

The Universal and the Particular: Race, Religion, and the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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I. Introduction: Purpose and Overview

Focused on the interaction between the factors of race and religion, this paper examines the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) concentrating on how he balanced the particular focus of the quest for economic and political liberation of Blacks in the United States with embracing the universal goal of advancing human rights for all people, domestically and globally. The enduring challenge for all those promoting the freedom and empowerment of people is emulating this model of maintaining the universal focus on the good of all humanity while working zealously to assist specific group or groups of people in their struggle for justice and equity. This paper will proceed along these lines. First, it will provide a short description of King's contributions and set his life in the context of the Baptist Church. Second, and associated with the first point, this presentation will provide some historical background on Black Baptists in the U.S. as ecclesial and theological setting for King. Third, it will discuss King's position on particularity and universality in terms of human rights and demonstrate how he reflects the Black Baptist tradition in this regard. Fourth, utilizing Peter Paris's model regarding integration, nationalism, and pluralism in Black thought, the paper will highlight how the tension between the universal and particular manifested itself in the late 1960s in the debates between King and Stokely Carmichael or Kwame Ture.

II. Heritage and Identity: King, Black Baptists, and American History

As you know, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a twentieth century leader for racial and economic justice in the United States, especially from the year 1955, when selected as leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama, until 1968, when he fell to the gunshots of an assassin in Memphis, Tennessee.¹ Born the son of a Baptist pastor father and an active churchwoman mother in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929, he attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, attained his theological degree from Crozer Theological Seminary then in Pennsylvania, and secured his Doctor of Philosophy degree from Boston University School of Theology in the early 1950s. King was a crucial leader among those largely responsible for overthrowing Jim Crow segregation and racial disfranchisement in the South and the nation during the 1950s and 1960s. He helped established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957 and worked in alliance with other major civil rights organizations of the day, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This mighty coalition of organizations and the support of many others helped persuade the nation to adopt the 1964, 1965, and the 1968 Civil Rights Laws. These national measures legally demolished segregation, outlawed disfranchisement, and combatted housing discrimination. The Civil Rights Movement enacted changes that continue to impact the way we speak about religion in general and Christianity in particular, how we interpret American history and assess American government and politics, and the manner in which we draw connections and interconnections with progressive movements

¹ Perhaps the most comprehensive biographical study of King is the set of three volumes by Taylor Branch: *Parting the Waters/Pillar of Fire/Canaan's Edge* published in New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988, 1998, 2006, respectively.

throughout the Americas and the world. It bears emphasizing that King did not singlehandedly accomplish these feats. Other people, renowned and unknown, remembered and forgotten, Black and White, men and women,² boys and girls, Democrats and Republicans, contributed immensely to the establishment of a post-Jim Crow America and thereby an important reaffirmation of liberation around the world.

III. An Overview of Black Baptists in the Struggle for Social Justice and Their Global Presence

But first let us place King in the Baptist historical context. While King had an understanding and appreciation of religion that included the breath of Christianity and other non-Christian faiths, he also was very much a Baptist. Therefore, it serves us well to provide some brief background on Black Baptists in the United States. We acknowledge the overall emergence of Baptists in the United States: their being legatees of the tradition from England and mainland Europe during the 1600s and 1700s; and the theological indebtedness to Congregationalism and other Puritans in England and elsewhere; and, of course, to the significant influence of the Anabaptists in mainland Europe.³ More specifically regarding Black Baptists in the U.S., we should be aware that during the very first two centuries of English colonial presence in North America, African Americans in limited but significant numbers affiliated with Baptist churches. But two well-known series of evangelical revivals in North America during the approximate time span of 1730-1830 -- the First Great Awakening and the Second Great

² Included among those women is the Mississippi freedom fighter, Fannie Lou Hamer. See Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1990). For a treatment of multiple Black women social, political, and religious leaders in American history, see Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman, eds., *This Far by Faith: Readings in African-American Women's Religious Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

³ For a solid history on the rise of Baptists and their presence in colonial and early national America, see Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), Chs. 1-6, pp. 1-138. Also, see Ch. 11, "African American Baptists," pp. 263-85.

