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# THE RADICALIZATION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: THE LAST THREE YEARS\*

Kenneth L. Smith

## PRECIS

The view of Martin Luther King, Jr., that has been eulogized during celebrations of the national holiday designated in his honor is not the view of King that should be eulogized. The image is false because it does not recognize that a significant transition occurred in King's thought during approximately the last three years of his life. During that time, he broadened both his vision of the kind of society required to eliminate racism and achieve justice for everyone and his view of the tactics necessary to actualize such a society. In order to see the King that should be eulogized at future celebrations of the national holiday, it is necessary to understand his broadened social vision in terms of "democratic socialism" and the tactic of "mass civil disobedience" he thought would be required to achieve it. It is also argued that an analysis of these subjects will assist us to see the meaning of the national holiday in its proper perspective.

\*This essay utilizes some material from and is an elaboration of some ideas only dimly seen in the book, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, which I co-authored with Ira G. Zepp, Jr. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974; repub. - Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986).

Kenneth Lee Smith (American Baptist) was Professor of Christian Ethics and Sociology of Religion at Crozer Theological Seminary, Chester, PA, from 1950 to 1970 (where his students included Martin Luther King, Jr., and the J.E.S. managing editor, among many others!), also serving as Editor of *The Voice: Bulletin of Crozer Theological Seminary* from 1952 to 1962, and as its Book Review Editor, 1962-70. From 1965 to 1970, he was also adjunct professor in urban sociology at Widener College, Chester, PA, and consultant to the Community Action Council of Chester and Vicinity. Since 1970, he has been the Mrs. John Price Crozer Professor of Applied Theology at Colgate Rochester Divinity School/Bexley Hall/Crozer Theological Seminary in Rochester, NY, serving as Dean of Crozer Theological Seminary, 1984-89. Since 1983, he has been a Contributing Editor to *Report from the Capitol* (Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs). He has been a consultant to the Office of Human Relations of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester and to the Religious Planning Team, Riverton: A New Town, Henrietta, NY. Ordained in 1948 at the Exmore (VA) Baptist Church, he holds a B.A. from the University of Richmond, a B.D. from Crozer Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Duke University (1959). Dr. Smith's longstanding civic and professional involvements are legion - from chairing the Board of Directors of the War on Poverty Program in Chester, PA, in the late 1960's, to serving on the board of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center in Rochester since 1984. A charter member of the Society of Christian Ethics, he has long served on its Executive and Program Committees and has frequently preached and lectured in local churches, at community events, and on radio and TV throughout the U.S.A. His articles and reviews have appeared in *Social Progress*, *Frontiers*, *Foundations*, *Review of Religious Research*, *The Christian Century*, *Report from the Capitol*, *Pulpit Digest*, the *Bulletin of Crozer Theological Seminary*, and *J.E.S.* His books include *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, with Ira Zepp (Judson Press, 1974; repr. - University Press of America, 1986); and *The Life and Works of Morgan Edwards: America's First Baptist Historian*, with Thomas R. McKibbens (Arno Press, 1980).

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## Introduction

"Great men," Adolph Berle said in an eulogy for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "have two lives, one which occurs while they work on earth; a second which begins at their death and continues as long as their lives and conceptions remain powerful." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has been dead for over twenty years, and, although none of us can prophesy about the long-range effects of his life, only a few would venture to deny that his benevolent and courageous spirit still speaks to a world torn by war and injustice. "Certainly," one commentator has observed, "no other American so successfully wedded the American political ideal of equality in the eyes of the state with the religious belief of equality in the eyes of God. . . . And few in our history have matched his personal courage in pursuit of his dream, his unswerving fidelity to the cause of equal rights and equal opportunity."<sup>1</sup>

Hence, after many years of proposals and debates, the United States Senate finally voted in October of 1983 to designate the third Monday of January as a national holiday in honor of King, one of two Americans, along with George Washington, to have received such an honor. The dominant theme of those in favor of the holiday was that it would have "symbolic importance." True, but symbolic of what? Will it symbolize that King represented "the brightest and the best" of the American tradition of dissent in the interest of justice and freedom for all, thus encouraging us to continue that struggle; or, will it simply assume a symbolic significance without any actual effect? Will the holiday become another classic example of what Max Weber called "the routinization of charisma"?

