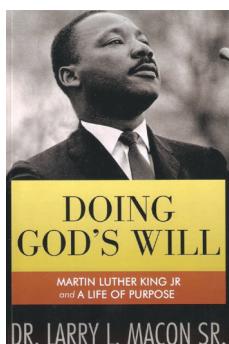




DOING GOD'S WILL: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND THE LIFE OF PURPOSE

by Larry L. Macon Sr.
(A Book Review)



Even though racism has been recognized as wrong (sadly, not that long ago), the world, heedless, is heading towards nationalism and radical conservatism again. It certainly is a reason for concern, especially that the semantics of such adjectives as “patriotic,” “religious,” and “nationalist” seem to blur, and in the ensuing ideological and terminological chaos, extreme attitudes

adopted with respect to these lofty notions have already proven to aggravate, rather than mitigate, social tensions. To Larry L. Macon, Sr., a theologian, questions concerning the essence of Christian ethics are of elementary importance in this context. Can faith matter in the process of social change? Can Christians have a positive impact on the social life of the multicultural and multiethnic societies in which they live? Can they truly overcome evil with good? And if so, what theology might provide a fundament solid enough to eliminate partisanship within Christianity and effectively translate the essential Christian creed into social practice?

In his *Doing God's Will*, Larry L. Macon seeks to answer these questions by shedding light upon the theology of one of the most influential pastors in history: an African American Southerner,

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Nobel Peace Prize winner, and legendary Civil Rights leader—Martin Luther King Jr. Unlike many other biographers, however, the author of the book—a minister and a professor of religion at Cleveland State University in Ohio—depicts King not only as a Civil Rights champion, but also as a son and grandson of ministers, as a child of African Americans who fought for justice, and as a legacy-bearer of Africa. Furthermore, perhaps because Macon—a scholar of Native American extraction—is neither African American nor white, the image of Martin Luther King he paints is not tinged with any black-white tension. The above notwithstanding, as a Native American intellectual, Macon demonstrates a particular sensitivity to issues of racial mistreatment, which allows him not only to empathize with the trauma of the African American experience, but also to appreciate, without bias, the unique connection between King’s theology and his formula of social and political activism.

This, possibly, is one of the reasons why the book creates the impression that it exceeds the limits of its genre. Although it does offer the reader a plethora of historical facts in rich contexts, the narrative chiefly aims at bringing into light the complexity of connections between Martin Luther King’s theology, his background, and the philosophy of the African American Church. Macon invites his readers “to a journey” through the famous minister’s life, allowing the sensitive “pilgrim” to develop a profound, emotionally sound, understanding of what it meant to be African American both during and before King’s lifetime, and how important religious faith was in the context of the African American reality of the time (Macon 2019: 15). The author thus guides his readers through his protagonist’s childhood, offering the audience an insight into experiences to which young Martin was exposed while growing up as a son of a respected Ebenezer Baptist Church pastor and—at the same time—as an African American boy, learning his first bitter lessons in racism. Following a chronological key, Macon then presents King in the turbulent contexts of his teenage and college years, and ultimately arrives at the final stage of his protagonist’s intellectual and moral formation, showing him as the ethically, socially, and politically self-aware, charismatic leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

Importantly, however, the author uses the biographical formula to address Martin Luther King's evolution towards ministry—a process in the course of which his stewardship to the African American Church became tantamount to his commitment to his nation's brighter future.