Awakening – were important means by which larger numbers of Blacks entered the Christian churches, especially the Methodists and the Baptists.⁴ By the late 1750s and early 1760s we see the emergence of one of the first congregations in the U.S. founded particularly for the worship of Blacks, known as the Bluestone Baptist Church or the African Baptist Church in Virginia. That Black church independent tradition continued with the founding of the Silver Bluff Baptist Church in South Carolina in the 1770s and the First African Baptist Church in Georgia in the 1780s. Though Black congregations first emerged in the Southern colonies and states, the Northern states saw not only the rise of independent Black congregations but also the emergence of the first regional associations beginning in the 1830s and at least one serious attempt during the Antebellum era to form a national body of Baptists, the American Baptist Missionary Convention based in New York state in 1840. Of course, the majority of Black Baptists, as most other Christian groups, remained in White-controlled ecclesial local, regional, and national bodies prior to the American Civil War. With the coming of Black freedom during and after the Civil War, we see more vigorous and numerous efforts to organize national bodies, the most successful and enduring of which was the National Baptist Convention in 1895.⁵ This Convention formed about 50 years after the founding of what is currently the largest Baptist group in the U.S., Southern Baptist Convention, which was

⁴ Carter G. Woodson, *History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, Originally Published in 1921), pp. 1-99; Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 3-41.

⁵ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Originally Published by Greenwood Press, 1979, Reprinted by Princeton University Press, 1988). Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985) provides a history of the rise and growth of Baptist churches into the 20th century. James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986) traces the movement to construct a national body of Black Baptists, culminating his study with the rise of the National Baptist Convention in 1895. Wayne Croft's *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I don't Feel No Ways Tired* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2020) provides a solid delineation of Black Baptist associations, societies, and conventions.

and is mainly White but with significant non-White presence. The NBC organized a decade prior to the advent of the Northern Baptist Convention, also mainly White and today known as the American Baptist Churches, USA.⁶

Let us also note that Black Baptists in the U.S. have from their earliest history operated in the global community of Baptists. The Revolutionary War with Britain caused divisions among many American churches and affected Blacks as well as Whites. The area around Savannah, Georgia, in the 1770s and 1780s, was one in which some of the earliest Black churches emerged or can trace their roots, including the First African Baptist Church and the First Bryan Baptist Church. The War occasioned some Black Baptists to leave this area and travel to other lands. George Liele, identifying with the British in the War, who gained his freedom and traveled to the Caribbean, there founding the first Baptist congregation on the island and later nation of Jamaica. David George, also a Loyalist, took a different geographical route and traveled to Nova Scotia, Canada, forming a church there, and eventually emigrated to Sierra Leone, started as a British colony prior to becoming an independent West African nation. In Sierra Leone George apparently established the first Baptist congregation on the continent. By the 1820s Black Baptists in the state of Virginia, including the leaders Lott Carey and Colin Teague, traveled to West Africa helping to form the American colony and later nation of Liberia. In some cases, entire Black Baptist congregations emigrated to West Africa. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth Black Baptists maintained religious and racial interests and ties to Africa, through the agencies of the American Colonization

⁶ W. R. Estep, "Southern Baptist Convention," pp. 254-55, and W. H. Brackney, "American Baptist Churches in the USA," pp. 21-22, in Bill J. Leonard, *Dictionary of Baptists in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

Society, White-controlled Baptist groups, and separate Black Baptist societies and conventions.⁷

This Black Baptist tradition is a significant biographical, theological, and political setting for life, ministry, and public service of Martin King. Two eminent Black Baptist historians, Leroy Fitts and the late James M. Washington, make abundantly clear two of the fundamental motivations for Black Baptist independency from White organizations: greater freedom of worship and the pursuit of temporal freedom and progress.

Concerning the latter, the pursuit of racial freedom, Black Baptists in various ways, sometimes openly and other times more subtly and secretly, dealt with and opposed enslavement, sought to exercise whatever civil liberties available, and in other ways endeavored to advance themselves politically and economically.⁸

IV. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Baptist Identity and Activities and Global Dimensions

Hence, King inherited and was nurtured by family members and Atlanta Black Baptists in a tradition that spoke of eternal and temporal meanings and needs. King, Jr. came from a family with strong Baptist ministers on both sides of the family, which included his father Martin Luther King, Sr., a political as well as spiritual leader in the Atlanta area. King, Sr., as would be the case with his son, was an active participant in the oldest organized national body of Black Baptists, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated. The NBC advocated economic and political advancement as well as

⁷ For accounts of early Black ministers and congregations and their global contexts, see George Liele and Andrew Bryan, "Letters from Pioneer Black Baptists," in Milton C. Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, Second Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 44-51; Grant Gordon, *From Slavery to Freedom: The Life of David George, Pioneer Black Baptist Minister* (Hantsport, Nova Scotia, Canada: Lancelot Press, 1992); David T. Shannon, Julia Frazier White, and Deborah Van Broekhoven, eds, *George Liele's Life and Legacy: An Unsung Hero* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2012).