The manner in which the national holiday has been celebrated thus far indicates that King has been "routinized." The King eulogized has been the King of the March on Washington in August of 1963, not the King assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in April of 1968. The "I Have a Dream" speech, to be sure, was a rhetorical miracle, but it was not substantive. Nevertheless, this has been the King eulogized during the celebrations of the national holiday, and it undoubtedly will be the King eulogized at future celebrations. Dr. King's feet have been frozen to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial because it has not been recognized that, between that speech and the time of his assassination, King had broadened both his vision of the kind of society required to eliminate racism and achieve justice for everyone and his view of the tactics necessary for the actualization of such a society. King's dream was not fulfilled by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

By freezing King's feet to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the fact has been overlooked that during the last three years of Dr. King's life he linked the militarism of the Vietnam War with the domestic issues of racism and economic

<sup>1</sup>William Lucy, "King Linked Causes on Way to Dream," *Democratic Left* (September-October, 1983), p. 12.

exploitation. He began to speak of the war, having concluded that it was draining off funds necessary for the success of the War on Poverty, as "a demonical destructive suction tube." He went on to explain:

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. . . . A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. . . . We must not engage in a negative anti-communism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy, realizing that our greatest defense against Communism is to take offensive action in behalf of justice. We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity and injustice which are the fertile soil in which the seed of Communism grows and develops. . . . Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism.<sup>2</sup>

During the last three years of his life, King also came to believe that racism was more deeply ingrained in the psyche of the American people than he had previously thought. Although he could exclaim optimistically after the Selma-to-Montgomery March (March 25, 1965) that "we are on the move now and no wave of racism can stop us,"<sup>3</sup> just two years later he was saying, "The fact is that there has never been any single, solid, determined commitment on the part of the vast majority of white Americans . . . to genuine equality for Negroes."<sup>4</sup> In an even stronger statement some months later he lamented:

The roots of racism are very deep in our country. Now admittedly, thousands of white persons of good will have seen the moral light. And they cherish democratic principles and justice over privilege. But I must honestly say to you . . . that they are in the minority. I am sorry to have to say that the vast majority of white Americans are racists, either consciously or unconsciously.<sup>5</sup>

The point is that the citizens of the United States do not hear very much

<sup>2</sup>"Beyond Viet Nam," New York: Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Viet Nam (April, 1967), pp. 15, 16. This famous "Riverside Speech" was not the first time King had criticized the Vietnam War. See, e.g., the same publication for an earlier version, "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam," delivered in Los Angeles, February 25, 1967. This publication contained a foreword by Reinhold Niebuhr and favorable comments by John C. Bennett, Henry Steele Commager, and Abraham Heschel.

<sup>3</sup>Address by Martin Luther King, Jr., p. 5, an unpublished manuscript in King Library and Archives, Atlanta, GA. Hereafter, unpublished material from this source will be noted as "KLA."

<sup>4</sup>"America's Chief Moral Dilemma," May 10, 1967, p. 4 (KLA).

<sup>5</sup>"Which Way Its Soul Shall Go," August 2, 1967, p. 2 (KLA).

about the King reflected in these statements, and they are not likely to hear very much about that King during future celebrations of the national holiday. It is truly a disquieting sign that the newspaper columns, magazine articles, and television clips never mention his crucial last three years; indeed, they seldom contain much of anything about him after he won the Nobel Peace Prize, except of course his assassination and funeral. It seems that those forces in our society who represent "the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism" have rather effectively kept hidden the King who, during the last three years of his life, vehemently denounced the government, the military-industrial complex, the U.S. economic system, and the exploitative role of big business in the Third World (including South Africa).<sup>6</sup>

The truth is that a significant transition occurred in King's political thought during the last three or so years of his life. Up to that point he had attempted to balance protest and accommodation, and he was politically aligned with the "liberal" wing of the Democratic Party. However, he moved steadily away from "liberal reformism" to "revolutionary 'democratic socialism.'" "For years," King told a reporter in 1967, "I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society."<sup>7</sup> It is clear that, by 1966, King had begun to articulate a vision of the future that would require radical structural changes in existing institutions, and he had begun to take steps, exemplified in the planning for the Poor People's Campaign, to translate that vision into reality. In order to comprehend the King who should be eulogized at future celebrations of the national holiday, it is necessary to understand both his broadened social vision in terms of democratic socialism and the tactic of "mass civil disobedience" that he thought would be required to achieve it. An analysis of these subjects will assist us to see the national holiday in its proper perspective.

