INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1951, Martin Luther King, Jr., twenty-two years old and in his final year at Crozer Theological Seminary, accepted an admission offer from Boston University’s Graduate School. Because King had already completed seven years of higher education, his decision to continue with graduate studies in theology set him apart from the great majority of Baptist ministers. His father and grandfather had furthered their careers by acquiring degrees from Morehouse College, but in 1951 less than ten percent of African-American Baptist ministers had pursued formal seminary training, and only a few dozen had earned doctoral degrees. Though the elder King still wanted a permanent co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, he was pleased that his son “was moving forward into a modern, advanced sort of ministry” and thus was willing to provide financial support for graduate study in systematic theology. Even as his son’s theological studies provided a gloss of erudition, King, Sr., remained convinced that the stamp of the African-American Baptist church on his son’s religious beliefs was indelible. He admired his son’s ability to combine “the Bible’s truths with the wisdom of the modern world” but still saw him as “a son of the Baptist South.” The young minister’s occasional sermons at Ebenezer displayed, in the opinion of his admiring father, “the probing quality of his mind, the urgency, the fire that makes for brilliance in every theological setting.”

The academic papers that King, Jr., wrote during his three years at Crozer Theological Seminary record his movement from teenage religious skepticism toward a theological eclecticism that was consistent with his Baptist religious roots. Never having had an “abrupt conversion experience,” King felt that his religious beliefs resulted from the “gradual intaking of the noble ideals” of his family and community. “Even in moments of theological doubt I could never turn away” from those ideals, he insisted. Growing up as the son and grandson of preachers and choir directors, King had acquired his basic convictions through daily immersion in the life of Ebenezer. “Religion has just


been something that I grew up in,” he noted. The example of his “saintly”
grandmother, Jennie Celeste Williams, an influential figure at Ebenezer, was
instrumental in his religious development, while his father “also had a great
deal to do with my going in[to] the ministry. He set forth a noble example
that I didn't min[d] following.”

In addition to influencing his choice of a career, King’s family and church
shaped his theological perspective. As King’s undergraduate mentor, More-
house president Benjamin Mays, wrote in his survey of religious beliefs in the
African-American community, there were two traditions of thought about
God, one that enabled blacks “to endure hardship, suffer pain, and withstand
maladjustment” and another that motivated them “to strive to eliminate the
source of the ills they suffer.” King’s family connected him to the latter tra-
dition, which rejected the notion that Christians should abide this world while
awaiting a better one in heaven. “The church is to touch every phase of the
community life,” King, Sr., once urged his fellow black Baptist ministers. “We
are to do something about the broken-hearted, poor, unemployed, the cap-
tive, the blind, and the bruised.” The elder King exhorted his colleagues to
become politically active: “God hasten the time when every minister will be-
come a registered voter and a part of every movement for the betterment of
our people.”

Theological study became the means by which King, Jr., reconciled his de-
sire to pursue a social gospel ministry with his deep-seated distrust of the
emotionalism that sometimes accompanied Baptist religious practice. He later
recalled that at the age of seven he had formally joined Ebenezer in the midst
of a revival meeting “not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a child-
hood desire to keep up with my sister.” He rejected scriptural literalism, ex-
plaining that he “couldn’t see how many of the facts of science squared with
religion.” At one point as a teenager, he even denied the bodily resurrection
of Jesus. His religious doubts began to subside, however, when Morehouse
professor George D. Kelsey reassured him “that behind the legends and
myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape.”
Kelsey and Mays provided King with role models of academically trained min-
isters, and their example inspired him to continue his theological studies.
“Both were ministers, both deeply religious,” King said in a later interview,
“and yet both were learned men, aware of all the trends of modern thinking.
I could see in their lives an ideal of what I wanted a minister to be.”