⁸ Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985; and James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986).

religious advancement for Blacks. Baldwin in his *Voice of Conscience* outlines the tremendous impact of Baptist and Baptist-related churches, schools, and individuals had upon the formation of King, including: the Ebenezer Baptist Church, pastored by King, Jr.'s father; other Baptist and non-Baptist churches in the Atlanta area, such as Wheat Street Baptist Church; Morehouse College, which began as a Baptist institution with both White and Black support and some of whose administrative leaders and professors, such as Benjamin E. Mays, were Baptist; Crozer Theological Seminary, a Baptist school, which later merged into the school today commonly known as Colgate-Rochester Divinity School; and Baptist pastors in Northern cities where King pursued his graduate studies.⁹

The point here is not to claim that King was exclusively shaped by Baptists, for there were many non-Baptist and non-Christian influences that helped shaped King's emerging theology and strategies, including the Hindu Mohandas K. Gandhi of the Indian subcontinent in his successful campaign in the 1940s to de-colonize that region from British control. Nor should we leave the impression that King was the first, last, or only Baptist minister and/or pastor to understand the Christian faith and ministry to be inseparable from the goals of racial and social justice. We can at least make reference to his associate in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Reverend Dr. David Abernathy and the courageous Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, long time pastor in Birmingham, Alabama, and in Ohio.¹⁰ But the point here is to emphasize that King had a stalwart Baptist identity and to observe that even in the midst of his civil rights activities,

⁹ Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 13-50.

¹⁰ Ralph Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); and Andrew Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001).

he found time after his pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, to co-pastor Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta with his father, King, Sr., with active service of preaching, serving Holy Communion, and visitation of the congregation's sick members, like many other Baptist and non-Baptist ministers of his time.¹¹

V. MLK's Major Themes and Contributions: The Universal and the Particular

Looking at the totality of King's public ministry and service, three major themes permeate and structure his activities from the earliest days of activism in Montgomery, Alabama, until his death in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968, in his sermons, public speeches, articles, and books. He labored to do his share in fostering racial equality, economic justice, and peace. Stated another way, King fought to eliminate racism, poverty, and violence. Of course, he focused most of his efforts on the United States of America and its Black population. But King always made clear that racial equality, economic justice, and peace were of concern of all humanity. He so often repeated the quote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Stated alternatively, King saw the liberation struggles of African Americans in the U.S. as one important expression of God's plan to bring the Beloved Community of equality, justice, and peace throughout the world.

King left us many legacies. *One of those legacies is the theological understanding and balancing of the universal and the particular.* King was a human rights leader focusing earliest and most thoroughly on the issues of racial discrimination in the United States and the attending issues of poverty and violence. We might say that was his *particular* focus. But that particular focus on Black rights and empowerment was

¹¹ Baldwin, *Voice*, pp. 51-100.

immersed in the *universal* goal of human rights for all people in the U.S. and throughout the world. His *particular* understanding was the recognition of the harsh impact of racism upon Black people; his *universal* understanding was that White people too are damaged by a false sense of superiority that wounds their souls and because of the price expended in suppressing Blacks many Whites are harmed socio-economically as well. King would agree with the often quoted statement of Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in the state of Alabama, not too far from Birmingham, and who was a major Black leader during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Washington said in effect that in order for one person to hold another person in a ditch the aggressor would have to remain in the ditch with the intended victim.¹² No wonder, King and many others observed in the 1950s, the 1960s, and thereafter, that the Southern area of the United States often had higher poverty rates, less educational resources and attainments, worse medical care, etc. than other areas of the country. Segregation, disfranchisement, and other acts of racial suppression aimed at Blacks also directly or indirectly limited the opportunities of Whites and others in the South. In his 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail, as in many other writings and speeches by him, King said that all Americans are tied in a “network of mutuality,” that the interests of one are the interests of all, what affects one affects all.¹³

In other words, King believed that it is ultimately impossible to separate entirely the particular from the universal. King wanted Whites to understand that what benefits

¹² This quote originally appeared in Booker T. Washington’s *The Story of the Negro: The Rise of the Race from Slavery, Volumes 1 and 2* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005; Originally published by Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1909), p. 124, according to: quoteinvestigator.com/2019/12/08/hold/. For an excellent collection of King’s speeches, sermons, writings, and interviews, see James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperOne, 1986). See pp. 20, 212, and 436 for instances in which King references Booker T. Washington.

