

## ***The Sword that Heals: King, the Black Radical Tradition, and the Destructive Power of the Beloved Community***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper I examine what I call the tradition of Kingdom Violence, which collectively names those who resist the forces of oppression in our world. I first explore the contours of Kingdom Violence in the theology and activism of Nat Turner and Sojourner Truth, and then argue that a kind of Kingdom Violence is present in Martin Luther King Jr.'s theological praxis despite his disavowal of physical violence. King recognized that much of what we have come to think of as normal and natural must be destroyed for the Beloved Community to be fully realized in our world.*

Keywords: King, violence, Turner, Truth, militant

### **INTRODUCTION**

When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood at the podium of Holt Street Baptist Church on December 5, 1955, and declared to thunderous applause, “there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression,” he participated in the long tradition of prophetic Black preachers and prophets rousing the Spirit of freedom in their people to fight for liberation.<sup>1</sup> Recently Gary Dorrien has helpfully explored King’s roots in the Black social gospel tradition, which supplements previous work exploring the radical King. I argue that the radical King can be further fleshed out by connecting him to the tradition of militant Black Christianity that stretches back to the antebellum South and the shores of Africa. More specifically, in this presentation I connect King to what I call the tradition of Kingdom violence.

Kingdom Violence is that tradition of resistance that seeks to exterminate the death dealing systems of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and all systems of oppression, through an insistence upon the dignity and worth of Black people and the full realization of the Kingdom of God. It is a recognition that certain aspects of our world are inherently antithetical to the Kingdom of God. Thus, in order to realize the Kingdom these forces, institutions, and systems of evil must be completely destroyed. Kingdom violence is the Kingdom of God moving into our world and removing what stands in its way. In the tradition of Kingdom Violence, spiritual warfare is waged against the forces of evil in our world in order to eradicate them and the institutions that support them.

This spiritual warfare is not separated from a physical struggle to destroy these evil systems of oppression. For some revolutionaries such as Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, such struggle looked like engaging in physical battles to attempt to win freedom for their people. For others, such as Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King, it had to do with awakening a spirit of freedom in the land through organizing and activism. What makes Kingdom Violence violent is the fact that there is a real war happening, and real enemies of God’s Kingdom that must be confronted and converted or destroyed. For some in this tradition, such as Nat Turner, white enslavers needed to be killed in an attempt to stop the horrors of the system of chattel slavery. For others, like Sojourner Truth and Dr. King, physical violence was not acceptable, but there are demonic forces and bastions of evil that must be driven out and decimated in order for God’s Kingdom to

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church” *King Institute*, accessed 8/10/21, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/mia-mass-meeting-holt-street-baptist-church>.

be established. Regardless of an individual's stance on the acceptability of physical violence, those within the tradition of Kingdom Violence recognize the reality of the war being waged jointly in the spiritual and physical realms, and the need to eradicate the forces of evil.

In the remainder of this paper I give a brief overview of Kingdom violence within the militant Black Christianity of enslaved Black people, then briefly examine Kingdom violence within the theology of Nat Turner and Sojourner Truth—who in some ways represent opposite ends of the spectrum of Kingdom violence—then finally locate the influence of the tradition of Kingdom violence on King's theology and activism.

### KINGDOM VIOLENCE

In Dwight Hopkins' work *Shoes that Fit Our Feet*, he makes the case that,

for African American chattel, God's compassion and *agape* did not exclude a belligerent deed against the enemies of God's people. Consistent with the biblical narrative and reflecting out of their own story, slaves knew that divine pathos brought God to the defense of victims of injustice. *Because of love, the divinity resorted to a warlike nature...* The slaves... conjured up theological images of Jehovah with arms outstretched leading the victorious advance on the battlefield against the evil system of slavery.<sup>2</sup>

Hopkins rightly notes the relationship between God's love and God's willingness to go to war in militant Black Christianity. That is, God's love for God's people, and the evil state of the world, make Kingdom Violence necessary. The kingdom of evil must be vanquished, and the Kingdom of God must be brought about.