Drawn to Crozer because of its liberal reputation, King deepened his theo-
logical understanding while at the seminary. By the end of his studies there,

4. Benjamin E. Mays, The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature (New York: Russell & Russell,
1938), pp. 23–24.
5. King, Sr., “Moderator’s Annual Address, Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association,” 17 Oc-
tober 1940, CRFC.
his papers had begun to express an awareness of the limitations of social gospel theology, even while King identified himself with theological perspectives that stressed transcendent moral values and the importance of religious experience. His seminary program included many courses on theology with George W. Davis, a Baptist theologian who combined social gospel teachings with a critical understanding of modern theology. King initially believed that Christian liberalism provided answers to "new problems of cultural and social change," unlike its theological adversary, fundamentalism, which sought "to preserve the old faith in a changing milieu." As he continued his studies, though, King found his initial uncritical attraction to liberal theology "going through a state of transition." His personal experience with "a vicious race problem" had made it "very difficult . . . to believe in the essential goodness of man"; nevertheless, his recognition of "the gradual improvements of this same race problem" led him "to see some noble possibilities in human nature." While continuing to reject biblical literalism and doctrinal conservatism, King was becoming, he acknowledged, "a victim of eclecticism," seeking to "synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology."

Davis also introduced King to personalism, a philosophical school of thought that satisfied King's desire for both intellectual cogency and experiential religious understanding. In an essay for Davis, King reviewed a text by Boston University professor Edgar S. Brightman, a leading personalist theologian. Excited by Brightman's analysis of various conceptions of God, King reported that he was "amazed to find that the conception of God is so complex and one about which opinions differ so widely." Conceding that he was still "quite confused as to which definition [of God] was the most adequate," King decided that Brightman's personalist theology held the greatest appeal. Its emphasis on the reality of personal religious experience validated King's own belief that "every man, from the ordinary simplehearted believer to the philosophical intellectual giant, may find God through religious experience." His reading of Brightman suggested to him that his early skepticism may not have undermined his inherited religiosity:

How I long now for that religious experience which Dr. Brightman so cogently speaks of throughout his book. It seems to be an experience, the lack of which life becomes dull and meaningless. As I reflect on the matter, however, I do remember moments that I have been awe awakened; there have been times that I have been carried out of myself by something greater than myself and to that something I gave myself. Has this great something been God? Maybe after all I have been religious for a number of years, and am now only becoming aware of it.

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Brightman's personalism reassured King that he had experienced God's powerful presence in his own life even without the benefit of an "abrupt" religious conversion. Even as personalist theology became the focus of King's studies, it strengthened his belief that experience as well as intellectual reflection could be the basis of religious belief. "It is through experience that we come to realize that some things are out of harmony with God's will," King wrote in an essay for Davis. "No theology is needed to tell us that love is the law of life and to disobey it means to suffer the consequences."14

To continue his theological training, King applied to Edinburgh University, which accepted him, and to Yale University, which did not, but it was to Boston University, a stronghold of personalism, that he was particularly attracted. Boston was the alma mater of Raymond Bean, one of King's favorite professors at Crozer. He indicated in his application that Bean's "great influence over me has turned my eyes toward his former school."15 He was also aware of several African Americans who had studied at the school, which had a long-established reputation as a hospitable environment for black theology students.16 Unlike Crozer, where there were less than a dozen African-American seminarians, Boston University had a larger number of black students, and its close proximity to other colleges helped to create a community of African-American students with whom King could interact.

King knew that at Boston he could refine his personalism in classes with Brightman and other noted theologians. King explained that he had a "general knowledge" of systematic theology but sought "intensified study" in graduate school to gain "a thorough grasp of knowledge in my field." He announced that theology, his chosen field, should be "as scientific, as thorough, and as realistic as any other discipline. In a word, scholarship is my goal."17 Even while expressing a desire to teach theology after he completed his studies, King had already begun to incorporate his theological training into his preaching. King's studies at Crozer had encouraged him to question many aspects of his religious heritage, but the church of his parents and grandparents had imparted an understanding of God and the Christian mission that theological learning enhanced rather than displaced. He later explained that personalism's "insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me a

15. King, Fragment of Application to Boston University, in Papers 1: 390.
16. In the fall of 1950, when considering various graduate schools, King met Crozer alumnus Samuel D. Proctor at a campus lecture and learned about Proctor's training at Boston University, where he had received his Th.D. that year. Dean Walter Muelder later estimated that Boston University awarded half of the doctorates in religion received by African Americans during the decade after King's arrival. He explained: "When the reason for this was sought, blacks said to me, 'We know where Boston University stands and the word gets around'" (Walter G. Muelder, "Philosophical and Theological Influences in the Thought and Action of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” Debate and Understanding 1 [1977]: 183). See also Muelder, “Recruitment of Negroes for Theological Studies,” Review of Religious Research 5 (Spring 1964): 152–156.
17. King, Fragment of Application to Boston University, in Papers 1: 390.
metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.”