<sup>6</sup>It has been argued that the reason for the lack of knowledge of the last three years of King's life is due to the fact that sources have not been published. (Clayborne Carson, professor of history at Stanford University, is currently working on a 12-vol. edition of King's works, including the unpublished material in the King Library and Archives.) However, this argument is only partly true. King's views on the Vietnam War were widely reported in the public press, and the main thrust of his thinking during those last three years has appeared in several publications. See, e.g., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); "Showdown for Nonviolence," *Look* 32 (April 16, 1968): 23-25; "A Testament of Hope," *Playboy* (January, 1969), pp. 175ff.; "A New Sense of Direction," *Worldview* 15 (April, 1972): 5ff. For a detailed analysis of King's views on South Africa, see Lewis V. Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'Beloved Community' Ideal and the Apartheid System in South Africa," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 10 (Winter, 1986): 211-222.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Adam Fairclough, "Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?" *History Workshop Journal* 15 (Spring, 1983): 122; and Manning Marable, "Evaluating King's Journey," *Democratic Left* (September-October, 1983), p. 15. See "Dr. King's Speech," *Frogmore*, November 14, 1966 (KLA), p. 13: ". . . a restructuring of the very architecture of American society" (cited hereafter as "Frogmore Speech").

## I

The new vision of democratic socialism began, ironically, to take shape in King's mind shortly after the successful Selma campaign in the Spring of 1965. In reflecting upon the progress of the civil-rights movement, he reluctantly came to the conclusion that the so-called successes, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, had not even begun to improve the plight of "the black underclass"<sup>8</sup> in either the South or the North. "... [T]hese legislative and judicial victories," he observed, "did very little to improve the lot of millions of Negroes in the teeming ghettos of the North. . . . These victories did very little to penetrate the lower depths of Negro deprivation. . . . We must admit it: the changes that came about during this period [1955-1965] were at best surface changes, they were not really substantive changes."<sup>9</sup> Although he affirmed that some progress had been made, he also recognized that it had been "limited mainly to the Negro middle class"<sup>10</sup> and "that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years."<sup>11</sup> He experienced a rude shock when he realized that desegregated public accommodations had not changed any entrenched patterns of economic exploitation and that access to the voting booth had not altered the concentration of political power within the white power structure. "Integration," he explained, "is meaningless without the sharing of power. When I speak of integration, I don't mean a romantic mixing of colors, I mean a real sharing of power and responsibility."<sup>12</sup>

King's disillusionment with the extent of the gains of the civil-rights movement was deepened by the failure of the Chicago campaign. Although as late as the Spring of 1965 he was still saying that "the flagrant denial of the right to vote" was "the very origin, the root cause" of Blacks' "second-class citizenship,"<sup>13</sup> after Chicago he began to identify economic exploitation—leading to unemployment and underemployment, inferior education, dilapidated housing, and inadequate medical care and legal representation—as the major problem. He began to use "slum" and "ghetto" as paradigms of the plight of black persons

<sup>8</sup>"Why We Must Go to Washington," January 15, 1968 (KLA), p. 7: "And so we have an underclass, that is a reality—an underclass that is not a working class. And we have thousands and thousands of Negroes working on full-time jobs with part-time income. And so often, those who are employed have to work on two and three jobs to make ends meet."

<sup>9</sup>Frogmore Speech, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 16. He was probably thinking of the following accomplishments: the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1961, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Bill of 1965. (He did not live to see the Open Housing Act, which was passed late in 1968.)

<sup>11</sup>"Pre-Washington Campaign," February 15, 1968, p. 3 (KLA).

<sup>12</sup>"A Testament of Hope," p. 231. See "Why We Must Go," p. 3: "The other thing we did not do during this period was to really grapple with the Negroes' economic plight. . . . We integrated lunch counters, but . . . an integrated lunch counter does not mean much if you don't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee. We integrated hotels and motels, but . . . integrated hotels and motels don't mean much if you don't earn enough money to take a vacation."

<sup>13</sup>Speech . . . after the Selma to Montgomery March, March 25, 1965, p. 3 (KLA).

in the United States. "The Chicago problem," he said, "is simply a matter of economic exploitation. Every condition exists simply because someone profits from its existence."<sup>14</sup> There is little doubt that the recognition of economic exploitation as the root problem decisively shook King's faith in liberal reformism and his previous tactics.