The uniqueness of the books lies in the fact that its author placed special emphasis on the explanation of essence of the cultural importance of the Black Church in the USA. Like Macon, many scholars believe that it was the Black Church and the Black ministers who exerted a crucial impact upon King's activism, arguing that in order to comprehend the leader's mission, it is vital to understand the fundamentals of his religion and the expressive formula of worship characterizing his church (Clayborne et al. 1991: 90–99). Macon reminds his readers that the Black Church has evolved from the Slave Religion and thereby, indirectly, remains rooted in Traditional African Religions, professed by men and women who were captured and brought to the Americans shores as enslaved people. His thorough explanation brings the readers' attention to the fact that the myth of 'Universal Christianity,' an idea often used to control and subdue people in bondage, has always had little substance: the notion of God shared by enslaved people differed significantly from the concept shared by their white owners. Quite predictably, despite the massive social, political, and economic transformation that America underwent between the Emancipation Proclamation and the present day, important differences in white and black perceptions of God remain. The experiences of white Americans and African Americans were different in the past—and, sadly, they remain different now, which is why, as Macon explains, "[t]he Black Church is not the same, nor is it a replication of the White Church. They are culturally, contextually, and historically different and distinct" (Macon 2019: 110). In his interpretation of the provenance of these distinctions, Macon supports C. Eric Lincoln's view, who believes that as long as white Americans trace their religious roots back to Western Europe, the African Americans can boldly claim their religious roots to be in Africa, not North America (Lincoln 1974:1).¹

1. See also Macon 2019:111.

The above notwithstanding, as Macon points out, Black and white churches (whether Protestant or Catholic) do, of course, have a lot in common, but it is important to remember that although the present-day Black Church may be analyzed in the evolutionary context of the American Christianity at large, it developed as a formation parallel to white Christianity, originating in gathering on plantations, unsupervised by white masters, led by intrepid Black leaders, and—as has been mentioned—drawing from African Traditional Religions (ATR). In his discussion of ATR, Macon refers to Peter J. Paris's work *Spirituality of African Peoples* (1995), in which the scholar pays special attention to the fact that, both historically and today, the distinction between the sacred and the secular is inessential in the Africans' everyday life. Drawing upon the features he identified as common across a wide range of African forms of worship, Paris generalizes that in most African stories of origin, the Divine Being created the world, rules it, and helps the community to meet its needs. Genderless, the Divine Being has their own will, according to which S/He acts. S/He has helpers—lesser supernatural beings, or sub-divinities. S/He is an invisible and self-sustaining spirit, which is why no visual representations of the Supreme Being have come into existence in the in ATR. Such a Being is conceived of as God who has no end, is all-powerful, unchangeable, perfect, omnipresent, omnipotent, wise, good, and possesses unlimited knowledge. Unreachable to humans, God is always close to mankind created in an act of love. A just Judge who punishes the evil and rewards the good, a Supreme Being of the African Traditional Religions bears a number of features parallel to those attributed to God in Christianity.

For this reason, as Macon observes, at the level of the religious discourse, the adoption of Christianity could have been relatively easy for the Africans professing traditional religions. In both cultural contexts God is a Spirit, and thus the Christian belief in an invisible God or Holy Spirit, or Jesus Christ as one of God's incarnations (who could be conceived of as a sub-divinity) may not have been contrary to their traditional beliefs. However, because the Christianization of the enslaved Africans would often be effected by the whip in the hand of the oppressor who would not shun from using Scriptures to justify their practices, and because within churches

racial segregation was a fact of life, the distinct elements of African religions and cultures brought to America with the captured ones were retained in African American spirituality. Macon observes that some traditional religious values that endured the dark period of slavery and segregation can now be found in the theological substratum of the contemporary Black Church.

It is against such a background that Macon locates King, who himself was a member of Black Baptist communities. Black Baptist Church became dissociated from the white Baptist Church (from which it originally derives) due to the schism caused by racial exclusion. As independent institution, it promoted spiritual freedom and emotive worship, which went hand in hand with the character of the ATR-rooted African American spirituality. Martin Luther King's early texts, written during his college and university years, reveal a lot about his personal attitude to the Black Baptist Church. Notwithstanding the accusations of plagiarism, Macon asserts, these writings pinpoint one important issue: King struggled with theological doubts concerning the Black Church's philosophical fundamentals and practice, yet, in the midst of the doubts, he could never turn away from the morality and ethics he had learned in it (Clayborne et al. 1991: 90–99). Initially opposed to the vision of becoming a minister, King understood well that the Black Church can be a center for social activism, a *locus* where the African American community could be galvanized into action (Clayborne et al. 1991: 96).

