You undoubtedly know that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a progressive Christian and champion of civil rights and the social gospel. You may also know that he spoke out against the Vietnam War, harshly criticized U.S. foreign policy, and questioned the capitalist system that produced poverty. But do you know his theology?

Right up until Dr. King’s assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had traveled to support striking sanitation workers, the civil rights leader worked -- not as a secular activist but as a Baptist minister -- to awaken the conscience of the nation. What was the meaning of Jesus for Dr. King? Did he see Jesus as divine? How did he interpret the Bible?

Biographies describe King as a liberal Protestant, but what does this mean? What was his understanding of Christian doctrines and why are they important to us? A number of academic papers written during his seminary years (1948–1951) provide an intimate look at the young King as he struggled to reconcile religion with a changing, dynamic, and modern world.

Prior to entering the liberal Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, King had developed only a tenuous relationship with Christianity. Despite being raised in a lineage of orthodox Baptist ministers, King at a young age demonstrated skepticism of the irrational claims of religion, and embarrassment at the emotionalism of his father’s preaching. His entrance into Christianity at the age of six came from neither a genuine religious conviction nor a crisis moment; rather, he saw his sister make the altar call during a local religious revival and quickly followed suit. He claimed that during his baptism he had no idea what was occurring. Perhaps most striking was his denial of the bodily resurrection of Jesus during Sunday school at the age of thirteen. From this point he stated, “doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly.”

King carried these suspicions with him when he entered Morehouse College in Atlanta at the age of fifteen. He had originally planned on being a doctor or lawyer. At Morehouse, under the guidance of President Benjamin E. Mays and professor George D. Kelsey, he began to believe that religion could be both “intellectually respectful and emotionally satisfying.” Mays’s weekly talks on the social gospel delighted King, while Kelsey’s Bible course taught him to see the Bible metaphorically, leading him to conclude the Bible has “many profound truths which one cannot escape.”

While the “shackles of fundamentalism” broke off during these years at Morehouse, it was at Crozer that King discovered the insights and potential of liberal theology and began to articulate his opinions about Christianity. It was here that he found his calling, graduating first in his class and delivering the commencement address. He would go on to study the twentieth-century giants of theology -- Tillich, Wieman, Niebuhr, and Barth -- while pursuing a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Boston University. But by the end of his seminary years at Crozer he had already
laid out his understanding of the core doctrines of the Christian faith. And it is here that we now
direct our focus.

How did Dr. King understand Jesus? Did he see him as the Son of God? In “The Humanity and
Divinity of Jesus,” a paper written for a class called “Christian Theology Today,” King clearly
lays out his view on the divinity of Jesus:

The orthodox attempt to explain the divinity of Jesus in terms of an
inherent metaphysical substance within him seems to me quite inadequately. To say that the Christ, whose example of living we are
bid to follow, is divine in an ontological sense is actually harmful
and detrimental. To invest this Christ with such supernatural
qualities makes the rejoinder: “Oh, well, he had a better chance for
that kind of life than we can possibly have …” So that the
orthodox view of the divinity of Christ is in my mind quite readily
 denied. The significance of the divinity of Christ lies in the fact
that his achievement is prophetic and promissory for every other
true son of man who is willing to submit his will to the will and
spirit of God. Christ was to be only the prototype of one among
many brothers. The appearance of such a person, more divine and
more human than any other, and in closest unity at once with God
and man, is the most significant and hopeful event in human
history. This divine quality or this unity with God was not
something thrust upon Jesus from above, but it was a definite
achievement through the process of moral struggle and self-
abnegation. 3

The question King answered was not whether Jesus was divine but rather how he became divine.
This approach allowed him to deal with the “insuperable difficulties” of the orthodox position
while still explaining why Jesus was unique and different from other people.

In line with his metaphorical interpretation of Jesus, King searched for the deeper significance of
the history and context in which the Christian doctrines were created. He suggests, “We should
delve into the deeper meaning … and somehow strip them of their literal interpretation,” and
when we do this “we will find they are based on a profound foundation.”