¹³ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” printed in Washington, *Testament*, pp. 289-302; the quote is on p. 290.

African Americans also helped Whites and other Americans. But he also reminded his Black brothers and sisters of the same, declaring throughout his public career that the struggle for racial justice was not in the limited sense of the term a *racial* campaign but more broadly and essentially a *human* crusade. The goal was not defeating Whites but helping them recognize injustice and pointing Blacks, Whites, and all people toward harmony or reconciliation. Of course, there is a practical, utilitarian value and rationale for adopting this approach. One of the greatest obstacles and successful strategies against Black justice struggle is having that effort reduced to an endeavor that is Black-centered and/or mischaracterized as anti-White. To be sure, King would often point out to those in the Black community who appeared to waver in their commitment to nonviolence that, strategically speaking, Black people were outnumbered and outgunned, meaning any physical conflict between the races would result in greater destruction for Black people. Nonetheless, the overriding factor for King was his strongly held set of theological and ethical convictions regarding nonviolence, love, and the creation of the Beloved Community.¹⁴

Once again, King's views on the particular and the universal are perfectly consistent with the Baptist tradition. Has not the world-wide Baptist tradition, with few exceptions, generally seen our *particular* faith confession as one expression of the larger *universal* church? While we have been fully convinced that our religious understanding and proclamation were among all declarations the most faithful to the Biblical record and witness, we have generally not sought to limit the Church of Christ to any one particular denomination, not even our own. Therefore, when we speak of the individual's right to

¹⁴ These sentiments are found throughout King's writings, sermons, and speeches. As examples, see Washington, *Testament*, pp. 5-72.

interpret the Bible, the independence and self-governance of the local congregation, freedom of religion and conscience, and other great principles we cherish, are not all these our successful attempts to maintain a preference for the *particularity* of Baptist beliefs and practices while holding on to the *universality* of Christianity by recognizing that all faithful believers and followers of Christ are members of the Church of God?¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist, both in the American and global sense.

But King was also a Black American and an African American Baptist. Inherent in the Black tradition is this struggle between the universal and the particular. W.E. B. DuBois was an outstanding race leader, educator, sociologist, and author, publicly active especially during the 1890s to the 1940s in the United States. In his work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in the first decade of the 1900s, DuBois stated that Black Americans have to deal with a warring or conflicting two-ness in their souls. On one hand they are Black, which sets them off from the majority and largely indifferent and sometimes hostile White majority; on the other hand, they are Americans who share the country's central and best ideals and customs. Both, Blackness and Americanness, are essential parts of our personhood and neither can be either by choice or compulsion completely extracted from the other.¹⁶ Surely this tension or conflict between the particularity of one experience alongside another experience that is more general or universal appears among other groups in the U.S. and around the world, for all of humanity is a variety of constituencies and sets of experiences. But in American history

¹⁵ Leonard in his *Baptist Ways*, pp. 1-17, provides an excellent summary of Baptist distinctive beliefs and principles.

¹⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Originally published 1903; Republished: Tampa, FL: Millennium Publications, 2014), referenced quote on p. 5.

the tension of universality and particularity among Blacks seem to be in terms of intensity and persistence never exceeded and seldom rivalled.

Be that as it may, Martin King stood in a tradition of African American Baptists who experienced this tension between the particular and the universal, between Blackness and American Christianity. With the gradual emergence and during the early years of the first enduring national organization of Black Baptists, the National Baptist Convention, in 1895, we see a manifestation of this tension between the particularity of Blackness and the universality of the Christian faith, between Blackness and Baptist-ness. To illustrate this fact, the newly organized Black denomination debated the issue of publishing their own literature or continuing to receive their materials through the mainly White and Northern-based American Baptist Publication Society, a forerunner of the Northern Baptist Convention organized in the early 1900s and eventually named the American Baptist Churches. In the 1880s and 1890s many Black Baptists believed that the Northern-based White group prioritized its cooperative publishing relationship with the mainly-White Southern Baptist Convention over treating its Black writers with a full measure of respect. Therefore, one of the impulses behind the organization of the NBC was the opportunity for Black Baptists to chart their own course in church literature and in other areas. At the time, many Blacks, including many Black Christians, fervently believed that each race of people had vital contribution to make to the world and that the emphasis on cooperation and integration with Whites should not obscure the duty of Blacks to make their contribution. Some Blacks, including Baptists in the NBC, held the conviction their race would never be fully free and maximally creative unless they were operating in institutions owned and operated by themselves, that White-controlled

organizations would not in the near future be able to surmount their racial prejudice and ignorance and, hence, African Americans in these groups would for the foreseeable future experience frustrations -- a common Christian and denominational faith notwithstanding.¹⁷