In the fall of 1951, after driving from Atlanta in the green Chevrolet his father had given him and moving into an apartment on St. Botolph Street in Boston, King immersed himself in his courses at Boston University’s School of Theology. During his first semester he came into contact with the leading proponents of personalist theological studies. Edgar Brightman had studied with Borden Parker Bowne, the first notable American advocate of personalism and a member of Boston’s faculty until his death in 1910. Since 1925 Brightman had held an endowed chair at Boston named for his mentor. Sixty-seven years old when King arrived, Brightman taught the core course on the philosophy of religion, assigning his own work, A Philosophy of Religion, as the required text. Under Brightman’s guidance, King would continue developing his theological outlook by critically evaluating the ideas of leading theologians from a personalist perspective. He also took two courses—one on personalism and the other a directed study in systematic theology—with L. Harold DeWolf, a Methodist minister and Brightman’s protégé. DeWolf had taught at Boston University for twenty years and would become King’s most important mentor after Brightman’s death in 1953.


Introduction

During his first semester at Boston, King clarified his personalist views in papers that explored various forms of personalism and critically assessed the writings of non-personalist theologians. King's essays for his classes with Brightman and DeWolf were not as personally revealing as were some of those he had written at Crozer, but they did provide opportunities for him to express his theological opinions. As was the case during his Crozer years, King's arguments were sufficiently consistent and convincing to persuade his teachers of his competency; yet they were also derivative, often relying on appropriated words and phrases. In his essays King acknowledged drawing from others as he refined his theological beliefs, but, especially in the essays for DeWolf, he often failed to cite his sources precisely and appropriated the words of others without adequate attribution. The significance of King's academic papers lies not in their cogency or originality, therefore, but in their reliability as expressions of his theological preferences. The Boston essays trace the course of King's theological development, revealing how he constructed a theological identity by carefully selecting insights from various perspectives that were consistent with his own. These borrowed insights would contribute to his subsequent religious leadership.

In first-semester papers written for Brightman and DeWolf, for example, King distinguished his views from the personalism of the British Hegelian J. M. E. McTaggart, who found belief in an omnipotent and creative God "metaphysically unsound." King labeled McTaggart an atheist, asserting that he failed to "recognize the necessity of one all-embracing or controlling Person." Although King identified himself with Brightman's theological perspective, he offered mild criticisms of his professor's notion that the existence of evil implied that God's power was limited, arguing, for example, that this theistic finitism left "faith in a supreme God endangered." Nevertheless, his formulation of the problem of theodicy placed him close to Brightman's views. "God's power is finite," King wrote on his final examination for Brightman's class, "but his goodness is infinite. . . . After a somewhat extensive study of the idea I am all but convinced that [this] is the only adequate explanation for the existence of evil." King's defense of personalism from the chal-


lenges of alternative theological schools gained the approval of Brightman and DeWolf, although the two professors sometimes debated King's points in the margins of his papers.

King received an A – for the course he took with Brightman and grades of A and A – for the two courses with DeWolf, but the latter professor was more effusive in applauding King's work during the first semester. Less critical than Brightman in his evaluations of King's papers, DeWolf gradually assumed the role of King's primary mentor, as he would for many other black students at Boston. DeWolf called one of King's essays "superior," adding that it exhibited "excellent, incisive criticism." He praised another paper on the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth as an "excellent study," awarding King an A. In assessing the Barth paper, DeWolf did not note that King largely restated the views of his professors, both at Crozer and at Boston. Challenging Barth's view of God as "Wholly Other," King conceded that he had been "greatly influence by the liberal theology" to which he was exposed at Crozer and proceeded to use the words of Crozer professor George W. Davis when acknowledging that neo-orthodoxy served as a "necessary corrective" for "shallow" liberalism: "[Barth's] cry does call attention to the desperateness of the human situation. He does insist that religion begins with God and that man cannot have faith apart from him. He does proclaim that apart from God our human efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest night."24 King would continue to use Davis's vivid mode of expression on subsequent occasions to praise an author's affirmation of God's transcendence in the world.25