Militant Black Christianity, then, is not only distinct from what Kelly Brown Douglas calls slaveholding Christianity, but is its enemy. To put it plainly, militant Black Christianity stands allied with God, and white slaveholding Christianity is in league with Satan and the forces of evil. Hopkins is again helpful here:

[enslaved people] perceived institutional slavery as a struggle between two kingdoms—that of God and that of Satan. Not surprisingly, the white master proxied for Satan and belonged to the latter's domain.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to noting the warfare present at the heart of Kingdom violence, Hopkins here points to another of its important aspects, namely that within this tradition the spiritual and the physical cannot ultimately be separated. God, spiritual beings, and the ancestors do not merely reside within a spiritual realm cut off from the material, but are present and active within the physical realm. The coming world of freedom and justice that enslaved people longed for and enslaved preachers prophesied about was also one that they expected to manifest in their midst. As George C.L. Cummings argues, within militant Black Christianity, "The eschaton was not an opiate; it functioned proleptically. The transcendent future was also the present."<sup>4</sup> Spiritual liberation, therefore, necessarily has practical consequences, and the God who saves the soul also saves the body.

One final aspect of militant Black Christianity that bears upon Kingdom violence is the presence of God's Spirit in the world. This Spirit dwells within each person and also is the foundation of the community that grounds each individual. Hopkins notes that, because of God's Spirit dwelling in each person, and the membership of enslaved Black Christians in the Kingdom of God, "to attack slaves... equalled a demonic attack on God within them."<sup>5</sup> In various ways, God's Spirit moved to resist such attacks, and to deal blows against the Kingdom of evil. God's Spirit also unites each person within God's kingdom to the larger Kingdom of God. As Diana Hayes argues,

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<sup>2</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 24. Emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> George C.L. Cummings, "The Slave Narratives as a Source of Black Theological Discourse" in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet*, 39.

African American spirituality is firmly rooted in the slaves' experience of and encounter with the all-encompassing power of the Spirit. The African understanding of ntu, the spiritual life force, was transferred to the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit who, like ntu, sustains and nurtures the living and connects them with those who have gone on before—the ancestors—as well as with all creation.<sup>6</sup>

Kingdom violence, then, sees individuals as thoroughly enmeshed within and dependent upon their community, and God's Spirit as present and active in the material world.

### THE SPECTRUM OF KINGDOM VIOLENCE

One person who followed the leading of God's Spirit was the enslaved Baptist minister Nat Turner. He in some ways represents the clearest example of Kingdom violence, because there is no question whether his theology led to violence. Prophet Nat was called by God's Spirit, which he described as the Spirit that "spoke to the prophets in the former days," to lead a revolt against the white enslavers oppressing his people.<sup>7</sup> After becoming fascinated with Matthew 6:33, which states, Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you, Turner had a vision of a battle in the heavens between white and Black spirits that led to the Spirit revealing many things, including that the great day of judgment was fast approaching. Christ's blood then returned to earth in the form of a bloody dew, which prompted Turner to await the final sign—an eclipse—and then carry out the work the Spirit set for him.

Turner clearly fits within the tradition of Kingdom violence because he was called to enact a physically violent rebellion by the Spirit in order to move forward God's Kingdom on earth. He was seeking the Kingdom, and the Spirit instructed him to do so by bringing together enslaved persons and killing enslavers. According to Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, Turner "[understood] his struggle in terms of God's chosen ones... [who were] identified with the Hebrews of the Old Testament."<sup>8</sup> Ogbar argues that Turner saw in the Old Testament a "God of war" that would ultimately guide enslaved Black people to freedom.<sup>9</sup> Though Turner's rebellion did not end chattel slavery, Turner trusted in the Spirit and saw his shed blood as somehow working in concert with Christ's blood to bring about liberation and God's kingdom.

On the surface, Sojourner Truth seems quite different from Prophet Nat. Most importantly, she was an avowed pacifist, which seems to rule out support for violent rebellions such as the one led by Turner. However, if we dig below the surface a bit, I argue that Truth also was influenced by the tradition of Kingdom violence, despite personally eschewing physical violence. First, she was guided by the Spirit, having visions that called her to preach and purified her from her sins. Margaret Washington records that in her experience with the Spirit, Truth learned that "God's breath, according to the New Testament, punished as well as rewarded, brought judgment as well as purification."<sup>10</sup> Through the Spirit, Truth encountered a God who was loving and enacted fierce judgment. Indeed, Truth saw God's love and judgment as intertwined. Additionally, Truth lived her life in a way that tried to make God's kingdom a reality on earth. Washington argues that Truth, through her devotion to the Beloved Community, hoped to change the world and usher in the Kingdom.