These racial *independents or nationalists* faced strong opposition in the NBC from a segment of their peers whom we can designate as *cooperationists*. The cooperationists believed that many Northern White Baptists in particular had provided much essential human and material support for the founding and operation of Black educational institutions and many of their churches in the South before, during, and after the 1860s Civil War in America. It would be a height of ingratitude to sever these cooperative links with proven friends. Relatedly, many cooperationists believed that African Americans fewer than 50 years from chattel enslavement still required material assistance from White friends. Beyond this reasoning along the lines of practicality, however, they also theologically raised the issue of universalist character of the Christian faith. Though not employing this exact terminology, they emphasized that the Christian faith calls for cooperation across racial lines, that Blacks should not emulate some Whites and adopt a color line or caste Christianity.

There are some observations to be made regarding this independent-cooperationist debate among Black Baptists in the late 1800s and early 1900s. First, proponents on both

¹⁷ For the conflict between the cooperationists and the nationalists among Black Baptists, see Sandy D. Martin, *Black Baptists and African Missions: The Origins of a Movement, 1880-1915* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1989), pp. 139-69; more specifically regarding the conflict between Black and White Baptists relative to publication of literature, see Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, pp. 159-85; for a survey and analysis of Black thought during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1963); and for a more specific look at Black nationalism among blacks, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925*.

sides likely at times exaggerated their differences with their counterparts, occasionally making the divide larger theoretically or theologically than it was in terms of actual practice. The Black independents did accept financial supports from Whites and the Black cooperationists at times did reject arrangements they deemed unfair. Second, this independent-cooperationist debate had practical, organizational consequences. The Lott Carey Baptist Convention emerged in 1897, only two years after the founding of the NBC parent body; and it is clear that this debate played an important, though not the only, role in their separation from the NBC.¹⁸ Third, we reiterate that this is just one example of Blacks, Baptist and otherwise, dealing with the issue of particularism and universalism. The legacy of King as it pertains to balancing the particular needs of Black people struggling for freedom and the universal need and recognition that justice is a concern for everyone is, hence, an ongoing aspect of the Black experience.

VI. MLK: Integration, Desegregation, and Black Nationalism

One specific set of areas where we see the tension between particularism and universalism playing out in the life and public ministry of Martin King surrounds the racial issues of integration, desegregation, and Black nationalism. Once again, this presentation is beholden to Peter Paris of Princeton Theological Seminary for this typology laid out in his study of four major Black leaders of the 1960s: King, Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) a Black nationalist who eventually adopted Sunni Islam; Joseph H. Jackson, President of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated, from the early 1950s to the early 1980s; and Adam Clayton Powell, powerful U.S. Congressperson representing Harlem, New York. Three were Baptist ministers – King, Jackson, and Powell – and the fourth, Malcom X, was reared in a Baptist home. I shall

¹⁸ Martin, *Black Baptists*, pp. 139-69; and Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, 159-85.

focus on King the integrationist, Malcolm X's nationalist position in this paper represented by Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture), and Jackson the pluralist.¹⁹

King was an exponent of *integration*, envisioning a society and world where people would be judged by the content of character rather than skin color or other incidental factors. He labored for the Beloved Community free of racial distinctions where people in private and public life interacted as brothers and sisters of a common Heavenly Parent, eliminating the existence of racially characterized schools, businesses, etc. For King, there was a continuum from *segregation*, where the races are separated and one dominates the other; to *desegregation* where those walls of segregation are breaking down but where there is continued resistance and the breakdown of the segregation barriers is limited; to the final stage of *integration* where all structural separation has been eliminated and people from their hearts embraced their neighbors without regard to race, ethnicity, color, and other incidentals. King clearly understood that while legal segregation was largely demolished by the late 1960s that breakdown was limited, often more token integration than full integration. King conceded that in this situation with continuing opposition to full integration some Black institutions would still be required for the well-being of the Black community and as a foundation to struggle for full integration.²⁰

King, however, encountered opposition regarding integration. Reflecting a long-standing tradition in Black American history, some leaders, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, questioned the utility or even the practicality or possibility of

¹⁹ Peter J. Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity, Insights from Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Joseph H. Jackson, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

²⁰ Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, 98-143; Washington, *Testament*, 75-131; Baldwin, *Voice*, 51-100.