In another essay written for DeWolf entitled "Contemporary Continental Theology," King's tendency to appropriate the insights of others was even more evident: lengthy sections of the essay were taken verbatim from *Contemporary Continental Theology* by Walter Marshall Horton.26 King obscured his reliance on Horton by referring to him only once, when he acknowledged that a passage was quoted from Horton. King cited several European theologians, including Anders Nygren, but his quotations from them and the corresponding interpretations were in fact appropriated from Horton.27 Although the ideas expressed in the essay were consistent with King's later writings on agape, his explication of Nygren's *Agape and Eros* was identical to Horton's. Thus, although King's understanding of the distinction between romantic

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25. In two other Boston essays ("A Comparison and Evaluation of the Theology of Luther with that of Calvin" and "Contemporary Continental Theology," pp. 191 and 138, respectively, in this volume) and in his dissertation, King appropriated the passage to praise such diverse theologians as John Calvin, Martin Luther, Paul Tillich, and Henry Nelson Wieman.


27. A more extended discussion of King's plagiarism of Horton is in "Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” pp. 24–25.
love and the Greek concept of *agape* may have been shaped by Nygren’s ideas, the evidence in “Contemporary Continental Theology” suggests that King’s ideas were drawn from Horton’s analysis rather than from his own reading of Nygren.

DeWolf had little reason to suspect plagiarism given his student’s good performance in written examinations and in the classroom. He later remembered King as “a very good student, all business, a scholar’s scholar, one digging deeply to work out and think through his philosophy of religion and life.”

DeWolf’s obliviousness regarding King’s plagiaries is partially explained by the consistency of the theological perspective that emerged in the papers, but it also suggests that he did not demand of King the analytical precision and originality that might have prepared his student for a career of scholarly writing. DeWolf’s failure to note the plagiarized passages in King’s essays suggests that he asked little more of King than accurate explication and judicious synthesis. Brightman was more demanding. He insisted, for example, on careful citation practices, as outlined in an essay on writing bibliographies in his *Manual for Students of Philosophy*. He told King to consult the manual after the bibliography to King’s first essay failed to meet his exacting standards. In his next paper, King indicated an awareness of his professor’s expectations by appending a note to the essay, apologizing for footnotes that were “in somewhat bad condition” and a block quotation that had not been properly arranged, both errors attributed to a poor typist.

During his second semester at Boston, King continued his exploration of personalist theology in courses with DeWolf and broadened his studies with a course at Harvard University in the history of modern philosophy with Raphael Demos. King expanded his criticisms of theological liberalism in an outline written for DeWolf on Reinhold Niebuhr, whose writings led King to acknowledge “the fundamental weaknesses and inevitable sterility of the humanistic emphasis” of liberalism in the twentieth century. King was particularly receptive to Niebuhr’s criticism of love and justice as conceived in liberal and orthodox theology. In orthodoxy, “individual perfection is too often made an end in itself,” but liberalism “vainly seeks to overcome justice through purely moral and rational suasions.” Liberalism, King wrote, “confuses the ideal itself with the realistic means which must be employed to coerce society into an approximation of that ideal.” King was also drawn to Niebuhr’s eco-

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30. King passed over courses with such titles as Seminar in Gandhi, Social Christianity, Methods of Changing Social Attitudes, and Christianity and Race Relations. See Boston University catalogs, 1951–1953.

nomic and moral critique of capitalism, which King saw as responsible for 
"appalling injustices," particularly the "concentration of power and resources 
in the hands of a relatively small wealthy class." 32

In his conclusion King applauded Niebuhr's emphasis on making realistic 
moral choices and found "very little to disagree with" in Niebuhr's social 
analysis. King did, however, criticize Niebuhr for an inadequate explanation 
of how agape operates in human history: "He fails to see that the availability 
of the divine Agape is an essential affirmation of the Christian religion." 33