However, there still remains the question of violence. Nell Irvin Painter records a speech given by Truth in which Truth

calls down the curse of Cain on white Americans. She imagines a day when whites shall cry, like Cain, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." She speaks straightforwardly: "The promises of Scripture were all for the black people, and God would recompense them for all their sufferings in this world." To the masses of

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<sup>6</sup> Diana Hayes, *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Nat Turner and Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>, 7-9.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Ogbar, "Prophet Nat and God's Children of Darkness: Black Religious Nationalism," *Journal of Religious Thought* 53/54, no. 1 (1997): 60.

<sup>9</sup> Ogbar, "Prophet Nat and God's Children of Darkness," 61.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Washington, *Sojourner Truth's America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 74.

Americans who carried their Bibles in their heads, “recompense” plainly conveyed vengeance as well as salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, for Truth, God’s love of Black people entailed judgment against the white people who oppress them. This entails an aspect of violence, though a type of violence that serves purify as well as destroy. Additionally, Washington notes that, despite Truth’s pacifism, she “welcomed the Civil War as a necessary spiritual and national purge” and that Truth revered the famous John Brown, who attempted to end chattel slavery via an armed rebellion.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Truth saw God’s work through the Spirit as loving, but also recognized that in order to accomplish God’s purposes destruction must occur. That which is opposed to the Kingdom must be cleared away. And, she saw room for physical violence, whether through John Brown or the Civil War, to work towards God’s purposes in the world. In summary, then, while Truth was a pacifist her God was not, nor did she seem to think that everyone was called to live as a pacifist like she did.

### KINGDOM VIOLENCE AND KING

What unites Turner and Truth is a commitment to the working of the Spirit in the world to bring about God’s Kingdom, and a recognition that something must be done to destroy that which stands in the Kingdom’s way. Martin Luther King Jr. stood in this same tradition of Kingdom violence. King was affected by both Truth and Turner. Truth was an important precursor to King in the history of Black resistance, and in the first biography written about King, L. D. Reddick notes that King “thought highly [of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey],” and considered them “freedom fighters.”<sup>13</sup> King also saw the Spirit of God at work in the world, namely waging war against the forces of evil to bring about the Kingdom of God, which for him was synonymous with the Beloved Community. King argued that the Spirit was at work in the rebellions happening across Asia and Africa against colonization and oppression, and saw his own resistance as working in concert with this global push for liberation. For, while King was physically nonviolent and was committed to redeeming rather than destroying his human opponents, he also understood that much of the foundational structures of our society and world needed be destroyed in order to make the Beloved Community a reality.

We can see the necessity of this destruction, for example, in King’s description of nonviolence as a “sword that heals,” in his interview with Alex Haley. King is clear that this sword is “fabricated of love.”<sup>14</sup> Regardless, a sword that heals is still a sword—in order for it to function it must cut and destroy. Additionally, King actively re-enacted the Exodus narrative through his protests, seeking to bring down the metaphorical Egypt—that is, the interrelated triple evils of racism, militarism, and extreme materialism—through the power of the Spirit. King, in keeping with the jeremiad tradition of the Black Church, argued that God’s judgment would come upon wicked nations and individuals who refuse to change their ways. For example, in his sermon “Our God is Able,” King argued that persons and nations who fail to follow the moral laws of the universe will be broken by them. Importantly, for King God is a God of love and judgment, a God who sides with the oppressed and will act in history to address their plight. Multiple times throughout his career as a minister, civil rights leader, and human rights activist, King stated that God would actively intervene in history to break immoral nations. In his previously mentioned address at Holt Street Baptist church, King stated,

The Almighty God himself is not only... the God just standing out saying through Hosea, “I love you, Israel.” He’s also the God that stands up before the nations and said: “Be still and know that I’m God, that if you don’t obey me I will break the backbone of your power and slap you out of the orbits of your international and national relationships.” Standing beside love is always justice.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 138.

<sup>12</sup> Washington, *Sojourner Truth’s America*, xxvi.

<sup>13</sup> L.D. Reddick, *Crusader Without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2018), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Alex Haley, “Alex Haley Interviews Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *AlexHaley.com*, July 22, 2020, <https://alexhaley.com/2020/07/26/alex-haley-interviews-martin-luther-king-jr/>.