As Mason emphasizes, Martin Luther King adopted personalism, which partially stems from the tradition of the African American Church, as the philosophical substratum of his definition of God. According to Rufus Burrow, personalism is an ideology that “has profound implications for the way we think about God, nature, animal life, evil and suffering, freedom, ethics, and a host of other things relevant to human and other life forms” (Burrow 2006: 7, 12). To King, Burrow claims, the most important aspect of personalism was the belief in “the existence of a personal God, the dignity and sacredness of all persons, the existence of an objective moral order and corresponding moral laws, freedom, and moral agency” (Burrow 1999: 10–11), which allows the scholar to conclude that personalism had been culturally transmitted to, and intellectually

instilled in King by the environment in which he had been growing up. Bearing in mind that some aspects of King's personalism, such as his belief that God is personal and that humans are holy, can be traced back to the traditional African worldview (Burrow 1999: xiii, 1, 77; Burrow 2006: 6), it stands to reason to argue that King's theology was an outcome of the dynamics of his cultural legacy and his academic education. In 1960, King—already the leader of the Civil Rights Movement—declared thus:

In recent months I have also become more and more convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. but in past years the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category which I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. Perhaps the suffering, frustration and agonizing moments which I have had to undergo occasionally as a result of my involvement in a difficult struggle have drawn me closer to God. Whatever the cause, God has been profoundly real to me in recent months. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm and known resources of strength that only God could give [...] I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. (King 2013: 73)

Next to personalism, another important aspect of King's worldview traceable back to his African American legacy is manifest in his doctrine of the political engagement of the Church, which could be interpreted as a version of the concept of the non-divisibility of the sacred and the profane in everyday practice, characteristic of the ATR. Macon points it out by indicating the role which the Black Church has played in the sociopolitical reality of African Americans' lives. Given that the Church brought together individuals treated as 3/5 humans, the need for a very tangible delivery from oppression has always been present among its members. Always politically sensitive, the Black Church contributed to the expansion of freedom-oriented theologies and thereby also to the liberation of the enslaved Africans in 1863 by virtue of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. However, despite the abolition of slavery, racial injustice continued to be supported by law, the Black Codes or the Jim Crow laws serving as the most well-known examples. The Church reacted to such attempts to legalize racism by developing equality-oriented the-

ologies, whose proponents, including Martin Luther King, made a very significant contribution to the change of the political climate in the United States, and ultimately—to the validation of the Civil Rights Act, as well as to the passing of the Voting Rights Bill. One of such theological propositions was based on Luke 4:18–19, interpreting whom the Black Church developed what has come to be known as Social Theology:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,
and that the time of the Lord's favor has come²

Social Theology aimed at freeing the souls and improving social conditions of their bearers by political and social means. Martin Luther King adopted its provisions, believing that it is the institution of the Church that should be revolutionary and that it is its duty to fight evil in the society (Rathbun 1968: 46–50). The Church, in his view, should avoid using prayer as an excuse for passivity and silence: action and prayer should go together. Furthermore, because King believed that discriminatory laws passed by groups wielding power to protect the stability of their position at the cost of the suffering of countless others, they must be disobeyed: social actions should be judged as good or bad based on universal moral laws.

King's formula of non-militant civil disobedience, in which moral and social philosophy inform one another, offered him a compelling argument to challenge many Baptist churches to actively address social injustice. Some, as Macon observes, proved reluctant. Others, on the other hand, adopted the central premises of King's theology, which lead to the establishment of the Progressive National Baptist Convention that promoted social justice and encouraged churches to support both political and civil agendas that aimed at warranting marginalized groups in America their full civil rights. King believed that the Church should be involved in politics to fight evil manifest in systematic

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2. The quotation comes from the New Living Translation of the Bible.

discrimination, affecting employment, housing conditions, legal procedures of incarceration and police brutality, and many other aspects of everyday life. Should it remain passive, the Church would support the status quo, thereby, contrary to its mission, supporting evil.