King would later emphasize the redemptive power of agape in his dissertation 
and in his public statements as a civil rights leader. 34

At Boston University King encountered an urban environment quite different 
from the sheltered seminary atmosphere he had left at Crozer, but he 
quickly adjusted, establishing contacts with other black students attending 
Boston's many colleges and seminaries. He actively sought out southern stu-
dents, particularly those from Atlanta, and served as their link to the South. 
"Martin was in the center of it all," one friend later commented, "as we dis-
cussed topics of interest." 35 Traveling south for the holidays and other occasions, 
King would bring back news about Morehouse College and other 
Atlanta-area schools. 36

King's easy warmth and charm made him an attractive figure on campus. 
One friend described him as a "very amiable" person who liked parties and 
was generous with his money: "He was like a prince," one friend recalled. A 
skilled mimic and comic, King developed a private language with the other 
students. Biting into a hot dog at his favorite restaurant, King would say, 
"Doctor, this is a great institution." The expression became his signature, and 
he would apply it in many situations. 37 His acquaintances were eager to hear 
King speak at Boston-area churches. "We always found our way to those 
churches," one friend recalled, "as much to hear his message, but also his 
style was so entertaining." 38 Gathering together in the school cafeteria or in

32. King, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," pp. 146, 142 in this volume.
33. King, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," p. 150 in this volume. DeWolf gave the essay 
an A+ , calling it an "excellent interpretation and exposition," but wished that "the critical evaluation 
had been carried further."
34. See, for instance, King, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul 
Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," p. 441 in this volume; and King, Stride Toward Freedom, 
pp. 104–106. King's discussion of agape in Stride may also derive from Harry Emerson Fosdick, 
On Being Fit to Live With: Sermons on Post-War Christianity (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 
pp. 6–7; and George Kelsey, "The Christian Way in Race Relations," in The Christian Way in Race 
35. Willard A. Williams, "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.," 1986, WAWP-GAMK. See 
also "Conversation Between Cornish Rogers and David Thelen," Journal of American History 78, 
37. Williams, "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr."
dormitory rooms, King and the other students explored issues not covered in the classroom. A friend who left Boston after King’s first year nostalgically called the group “the gang in the room solving the problems of the world, politically, socially, and in the theological realm.” 39 Although participants sometimes discussed racial discrimination, issues such as the positive role of the church in the black community generally engaged them more than discussions of civil rights and black-white relations. Unlike Benjamin Mays and other black academics who had focused on racial issues in their academic studies, King and most others in his group sought advanced training in areas not directly related to their heritage as African Americans.

Over time these gatherings were formalized as meetings of the Dialectical Society. Perhaps modeled after a Philosophical Society initiated by Brightman thirty years before, the group comprised a dozen theological students who met monthly, usually at King’s apartment, to discuss a paper presented by one of the participants. “It was a group,” one member recalled, “that was mainly interested in certain philosophical and theological ideas and applied them to the black situation in the country.” 40 King generally presided over the sessions, helping choose the topics for discussion or engaging a guest speaker such as his advisor, Professor DeWolf. One participant later reflected that King’s leadership “was not aggressive, but always available.” King “would speak in the discussions, but I never got the impression that he was insisting that if he said it, it had to be right”; instead, King encouraged the others to see that “we’re here to cooperate and not compete.” 41 King drew upon his academic study of the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr in one of his own talks to the Dialectical Society. Though King’s presentation did not directly refer to racial issues, he questioned Niebuhr’s notion of the inherent imperfectibility of human nature. “The result of this view is that there can be no real moral progress in man’s social, political, and religious life,” King complained. “Within such a view is there no hope for man?” 42

During his first year at Boston University, King strengthened his reputation as a skilled preacher. In September 1951, while driving to Boston for the first time, King preached at Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, one of the largest congregations in the country. Its pastor was the Reverend Gardner Taylor, a gifted preacher in the National Baptist Convention and an associate of King, Sr. In addition to Taylor, King was familiar from an early age with other prominent black ministers, many of whom knew his father well and had preached at Ebenezer. King’s admiration for the talented preachers who passed through Ebenezer was evident; during one discussion at Boston University, King proudly listed some of the most powerful orators of the African-American Baptist church—Gardner Taylor, Sandy Ray, Mordecai Johnson,