In a paper discussing the creation of orthodox beliefs, King argues that the virgin birth story
represents a pre-scientific worldview: Christ’s followers believed that Jesus’s uniqueness could
only be explained biologically. According to King, Jesus’s early disciples saw his “spiritual life
so far beyond theirs” that any attempt to explain his existence as human was inadequate. He
concludes, “We of this scientific age will not explain the birth of Jesus in such unscientific
terms.” This same type of thinking led Christ’s followers to externalize their inner experience of
his lasting power through the story of the bodily resurrection. Those who knew Jesus “had been
captivated by the magnetic power of his personality,” King writes, which led them to believe that he “could never die.” The living and eternal presence they experienced was then transferred into the story of a bodily resurrection.

In “The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope,” a paper King wrote for Christian Theology Today, he explores the core doctrines. The one he denounces most directly is that of the second coming, writing, “It is obvious that most twentieth century Christians must frankly and flatly reject any view of a physical return of Christ.” What were the early Christians trying to convey in predicting the return of Jesus? King states:

Actually we are celebrating the Second Advent every time we open our hearts to Jesus, every time we turn our backs to the low road and accept the high road, every time we say no to self that we may say yes to Jesus Christ, every time a man or wom[a]n turns from ugliness to beauty and is able to forgive even their enemies. Jesus stands at the door of our hearts if we are willing to admit him....
The final doctrine of the second coming is that whenever we turn our lives to the highest and best there for us is the Christ.

This is in effect the continual return of Jesus.

In addressing the orthodox notion of the Day of Judgment, King suggests that we “set aside the spectacular paraphernalia of the judgment scene and the literal throne.” Jesus has already come to judge the world. When we judge ourselves against the life of Christ or experience closeness to him we are experiencing the Day of Judgment. King also denies the traditional notion that some are destined for eternal communion with God while others are destined for hell. In “The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope,” he writes, “A physical heaven and a physical hell are inconceivable in a Copernican world ... for us immortality will mean a spiritual existence.”

And in “Why Religion?” he says, “In reality I know nothing about heaven ... personally I don’t believe in hell in the conventional sense.” In the end King interprets the kingdom of God not as some cataclysmic end time or a theocratic kingdom that triumphs over “satanically inspired regimes.” Rather he associates the kingdom of God with the eternal love of God on earth, writing, “When we see social relationships controlled everywhere by the principles which Jesus illustrated in life -- trust, love, mercy, and altruism -- then we shall know that the kingdom of God is here.”

In a paper entitled “A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification,” King describes the various different views of the meaning of the cross throughout history and then concludes: “Any doctrine which finds the meaning of atonement in the triumph of Christ over such cosmic powers as sin, death and Satan is inadequate.... If Christ by his life and death paid the full penalty of sin, there is no valid ground for repentance or moral obedience as a condition of forgiveness. The debt is paid; the penalty exacted, and there is, consequently, nothing to forgive.”
Dr. King’s understanding of the Bible is quite simple; he believed it was written in a pre-scientific world and used language that was representative of its era. He flatly rejects a literal interpretation of biblical stories, claiming such a reading would be “absurd” in a Copernican world. The pre-scientific worldview that informed the authors of the Bible is clearly inadequate for modern Christians. Written by men trying to understand their social environment and place in the cosmos, the Bible is filled with “mankind’s deepest devotional thoughts and aspirations.” Readers who accept the Bible literally are faced with impossibilities and deep contradictions, but those who read it as myth encounter “many profound truths which one cannot escape.”

For Dr. King, the value of biblical stories is not diminished by their mythological nature. Rather, the myth serves to take the reader beyond the idea or thought within the mind. In short, he accepts the standard methods for critically examining the Bible. In “How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction,” he explains that this modern method “sees the Bible not as a textbook written with divine hands, but as a portrayal of the experiences of men written in particular historical situations.” Textual and literary criticism, archaeology, and history revealed to King the inadequacy of a literal biblical interpretation. He claimed that this critical approach to the Bible was “the best or at least the most logical system of theology in existence.” He also believed that biblical criticism and biblical archaeology “will serve to justify the church in modern culture.” However, King was keenly aware of liberal theologians’ ability to get caught up in abstract theory. In “The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology,” he expressed his understanding that his role as a religious leader was to reconcile theory with concrete meaning:

It is certainly justifiable to be as scientific as possible in proving that the Pentateuch was written by more than one author, that the whale did not swallow Jonah, that Jesus was not born a virgin, or that Jesus never met John the Baptist. But after all of this, what relevance do the scriptures have? What moral implications do we find growing out of the Bible? What relevance does Jesus have in 1948 A.D.? These are questions which the liberal theologian must of necessity answer if he expects to influence the average mind. Too often do we find many of the liberals dodging these vital questions.

King also wrote at this time that “to discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing.” During his first semester at Crozer, writing on the Hebrew Bible, he compared the creation accounts, flood stories, and theologies of Babylonia, Egypt, and Sumer with those in the Bible and concluded that biblical stories are rooted in the surrounding cultures. He concluded that the Hebrew authors of the flood story were “producing from Babylonian mythology an almost verbatim story.” While most Christians of his time would have seen both Judaism and Christianity as contradicting and rejecting pagan religion, King argued that they gave a more “profound and spiritual meaning” to the pagan views to which
they must be indebted, adding that these traditions even prepared people “mentally and emotionally to understand the type of religion which Christianity represented.” For King, the only reason Christianity triumphed was the particular historical and social circumstances. He even went on to suggest that Christianity might end up like those other cults, religions, and pagan practices that didn’t survive. In *The Influence of Mystery Religions on Christianity*, he wrote: “The staggering question that now arises is, what will be the next stage of man’s religious progress? Is Christianity the crowning achievement in the development of religious thought or will there be another religion more advanced?”

The purpose of the church for King is not to create dogma, theology, or creeds but rather “to produce living witnesses and testimonies to the power of God in human experience,” and to commit to action. From a young age, King understood the importance of combining his religion with social justice. From this perspective King viewed the church’s role as promoting a way of life rather than a belief system, saying, “Jesus always recognized that there is a danger of having a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.” He stated that Christ is more concerned with how we treat our neighbors, our attitudes toward racial justice, and living a high ethical life than he is with long processions, knowledge of creeds, or the beautiful architecture of a church. According to King, the church had strayed from Christ.

In “Is the Church the Hope of the World?” he asserted that “nothing has so persistently and effectively blocked the way of salvation as the church,” due to the church’s condoning of evils such as slavery and monopoly capitalism. He went on to say, “On the other hand, the church can become the hope of the world, but only when it returns to Christ.”

By his senior year, King had developed a strong belief in the liberalism that defined the social gospel movement and progressive theology in his era. However, his encounter with Reinhold Niebuhr and the Neo-Orthodoxy movement led him to “recognize the illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of a false idealism.” Thus, he sought a middle ground and rejected original sin as “preposterous” while acknowledging that sin is a real choice we make, albeit far too often.

Like the great mystics, King viewed God as an experience not limited to any religion or restricted by any creed, stating, “Of course the true seeker will realize that there is no one way to find God” and “No theology is needed to tell us that love is the law of life and to disobey it means to suffer the consequences; we see it everyday in human experience.” King meditated for an hour a day, prayed, and discovered God through nature. It was through this sort of devotional life that he believed our souls can be united with God, bringing our will in line with his.

For King, God is always near. In “Mastering Our Evil Selves,” he writes: “God is not a process projected somewhere in the lofty blue. God is not a divine hermit hiding himself in a cosmic cave. But God is forever present with us.” Despite his liberal theology, he did, however, maintain the belief in a personal God that is both transcendent and immanent. In his dissertation King compared and contrasted his particular theology of personalism with the theology of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman, two leading voices in the process theology movement, which viewed God as an impersonal force. King also viewed God as synonymous with justice. He
believed God was right there with him and others during the civil rights movement: “The God that we worship is ... but an other-loving God who forever works through history for the establishment of His Kingdom.”