striving for full integration in the sense of assimilation. They did not see that the U.S. in the foreseeable future would surmount its racial consciousness and step completely away from White supremacy or preference. Consistent with thinkers dating back centuries, Black Power advocates or Black nationalists called for a deeper, more explicit sense of racial consciousness and pride, a greater understanding and appreciation of Black history and culture, the necessity of supporting existent and establishing new Black institutions, control of facilities serving the Black community, the amassing of Black wealth for the benefit of the greater Black populace, less confidence and reliance on the generosity and ability of Whites to reform racist attitudes and behavior, and the necessity of Black unity, cooperation, and self-support. In other words, King and others had placed too much emphasis on the *universality* of the Black struggle; there was now the need to focus more on the *particularity* of Blackness.²¹

King interpreted the rise of nationalism as a logical, though not preferable, response to White backlash against the Civil Rights Movement and appreciated many points made by his philosophical opponents, such as increased emphasis on Black history and culture, racial pride and solidarity, and the need to consolidate and strategically use political and economic power. But King had serious reservation about the use of the term “black power,” believing that for many it suggested black domination or racism; a better slogan that would convey greater urgency and pride should be used. Furthermore, King saw this emergent nationalism running counter to the universality of the justice struggle; as rejecting or at least despairing of the goal of full racial integration; abandoning the strategy of nonviolence in civil rights protests; and the breaking of ties with White allies

²¹ Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America with New Afterwords by the Authors* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1967, republished 1992); Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, pp. 182-222.

and supporters. In other words, rather than the particular struggle of Black people reflecting the broader struggles of all peoples to gain freedom and liberation, Black nationalism denoted or certainly implied an excessive emphasis on the Black struggle as a particular race issue that undermined it as a universal human issue.²² To be fair to the nationalists, their response is that every people should have leadership from within that defines and charts the liberation of that group; that the universality of this particularity of race is maintained on the principle of alliances with other oppressed peoples and all people of goodwill willing to support, but not direct, other peoples' liberation struggles.

The pluralist position of Joseph H. Jackson stands somewhere between the integrationism of King and the nationalism of Carmichael and Malcolm X. NBC President Jackson certainly advocated and welcomed the fall of segregation. But he made a distinction between prejudice and preference. Racial prejudice, which mistreats people on the basis of their race, is immoral and unconstitutional. Preference, however, is the realization that people of a given race might prefer associating or grouping themselves with those sharing customs and experiences. Preference is natural, but it becomes immoral when hardened into prejudice. Hence, Jackson was not dismayed with the existence of White and Black churches, that is, congregations composed of all or mostly Whites or Blacks. The problem arises when such congregations fail to realize that all people are siblings and are children of a common Heavenly Parent. It is un-Christian when people go beyond sharing memberships with those whom they are comfortable and began actively excluding those who are different. While sharing the integration and

²² Excerpt from King's book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* in Washington, *Testament*, pp. 555-633, especially chapter 2 on pages 569-97 in the book dealing with "Black Power"; see also James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1992), for Cone's comparison of King and Malcolm X.

universal perspective of King, Jackson also valued the need for Black identity and maintenance of Black institutions. He did not embrace some of the connotations of nationalism, and neither did he insist on the necessity or even in the foreseeable future the complete extinction of racial identity by Whites or Blacks. Jackson sought to emphasized the universality of religion and country while sustaining the practical need for the particularity of race identity.²³

Conclusion

There are other points that I had planned to address, such as the legacy of King regarding gender equity, the politics of respectability, and reparations for the descendants of American enslaved persons. But I found it more manageable to center the theme of the universal and particular in the thought of King. This presentation has discussed the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., twentieth century Baptist minister and Civil Rights leader, in the larger context of the African American and general Baptist tradition in the United States, emphasizing his approach to Christianity and Civil Rights as encompassing both the universal and the particular. This paper has argued that King maintained the universally shared principles of Christianity and the Baptist tradition in pursuit of the goals of a particular community of African Americans. That is an enduring legacy and continuous challenge for us all, our Baptist heritage and identity.

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²³ Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, 64-97; Joseph H. Jackson, "National Baptist Philosophy of Civil Rights," in Sernett, *African American Religious History*, 511-18; Sandy D. Martin, "Uncle Tom, Pragmatist, or Visionary?: An Assessment of the Reverend Dr. Joseph H. Jackson and Civil Rights," in Peter Eisenstadt, ed., *African American Conservatism* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999), pp. 169-200.

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