39. W. T. Handy, Jr., to King, 18 November 1952, p. 161 in this volume.
40. “Conversation Between Cornish Rogers and David Thelen,” p. 46.
41. Ibid., p. 48.
and Benjamin Mays—and challenged the Methodists to do the same. The Methodist seminarians could produce only one name. King's student acquaintances often accompanied him when he delivered guest sermons and recognized his special oratorical talent. A classmate commented that she and other students thought he was a "phenomenal preacher" who could "mesmerize" the audience. His developing reputation as a rising young star of the Baptist church opened up guest pulpits along the eastern seaboard. Churches in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York offered welcome havens for King as he traveled back and forth between Atlanta and Boston.

An old friend of King, Sr., the Reverend William H. Hester, was particularly supportive of King and other black graduate students, welcoming them to the pulpit of Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury. King preached at the church occasionally and participated regularly in the young adults group on Sunday evenings. King once gave a sermon on black women as a "great institution," a female friend remembered, in which he "talked about how resourceful we were and how persevering we were, and how caring and strong." Later, during the Montgomery bus boycott, a parishioner wrote to King recalling "the great sermon" he had heard at Twelfth. In the sermon, probably entitled "Loving Your Enemies," King had preached from a passage in the book of Matthew: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." If we can judge from their titles, several of King's sermons from this period would later become standards in his repertoir. There is little documentation of these early homilies, but the fragmentary extant evidence suggests that King apparently did not alter a sermon drastically after he initially composed it. In a later version of "Loving Your Enemies," King stressed the importance of forgiveness, noting that "there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us." King indicated that this love was not "some sentimental outpouring," but agape, or "redemptive good will for all men." Love could transform "an enemy into a friend," because "only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness."

King maintained his close ties to Ebenezer Baptist Church and his family

43. Williams, "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr."
44. Sybil Haydel Morial, interview with Clayborne Carson. See also Williams, "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr."
45. Sybil Haydel Morial, interview with Clayborne Carson.
46. Milton Britton to King, 5 February 1956, MLKP-MBU: Box 15; Matthew 6:44.
47. See, for example, the transcript of King's "Rediscovering Lost Values," 28 February 1954, and the discussion of it in this introduction, pp. 248–250 and 26–28, respectively, in this volume. During the Montgomery bus boycott King gave this sermon several times, occasionally with the title "Going Forward by Going Backwards." Complete transcripts have not been found, but contemporary reports indicate that the structure and language of these versions were similar to the one King preached in 1954.
while at school in Boston, speaking with his mother by telephone, “often for hours at a time, three or four times a week.” In late November 1951, he drove to Atlanta to celebrate his parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, making the first of four trips home that school year. The next month, he traveled to Atlanta again to participate in the Christmas and New Year’s services at Ebenezer. His discussions with his parents often concerned his future plans regarding marriage. They expected him to find a wife quickly, as social mores required that preachers be married, but King made slow progress toward that goal. “When I knew M. L.,” W. T. Handy later remembered, “he wasn’t running after the girls; the girls were running after him. And he was a good catch.” After hearing about King’s popularity from Handy, who had visited the King family in Atlanta, Alberta Williams King expressed concern about her son’s marriage prospects in a sober letter to Martin, Jr., which he shared with Handy. Handy later quoted King’s mother in a teasing letter to him: “Remember M. L., ‘we are expecting great things from you’”—adding that only King himself would “restrain our expectations from bearing fruit.”