As King gradually arrived at a more "realistic" understanding of the deep-seated roots of racism, as well as the intransigence of the white power structure that supported and encouraged it, and increasingly began to link racial oppression, class exploitation, and militarism, he started to argue for "a redistribution of economic power,"<sup>15</sup> which he thought would be accomplished only by "a reordering of [national] priorities."<sup>16</sup> The plight of both the black and the white poor he viewed now as the result of the economic system *per se*, "systemic rather than superficial flaws."<sup>17</sup> When he arrived at the view that "the roots are in the system rather than in men or faulty operations,"<sup>18</sup> he rejected a major premise of reform liberalism: that capitalism, tempered by a little government regulation, offered the best hope for justice for all persons. At a staff meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he said:

... [W]e are now making demands that will cost the nation something. You can't talk about solving the economic problem of the Negro without talking about billions of dollars. You can't talk about ending slums without first saying profit must be taken out of slums. You're really tampering and getting on dangerous ground because you are messing with folk then. You are messing with the captains of industry. . . . Now this means that we are treading again in very difficult waters, because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong with the economic system of our nation. . . . It means that something is wrong with capitalism. . . . And I want to say that very seriously because I am not going to allow anybody to put me in the bind of making me say everytime [that I am not a Communist or a Marxist]. [I simply wish to say that] there must be a better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a Democratic Socialism. . . .<sup>19</sup>

He then went on to talk about a fundamental redistribution of wealth and power, full employment legislation, a guaranteed annual wage, massive expenditures to renew central cities and to provide jobs for ghetto residents, a national

<sup>14</sup>"The Chicago Plan," January 7, 1966, p. 3 (KLA).

<sup>15</sup>"Pre-Washington Campaign," p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>"America's Chief Moral Dilemma," p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>"A Testament of Hope," p. 194.

<sup>18</sup>"The State of the Movement," November 28, 1967, p. 5 (KLA).

<sup>19</sup>Frogmore Speech, pp. 14, 19. When Ira G. Zepp, Jr., and I published *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), we said: "It seems that King's synthesis was evolutionary or democratic socialism though he never used the terms" (p. 125). We were wrong—he did use the term "democratic socialism." On this subject, see also "Pre-Washington Campaign: To Minister to the Valley," February 23, 1968, p. 7 (KLA); and "Pre-Washington Campaign," p. 6: "The problem is . . . we have socialism for the rich, and rugged, free enterprise capitalism for the poor."

health insurance, a more equitable tax system, and more effective affirmative action programs.

It is clear that the type of democratic socialism King had in mind was the kind he and the Rev. Andrew J. Young had observed on a trip to the Scandinavian countries, especially Sweden. "I am always amazed," he went on to say in the Frogmore speech, "when I go there. They don't have any poverty. No unemployment, nobody needing health services can't get them. They don't have any slums. The question comes to us, why? It is because Scandinavia has grappled with the problem for a more equitable distribution of wealth."<sup>20</sup>

It does not come as a surprise, given such statements, to find that King began to see economic exploitation in terms of "classism" as well as racism. "More and more," Adam Fairclough has aptly observed, "King saw racism as an instrument of class privilege, a means of dividing the working class by giving whites marginal economic advantages and encouraging their psychological pretensions to superiority. Both black and white labour was thus more easily exploited and cheapened."<sup>21</sup> In conjunction with his thoughts about "class struggle," he also began to describe ghettos as a "domestic colony"<sup>22</sup> and "a system of internal colonialism"<sup>23</sup> and to compare them to the apartheid system in South Africa. In his words,

A slum is any area which is exploited by the community at large or an area where free trade and exchange of culture and resources is not allowed to exist. In a slum, people do not receive comparable care and services for the amount of rent paid on a dwelling. They are forced to purchase property at inflated real estate value. They pay taxes, but their children do not receive an equitable share of those taxes in educational, recreational and civic services. . . . This means that in proportion to the labor, money and intellect which the slum pours into the community at large, only a small portion is received in return benefits.<sup>24</sup>

A ghetto is, to be more specific, "a segregated market where goods and services are deliberately restricted in order to boost the profits of the capitalists who provided them."<sup>25</sup> It is thus necessary to combat classism as well as racism in order "to bridge the gulf that separates the have-nots in our nation from the haves."<sup>26</sup> This was surely the reason that King went to Memphis to support

<sup>20</sup>Frogmore Speech, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup>Fairclough, "Was King a Marxist?" p. 120.

<sup>22</sup>"State of the Movement," p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>"Chicago Plan," p. 3.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. See "A New Sense of Direction," p. 9: "It is ironic that today so many educators and sociologists are seeking new methods to instill middle-class values in Negro youth as the ideal in social development. It was precisely when young Negroes threw off their middle-class values that they made an historic social contribution. They abandoned those values when they put careers and wealth in a secondary role, when they cheerfully became jailbirds and troublemakers."

