as a travesty of true Christian doctrine. Some, however, found it impossible, in the face of white Christian racism, to distinguish between true and false Christianity and condemned the entire religion as white man's propaganda. For them the tension involved in holding the same religion as the oppressor proved too great. Christianity was a religion for whites. In the early 20th century, esoteric versions of Judaism and Islam claimed to be religions for blacks. In these "new religions" blacks embraced the alienation forced upon them by the intransigence of racism in Christian America. Particularly in the Nation of Islam, led by

*Then into
Islam*

Elijah Mohammed and publicized by Malcolm X, the alienation of black Americans took on mythic form. The black Muslims turned American exceptionalism on its head. America was special all right, it was Satan.

Black protest in the 20th century, then, has not been as "secular" as some have thought, nor has the black church been as quiescent about protest as claimed. Black clergy were active in the Garvey movement, the NAACP, and in local political affairs, not only in the North, but in the South as well. Granted, much of their political activism would not appear "radical" from the perspective of the 1960s, but demonstrations of protest did occur. For example, in 1935, Martin Luther King, Sr. led several thousand black demonstrators on a march from Ebenezer Baptist Church to the city hall of Atlanta in support of voting rights for blacks. And even earlier, Reverend Adam Daniel Williams, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s maternal grandfather, organized rallies at Ebenezer to protest a municipal bond issue which contained no plans for high-school education for black youth. The activism of some black ministers, as well as the legal struggles of the NAACP and the Urban League, lay the groundwork for the movement that began in Montgomery. In this movement the themes of black religious protest

found their most eloquent expression.

King

As the son, grandson, and great grandson of Baptist ministers, Martin Luther King, Jr. was shaped by the black church. Though he briefly considered careers in medicine and law, he decided as a teenager that he too would enter the ministry. Already, it was apparent that he was, as his father put it, a magnificent preacher. Throughout the civil rights movement, King remained a preacher. He, and others, perceived his leadership as fundamentally religious. His style of speaking, the cadence of his voice, the choice of words and images, all echoed his church background and evoked, no less than the substance of his message, the rich tradition of black religion. In King, civil rights and religion seemed inseparable. It was important that this connection be made, because many whites and some blacks felt that civil rights was really a political not a religious issue. Christian ethics were personal not social. King was a living contradiction of that position.

His own commitment to social justice came early. Though his childhood was emotionally and economically secure, he personally experienced

several instances of discrimination. He was shocked and hurt by them, and like most black children, he never forgot them. During his college years at Morehouse in Atlanta, King began to reflect systematically upon race in America and came to see that racial and economic oppression were connected. He read and reread Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience" and appropriated the notion that non-cooperation with an evil system is a moral duty. Later at Crozier Seminary in Pennsylvania, King was influenced by the works of the Social Gospel advocate, Walter Rauschenbusch. By the time he reached maturity, he was deeply convinced that Christianity required Christians to actively work for social justice.

His concern for social justice, as well as his intellectual interests, led him to study the social philosophies of the major thinkers in Western philosophy as he pursued graduate degrees at Crozier and at Boston School of Theology. Though strongly attracted to the academic world, King decided that his commitment to social activism for racial justice could best be fulfilled in pastoral ministry in the South. So he accepted the call to pastor the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in the shadow of the Confederate capitol in Montgomery. As he later recalled, "When I went to Montgomery as a pastor, I had not the slightest

idea that I would later become involved in a crisis . . . I neither started the protest nor suggested it. I simply responded to the call of the people for a spokesman," As spokesman for the boycott, King hammered out for himself and for the public, hostile and friendly, a philosophy of black protest. The necessity of protest, he proposed, flowed directly from the principle of non-cooperation with evil. For black people to passively accept the unjust system of segregation was tantamount to cooperating with the system. Disruptive as demonstrations, marches, rallies, boycotts, and sit-ins were, they were necessary tools for breaking down the complacency of a false social order. Peace in a segregated society was a false peace in which the oppressed merely accepted their subordination out of fear. Black protest didn't create disorder, but revealed the disorder already there in American society, lying just below the surface.