<sup>15</sup> King, “MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church.”

King believed in the God of his enslaved forebears, a God who is willing to go to war for God's people. Albert J. Raboteau argued that enslaved Black Christians "adopt[ed] the biblical image of a God who lifts up and casts down nations," and King served this same God.<sup>16</sup>

Situating King within the tradition of Kingdom violence involves an investigation of hatred and violence in his thought. For King, hatred and violence are linked, and both are injurious because they separate humans from one another rather than moving us toward the Beloved Community. I do not challenge this fundamental aspect of his theology. However, I argue that Kingdom violence against systems and structures of evil is actually required given King's theological commitments, because these systems and structures are distorting human souls and making fully human community impossible. Therefore, though King does not see physical violence as permissible, I argue that his theology commits him to a particular kind of Kingdom violence.

How then are we to understand King's commitment to nonviolence? I argue that his commitment entails a complete rejection of anything that brings harm to human personality, but that this commitment paradoxically entails a dedication to eradicating systems and structures of oppression and any identities rooted therein. This destruction is ultimately tied to realization of the Beloved Community. This is how Kingdom violence manifests in King's theology. As the Beloved Community comes into being, it destroys that which is incompatible with it. Or, to put it differently, this destruction is ultimately constructive. In his sermon, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," King points towards this constructive, loving violence when he states, "There is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory, and that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil."<sup>17</sup> For King, God moving into the world and establishing the Beloved Community was also God crushing systems of oppression. King saw God at work in God's people fighting for justice, but also as a force intervening in world history to accomplish God's purposes in the world.

Thus, though King championed physically nonviolent resistance, his God is rather different from the pacifistic God envisioned by, for example, Walter Wink or Stanley Hauerwas. Rather, when King's back was up against the wall, he turned to the God who sustains enslaved people and ultimately breaks the back of the Egypt keeping them in bondage. This God called Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey to rise up and rebel against the Kingdom of evil, and this same God called Sojourner Truth and Dr. King to fight evil, oppressive systems and structures without physical violence, all with the purpose of one day establishing God's Kingdom, the Beloved Community, in our midst.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to briefly mention why I believe connecting King to the tradition of Kingdom violence is helpful and relevant. First, the tradition of Kingdom violence more clearly connects King to the tradition of Black resistance. While King and the Black Social Gospel tradition more broadly were influenced by Gandhian tactics of resistance, too often the homegrown tradition of resistance, both physically violent and nonviolent, is overlooked. Placing King within the tradition of Kingdom violence clearly situates him within the tradition of Black resistance to oppression. Second, placing King within the tradition of Kingdom violence allows him to be more easily placed into conversation with thinkers and activists who disagreed with him regarding the use of physical violence. This is true of figures like Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass who advocated for violence in the context of self defense, and even those like Frantz Fanon who argued that under the conditions of colonialism revolutionary violence was necessary for renewing the consciousness of the colonized. Third and finally, I argue that viewing King through the lens of Kingdom violence makes his theology and activism available in new ways for current freedom struggles. Rather than fixating on the question of whether an action is violent or nonviolent, interpreting King through the lens of Kingdom

<sup>16</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "'The Death of Evil upon the Seashore,' Sermon Delivered at the Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, Cathedral of St. John the Divine," *King Institute*, accessed 10/31/20, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/death-evil-upon-seashore-sermon-delivered-service-prayer-and-thanksgiving>.

violence allows one to more easily focus on liberation, the defeat of systems of evil and oppression, and the creation of the Beloved Community. This is not to say that the tradition of Kingdom violence is not worthy of critique. An important aspect of my dissertation is challenging the patriarchal aspects of Kingdom violence, specifically within King's theology and activism, as well as recognizing that the concept of "human" must be remade such that the ideal human is no longer a cis-hetero white male. Towards this end I am currently working to put King into conversation with figures like Sylvia Wynter, as well as Zakiyyah Jackson's recent book, *Becoming Human*.

Ultimately, by contextualizing King within the tradition of Kingdom violence I hope to honor his legacy of resistance and his commitment to the Beloved Community. He argued that the forces of evil must be confronted creatively, and iterated upon his theology and protest tactics as he faced new and evolving foes. I attempt to do the same with his legacy, to creatively interpret it in a way that adds in some small way to the fight against injustice and towards the realization of the Beloved Community.

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