Six months after arriving in Boston, King asked Mary Powell, a friend from Atlanta, if she knew any young women who might suit him. Powell immediately thought of Coretta Scott, a fellow student at the New England Conservatory of Music. More interested in a musical career than in marrying a Baptist minister, Coretta Scott, as Powell described her, was a poised, attractive, intelligent young woman with a mind of her own. As Scott later recalled, King called her to see if they could meet. When she agreed and met with King the next day, she remembered feeling initially unimpressed with King’s height—five feet seven inches. But when King began talking, he “grew in stature.” As she recalled, “This young man became increasingly better-looking as he talked, so strongly and convincingly. . . . He seemed to know exactly where he was going and how he was going to get there.” At the end of their first date she remembered King telling her, “You have everything I have ever wanted in a wife. There are only four things, and you have them all . . . character, intelligence, personality, and beauty.” King and Scott began dating, and their courtship progressed rapidly; within several months Scott began to consider seriously King’s talk of marriage.

Compared to King’s relatively privileged childhood in Atlanta’s “Sweet Auburn,” Coretta Scott’s youth had been less advantaged. She grew up on a farm in rural Alabama twenty miles outside the county seat of Marion. Her father,

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49. King, Sr., *Daddy King*, p. 148.
51. W. T. Handy, Jr., to King, 18 November 1952, p. 163 in this volume. Alberta Williams King’s letter to her son is not extant.
Obadiah Scott, was a hardworking farmer who ran a barbershop in his home at night to earn extra money. His industriousness brought the family material comfort and stability, but it also caused Coretta Scott to worry about her father's safety. In a time when successful blacks often encountered racist violence, she later marveled, “It is a wonder that my own father did not end up in the swamp.”  

Her fears for her father were not unfounded. In November 1942, the Scott home had burned to the ground, and the following spring another fire destroyed their newly purchased sawmill after Scott refused to sell it to a white logger.

Determined to advance her education, Coretta Scott decided to attend Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where her older sister, Edythe, had been a student. Scott enrolled in 1945 “with a good deal of doubt” and “with a good deal of fear” about northern culture. Her decision to go north to college stemmed from her conviction that “a good education . . . should be as free as possible—and that means free from Jim Crow as well as free in classroom teaching.”

Taking voice lessons and pursuing a program of music education, Scott became aware of northern racial discrimination when she attempted to fulfill her student teaching requirement in a local elementary school: the school board prohibited her from joining the all-white faculty even though the student body was integrated. When administrators at Antioch discouraged her from protesting this injustice, Scott complained, “I came here from Alabama to be free of segregation.” The incident motivated her to join the Antioch chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights organizations. In addition to civil rights activism, she was also drawn toward the pacifist movement. As a member of the Young Progressives, Scott supported Henry Wallace’s presidential campaign in 1948 and attended the Progressive party convention as a student delegate.

A few years later, when she first met King in Boston, Scott saw herself as more of a political activist than he was; nevertheless, the two students shared a strong commitment to social reform.

As the courtship continued during the spring, King and Scott found many areas of agreement in their dissenting political and economic views. According to a later memoir, King had undertaken a serious examination of Karl Marx's writings during the Christmas holidays of 1949. Although he rejected Marxian materialism, ethical relativism, and totalitarianism, King was attracted to Marx's critique of capitalism. “I was deeply concerned from my early teen days about the gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty, and my reading of Marx made me ever more conscious of this gulf,” he

54. King, My Life, p. 25.
55. Ibid., pp. 38–39.
explained in *Stride Toward Freedom*. Scott recalled that King told her he “could never be a Communist,” nor “a thoroughgoing capitalist” like his father. “A society based on making all the money you can and ignoring people’s needs is wrong. I don’t want to own a lot of things,” she remembered him saying. King, Sr., recalled political arguments—“sharp exchanges”—with his son, who “seemed to be drifting away from the basics of capitalism and Western democracy.” Such disagreements may have been stimulated by King, Jr.’s August 1952 lecture at Ebenezer on “The Challenge of Communism to Christianity.”

That same August, King arranged for Coretta Scott to visit Atlanta in an effort to win his parents' approval of their relationship. Scott recalled being wary during this first encounter with the King family—“all I could think of was the well-known, rather closed social life of the black middle class of Atlanta.” She discovered that the Kings “were dedicated people who judged others on their own merits,” but concluded that her visit “was not an unqualified success.” King, Sr., remained unsure about the couple’s seriousness. King was not able to meet Scott’s family that summer, and they returned to Boston in September without either family's approval of their plans to marry.