To create such tension that whites could no longer ignore the issue of race, to arouse such conflict that whites were forced to negotiate, these were King's goals in city after city, their names a veritable litany of protest: Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, Washington, Selma, Chicago, Memphis. To those who argued that the time was not ripe for protests, King replied that

"we have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights" and "we are tired -- tired of being segregated and humiliated; tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression." The time to protest is now. To those who objected that demonstrations encouraged lawlessness, King answered that sometimes allegiance to a higher law required breaking an unjust law and suffering the consequences. Besides, the reaction of whites to black protest revealed the true source of lawlessness. When white police attacked unarmed black demonstrators with clubs, cattle prods, fire hoses, and police dogs, the lawlessness of racism stood revealed, captured on film for the entire nation to see. (And thousands at home and abroad were shocked that such things could happen in America.)

Demonstrations, then, were directed not just at local patterns of discrimination but at racism in the nation at large. Even when they resulted in minimal local gains, they dramatized the plight of blacks in a segregated society and created pressure for change. Moreover, demonstrations were rituals of revival, powerful exhortations to the nation to repent. They were the means for achieving the goal of the movement, at least as King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference saw it: "to save the soul of

the nation." The soul of the nation, King and the demonstrators were saying, with their bodies as well as their words, is tied to the struggle for racial justice. In his most famous defense of protest demonstrations, Letter from Birmingham Jail, King eloquently restated the relationship between black freedom and the American myth:

We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence . . . we were here. . . . We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

King's dream for black Americans was, then, in 1963, still "deeply rooted in the American dream."

But just as it had in the 19th century, the linkage between Afro-American destiny and American destiny kept slipping. The fit was not exact. The demonstrations graphically illustrated the distance between the ideal image of America and the reality

perceived by blacks. In fact the distance between image and reality was measured precisely by the gap (chasm isn't too strong a word) which stretched between black and white America. The demonstrations revealed how wide the separation really was to many Americans who had not even suspected it was there. A gap so wide was bound to call into question the myth of American identity: Was there one America or two?

The society depicted by the demonstrations was not simply divided, it was in conflict. Just as King and the demonstrators intended, their protests brought to the surface the conflict between America's deeds and her principles and so proved to many Americans for the first time that civil rights was indeed a moral struggle, not simply a political dispute with extremists on both sides. Aided by men like Bull Connor and Jim Clark, the demonstrations embodied the conflict between good and bad, but in this drama, the old color symbolism was reversed. Black was on the side of right and white on the side of wrong. King made it clear, the KKK and white citizens councils were "protesting for the perpetuation of injustice," the civil rights activists were "protesting for the birth of justice." The demonstrations provoked a crisis of conscience. Americans had to choose, as the freedom song put it, "Which side are you on?" If whites wanted to be on the side of right, they needed to join the cause of blacks. The soul of the nation depended on it.

Once again, the nation was being reminded that her destiny lay in the hands of black people. As King told a packed audience on the eve of the beginning of the Montgomery boycott: "If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'There lived a great people -- a black people -- who injected new meaning and dignity, into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility." "The Negro," he concluded, "may be God's appeal to this age -- an age drifting rapidly to its doom."

According to King, the means blacks had to use to save the nation was nonviolence. "The spiritual power that the Negro can radiate to the world comes from love, understanding, good will, and nonviolence." King's first contact with the theory of nonviolence came from reading Thoreau, but a lecture by Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, on the life and thought of Mahatma Gandhi, inspired King to study the Indian leader and to commit himself to nonviolence. Nonviolence, he thought, was the perfect method for translating the love ethic of Christianity into social reform. With the advice of Bayard Rustin, a black leader in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization, King fitted a theory of nonviolent resistance to the tactics of the civil rights movement. He preached that nonviolence was not just a tactic, but a way of life.

As King outlined it, nonviolence requires active resistance to evil instead of passivity; it seeks to convert, not to defeat the opponent; it is directed against evil, not against persons; it avoids internal violence, such as hatred or bitterness, as much as external violence, because hatred depersonalizes the individual. Nonviolence, according to King, is based upon the belief that acceptance of suffering is redemptive, because suffering can transform both the sufferer and the oppressor; it is based upon loving others regardless of worth or merit; it is based upon the realization that all human beings are interrelated; and it is grounded in the confidence that justice will in the end triumph over injustice. The belief that suffering is redemptive was crucial to King as the rationale for nonviolent direct action. By accepting the violence of the oppressor, without retaliation and even without hatred, the demonstrators, he taught, could transform the oppressor's heart.