Merging personalism and social action ideology, King's theology rests upon the fundamental law of love, whose transforming power renders it an efficient instrument of social change (Rathbun 1968: 46–50). Its main premise, rooted in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:43–4), was the commandment to “Love your enemies,” which became King's central motto:

we must first develop and maintain a capacity to forgive; second, distinguish between the evil deeds of the enemy and the goodness that can be found in every individual; and third, seek to win the friendship and understanding of our enemies rather than defeating and humiliating them. (Henry 1987: 329)

The strategy allowing one to combine love with the struggle for justice and equality was that of non-violent resistance, to the application of which King was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. For King, Gandhi was perhaps the first individual in the world's history to implement Jesus' teaching on a vast scale in the sphere of politics (Henry 1987: 330). The success of non-violent resistance would be tantamount to King's dream to establish an integrated American society coming true. Hoping for the best, however, the famous minister would exercise a degree of caution in his actions:

Even in his discussions of the Beloved Community, Martin Luther King sought to avoid “a superficial optimism,” on the one hand, and “a crippling pessimism,” on the other hand. While he avoided pointing to any existing political system as a model, it was clear that elements of the “American Dream” were firmly rooted in the Beloved Community. The universalism and inherent individual rights embodied in his nation's political tradition struck a responsive chord in King. Yet the Kingdom of Good—synonymous with the Beloved Community in King's thought—could not be limited to any one nation, language, race, or class. Ultimately, his vision was not rooted in the American Dream or in the goodness of white America, but rather in God. (Henry 1987: 329)

King's theologically-rooted non-partisanship may have earned him a prominent place on the list of “Twenty Most Influential

Southerners of the Twentieth Century” (Reed 2001: 96–100), but, perhaps even more importantly, it was his emotional message of love—spread in a fashion characteristic of the evangelical practices of the Black Baptist tradition—that made him a legend. King found eager listeners both among African Americans and among the whites, who, fearing its militant alternative, would be inclined to support the non-violent Civil Rights Movement:

Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives. (King 2013: 154)

The appeal of the idea of the Beloved Community, especially in the context of the escalation of racial conflicts at the time, proved powerful not only because it carried a promise of a better, peaceful future to people of all descents, but also because it was the divine, rather than human, authority that granted King’s vision credibility among his Christian audiences:

I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. but I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. (King 2013: 239)

Doing God’s Will portrays Martin Luther King as a ‘practical theologian,’ whose biblically sanctioned activism demonstrated to the world that “[e]pic changes can be made without carrying a gun.”³ Larry Macon’s unique biography emphasizes the elusive, non-scientific factor of faith, which preconditions the social engagement of a believer who practices the values he preaches. It leads the reader to the conclusion that in order to comprehend the power of Martin Luther King’s argumentation, it is necessary to take into account far more than his unquestionable rhetorical

3. “Martin Luther King’s Legacy Still Touches Lives Today.” *USA Today*, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://search-1ebscohost-1com-1ognznvvc011e.han.bg.us.edu.pl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=J0E284754014811&lang=pl&site=eds-live>.

skills or the sociopolitical situation of at the time. His struggle in favor of the love-based society consisting of integrated communities regardless of differences and his fight against injustice appealed to millions not only because the conditions of life in post-war, segregated America became unbearable to the marginalized and dangerous to the majority, and not only because the alternative proposed by Malcolm X might push the country to the brink of yet another Civil War. Larry Macon convincingly demonstrates that perhaps more important than all other factors was the fact that Martin Luther King's theology proved to resonate with the African American spirituality to such an extent that his dream became the dream shared by countless Americans, whose faith allowed them to see the Civil Rights Movement and its charismatic leader as the fulfilment of the biblical promise of deliverance.

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