Back at school for his second year, King was troubled by the unresolved tensions with his father over his courtship of Coretta Scott, and he spoke of his frustration in conversations with friends. That fall former Crozer classmate H. Edward Whitaker teased him about his unfulfilled intentions: “By the way you told me two years ago you would be married by the next summer. Apparently you are still meeting these girls who are one-time wreckers.” W. T. Handy also expressed an interest in the personal life of “the most eligible and popular bachelor in town”: “I know you are now married? Which one was...

58. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 94. King wrote: “In so far as Marx posited a metaphysical materialism, an ethical relativism, and a strangulating totalitarianism, I responded with an unambiguous ‘no’; but in so far as he pointed to weaknesses of traditional capitalism, contributed to the growth of a definite self-consciousness in the masses, and challenged the social conscience of the Christian churches, I responded with a definite ‘yes’” (p. 95).


60. King, Sr., *Daddy King*, p. 147.

61. Melvin H. Watson, dean of the Morehouse School of Religion, commented that King did not adequately clarify the difference between the materialism of the Greek philosophical atomists and that of Karl Marx. Watson corrected King’s understanding of Karl Marx, who argued, as Watson explained, that “the culture, thoughts, in fact the whole life of man is conditioned . . . by his relationship to the instruments necessary to the making of a living.” Watson also pointed out that “Stalin would certainly not make the question of race a sub-point as you did on Sunday,” maintaining that Soviet Communism had taken a much stronger official position against racism. Watson reminded King that his comments “by no means indicate a lack of appreciation for the fine job you did on Sunday.” See Melvin Watson to King, 14 August 1952, pp. 156—157 in this volume. Watson had written an article on a similar topic in the *Journal of Religious Thought*. In 1963 King published a sermon with a similar title (“How Should a Christian View Communism”) in *Strength to Love*, pp. 97—106.

it?" In addition to these concerns, King was experiencing difficulties with his course work after registering for a heavy academic load: two lecture courses with DeWolf, a seminar on the history of philosophy with Peter Bertocci, and a yearlong course on the philosophy of Hegel with his advisor, Brightman. He also took a class at Harvard with Raphael Demos on the philosophy of Plato.

The first sign of a troubled term came when King stumbled through an exploratory quiz for the Hegel seminar, missing such basic definitions as "logos" and "naturalism." King had studied Hegel in other courses at Boston University, including Richard Millard's History of Recent Philosophy, but the seminar with Brightman constituted King's first prolonged exposure to Hegel's thought. A less than thorough knowledge of German heightened King's difficulty with the course, and—perhaps an indication of his frustration with the philosopher's abstruse language—his essays for the seminar were appropriated largely from a synopsis of Hegel's philosophy. The loss of his mentor's guidance added to King's difficulties. Two weeks after the beginning of the semester a cerebral hemorrhage disabled Brightman, who was replaced by Peter Bertocci as leader of the seminar. Following Brightman's death several months later, King chose DeWolf as his advisor.

Not long after the beginning of the term King encountered difficulties in his other classes as well. After receiving an A on his first midterm examination for DeWolf's course on the history of Christian doctrine, DeWolf chastened King for his weak performance on the second: "Alas! You were to illustrate concretely some influences. You have mostly paraphrased lecture material on the non-Christian philosophies themselves and in telling of their influences—abstractly, not concretely—have added some highly doubtful views." King's poor grade on the examination (68/100) prompted his concerned professor to ask: "Do you have a heavier program than you can swing this term? Let's face it together quickly. Something seems wrong. Can I be of any help?" Two weeks later King took two midterm examinations on the same day, one at Harvard on the philosophy of Plato and another at Boston for a seminar in the history of philosophy. He received C's on both, though Bertocci tried to.

63. H. Edward Whitaker to King, 31 October 1952; and W. T. Handy, Jr., to King, 18 November 1952; pp. 159, 163, respectively, in this volume.
64. King, Exploratory quiz, Seminar in Hegel, 24 September 1952, MLKP-MBU: Box 113.
66. King, Examination answers, Religious Teachings of the Old Testament, 3 October 1952; and Examination answers, History of Christian Doctrine, 28 October 1952; both in MLKP-MBU: Box 115.