On the issue of evolution and creation, King sought to reconcile the advances of science with his religious belief in God. He claims that the scientific origin of the beginning of the world “might be right in seeing the invalidity of the older view of a first creation.” However, instead of denying any creation, he advocates the view of “emergent evolution,” which suggests that God is “an intelligent conscious mind working out its purpose through the evolutionary process.”

According to King, it is “here that we find creation and evolution working together.”

At this point a few important questions can be asked. Did King’s views on the Christian doctrines while in seminary change later in his life? He was ordained as a Baptist minister. Would he not have chosen a different denomination if his views were so liberal? Dr. Clayborne Carson, a world-renowned King scholar and director of the King Papers Project at Stanford, told me that he had not seen any documentary evidence of a later shift in King's thinking from his early views on Christian doctrines. He also said King may have found creative ways to avoid expressing his unorthodox views, as he was trained in a liberal seminary but served a Baptist congregation.

King had numerous opportunities to express his understanding of Jesus, the Bible, and Christianity with his many sermons, books, interviews, and writings. If at any point he changed his views and became an orthodox Christian, he might have at least once claimed that Jesus was his savior, the Bible was the literal word of God, or non-Christians would go to hell. But there are no statements either during his educational career or in his work as a civil rights leader and preacher that would suggest he ever changed his liberal views of the doctrines.

King’s metaphysical and philosophical understanding of God and human nature did grow and develop while at Boston University, though his approach to the Christian doctrines remained constant. It should not be surprising then that while Dr. King served a Baptist church, his first choice of religion was Unitarian Christian (which later merged with Universalism). Dr. King’s liberal faith resonated with the dynamic Unitarian Christian tradition because of his acknowledgment of the truth in all religions, his view of Jesus as an exemplary teacher, and his rejection of biblical literalism. Coretta Scott had been attending Unitarian churches for years before she met and married Martin, and they both attended Unitarian services while in Boston. He ultimately faced the reality that he would probably not be able to play a role in the civil rights movement in this tradition and thus he became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, shortly thereafter being elected to lead the Montgomery bus boycott.

God is bigger than any one religion, and King’s theology is a pertinent reminder of this. King was able to express a vision of Christianity that was both meaningful and welcoming of others. In our present world, where fundamentalism is on the march, a look back at his reasoned and thoughtful approach to religion can serve the public well. And for the spiritual progressives working to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth, Dr. King’s expression of faith offers a powerful synthesis of how justice, love, and peace can be manifest as paradise here and now. His theology is inclusive, tolerant, renewing, and life-sustaining -- free from dogma and exclusionary
views, which can lead to violence and separation. The history of religious intolerance within Christianity is, needless to say, troubling. A historical and metaphorical interpretation of Christianity is valid: it need not lack energy and conviction as some fear. Indeed, such an interpretation is held by many in today’s vibrant “emergent church.” Dr. King is a voice for this movement, as he promoted Christianity as a way of life based on an inner experience and rooted in a commitment to the social gospel. For those of us progressive Christians who have fought for a seat at the table, Dr. King politely pulls a chair out for us to sit on.
Endnotes


2 Ibid., p. 180.

3 King Jr., “The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.* Vol 1, p. 150.


5 Ibid., p. 229.

6 Ibid.


8 Ibid., p. 270.

9 Ibid., p. 271.

10 Ibid.

11 King Jr., “Why Religion?” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.* Vol. 6, p. 83.

12 Ibid., p. 272.

13 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

17 King Jr., “How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction,” in The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Vol. 1, p. 253.

18 King Jr., “The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology,” in the *Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.* Vol. 6, p. 78.

King Jr., “The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Vol. 6, p. 78.

21 King Jr., “The Influence of Mystery Religions on Christianity,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Vol. 1, p. 311.


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 King Jr., “A Religion of Doing,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Vol. 6, p. 171.

27 Ibid.

28 King Jr., “Is the Church the Hope of the World?” in “*The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Vol. 6, pp. 105-106.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 27.

31 Ibid., p. 232.

32 Ibid., p. 234.

33 King Jr., “Mastering Our Evil Selves,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Vol. 6, p. 97.

34 Ansboro, John, *Martin Luther King Jr., The Making of a Mind*, p. 47.


36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.


39 Ibid., p. 27.