King's doctrine of redemptive suffering awakened old themes within Afro-American culture, in particular the theme of the suffering servant with all its associations to the slave past. The prayers, sermons, and especially, the traditional songs "brought to mind the long history of the Negro's suffering," King noted. A simple reference to freedom as the "Promised Land," for example, stirred racial memories and triggered religious emotion. The biblical quotations and allusions, which studded King's speeches,

served to locate the protesters in the long train of prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints. The civil rights movement resembled the early Christian movement, King suggested by writing two epistles in the style of the New Testament, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "Paul's Letter to American Christians."

The demonstrations themselves took on the feel of church services. Invariably, they began with rallies in the black churches (primary targets for white terrorists.) These rallies followed a pattern consisting of song, prayer, scripture readings, discussion of goals and tactics, and an exhortation that frequently sounded like a sermon. From the churches, the demonstrators moved out into the public arena to bear witness with their bodies to the gospel of equality and freedom. Some did give their lives.

Just as in the 19th century, black protest, in the 20th, claimed that the moral leadership of the nation had passed to blacks. And blacks in both centuries asserted this claim in biblical and messianic terms. Once again the redemptive mission of blacks contradicted the national myth. But this was not to say that Afro-Americans had simply created a black version of Anglo-Saxonism. King, and others, realized that there was something universal about the black experience and they said so. The particular history of black Americans

represented the suffering of the poor and the oppressed everywhere. And the lesson of black history for the world was that suffering could be transcended. Nothing expressed this universalistic dimension of black protest as well as the spirituals. Gandhi, himself, had once commented that the slave spirituals got "to the root of the experience of the entire human race under the spread of the healing wings of suffering." King touched on this universalism when he ended his "I have a dream" speech with a vision of the day "when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! free at last! thank God almighty we are free at last!'"

With King, as with earlier black protest leaders, reflection on black destiny in America seemed inevitably to push beyond the boundaries of America. In part this was due to his concept of nonviolent love. Love recognized the interrelatedness of all people and impelled one to break down all barriers to community. There is a "network of mutuality" binding together all communities, all states, all peoples, King explained to an interfaith community of ministers who demanded to know why he, an outsider, was demonstrating in Birmingham. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," he told them. The philosophy of nonviolence tended to corrode the myth of American

exceptionalism in King's thinking.

In addition to nonviolence, the independence struggles of darker peoples around the world influenced King, and many black Americans, to place the civil rights struggle in an internationalist context. He wrote in 1958:

This determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from all forms of oppression springs from the same deep longing that motivates oppressed people all over the world. The rumblings of discontent in Asia and Africa are expressions of a quest for freedom and human dignity by people who have long been the victims of colonialism and imperialism. So in a real sense the racial crisis in America is a part of the larger world crisis.

For King, the largest blow against the traditional vision of America's role in the world was deliver'd by the Vietnam War. Against the wishes of many of his advisers, King began to speak out against the War in 1967. In his most famous anti-War speech, delivered at Riverside Church in New York City exactly one year to the day before his assassination, King described America in terms that Theophilus Gould Steward would have found familiar a century earlier. First he attacked "the deadly Western arrogance that has poisoned

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the international atmosphere for so long." Then he accused the nation of being on the wrong side of the revolutions against poverty and injustice taking place all over the world. The only hope for America, he argued, was for the nation "to undergo a radical revolution of values." "We must rapidly begin the shift," he asserted, "from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society," if the "great triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism" are ever to be conquered.

global vision

Finally, King's concern about the relationship between racism and economic injustice which had troubled him since his youth and which led him to organize the "Poor People's Campaign" in the last year of his life, caused him to focus increasingly on the need for structural change if the glaring disparity between wealthy and poor were ever to be closed. To attack these problems, a new universalist perspective must prevail, King argued. "Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole." In the "long and bitter--but beautiful--struggle for a new world," everyone dedicated to peace and justice must take on a new role. They must become for Americans the voice of the others -- the aliens, the enemies, the poor, the oppressed.

Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed

is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them. This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers. . . . Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weakness of our own condition, and if we are mature we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

The continual tradition of black religious protest in the United States has, in turn, called America to live up to her mythic vision of herself, has contradicted

her image of herself, and has argued that a revisioning of her identity was necessary. In Martin Luther King, Jr. these themes of black religious protest reached their culmination. Some Americans, white, as well as black, have over the long years listened to the voice of black protest. They realized that they had much to learn from the "wisdom of the brothers" who were called slaves and niggers. Perhaps we too can learn from their voices as we go about the continuing task of revisioning America.