<sup>25</sup>Fairclough, "Was King a Marxist?" p. 120.

<sup>26</sup>"Pre-Washington Campaign: To Minister," p. 13.

striking sanitation workers in their fight for union recognition. "In a sense," he told a reporter shortly before his assassination, "you can say we are engaged in the class struggle, yes."<sup>27</sup>

As we might expect, many of King's closest associates were greatly disturbed by these developments in his thought, some for ideological and others for tactical reasons. It is evident that Hosea Williams<sup>28</sup> and Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., were opposed on ideological grounds. "Politically," the latter has written, "he [Martin Luther King, Jr.] often seemed to be drifting away from the basics of capitalism and Western democracy that I felt very strongly about. There were some sharp exchanges; I may even have raised my voice a few times."<sup>29</sup> Some of the members of the S.C.L.C. staff were concerned about the effect such statements could have upon public opinion. This is probably the explanation for the fact that none of King's speeches that were delivered during the last three years of his life to staff meetings of the S.C.L.C. or to groups of ministers across the South to elicit their support for the Poor People's Campaign has been published. King and his associates, according to James M. Washington, "discussed which statements should be given to the American public."<sup>30</sup>

The question that naturally arises, having concluded that King was a democratic socialist, is: was he a "Marxist"? (Only persons like the late J. Edgar Hoover or Senator Jesse Helms and their ilk even entertain the thought that he was a Communist.) That King was influenced by the thought of Karl Marx is beyond doubt, though the extent of his knowledge of Marx is an open question since it seems to have been derived for the most part indirectly through the writings of others, such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.<sup>31</sup> However, though admitting that his thought had been stimulated by Marx, King rejected Marx's worldview:

In so far as Marx posited a metaphysical materialism, an ethical relativism, and a strangulating totalitarianism, I responded with an unambiguous "no"; but in so far as he pointed to weaknesses of traditional capitalism, contributed to the growth of a definite self-consciousness in the masses, and challenged the social conscience of the Christian churches, I responded with a definite "yes."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Fairclough, "Was King a Marxist?" p. 123. Earlier hints of a class analysis had appeared as early as 1963 in Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963, 1964), p. 138.

<sup>28</sup>Frogmore Speech, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup>Martin Luther King, Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 147.

<sup>30</sup>James Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. xxiv.

<sup>31</sup>See the discussion of this subject in Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, pp. 123ff. See "America's Chief Moral Dilemma," p. 13: "The reason that I couldn't live in a Communist nation is because I believe in dissent."

<sup>32</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 95.

In one of his last statements on this subject he concluded that "capitalism fails to realize that life is social. Marxism fails to realize that life is individual. [Economic] Truth is found neither in the rugged individualism of capitalism nor in the impersonal collectivism of communism. The Kingdom of God is found in a synthesis that combines the truths of these two opposites."<sup>33</sup> For King, that synthesis was found in democratic socialism.

King came to view democratic socialism as an alternative to both capitalism and Marxism. Moreover, he saw democratic socialism as the political and economic ideology most congenial with his view of the distinctively Christian goal of society, "the Beloved Community," the term he used more often and usually synonymously with the more traditional concept, the "Kingdom of God."<sup>34</sup> Although not altogether new, it was largely an unknown phrase for most people in the United States until King used it in the original statement of purpose of the S.C.L.C. in 1957. Its ultimate aim, he wrote, "is to foster and create the beloved community in America. . . ."<sup>35</sup> As he continued, it became apparent that by "Beloved Community" he meant an inclusive and interrelated society characterized by "freedom and justice for all."

This emphasis upon interrelatedness assumed a theme that appears throughout King's writings: the social nature of human existence. For him reality is composed of structures that form an interrelated whole. That is to say, people are dependent upon each other. The recognition of one's indebtedness to others should destroy the attitude of self-sufficiency so often characteristic of human nature, and it should lead to an awareness that individuals need each other for human fulfillment. Individual maturity and growth cannot occur apart from meaningful relationships with other persons. The interrelated character of life means that the "I" cannot attain fulfillment

<sup>33</sup>Frogmore Speech, p. 20. It is important to note that, although this statement was made in 1966, a similar view recurs throughout his writings. See, e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 98-99; and Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 71 (While still a student at Boston University, he told his future wife that while "I could never be a Communist," I can never be "a thoroughgoing capitalist either. I think a society based on making all the money you can and ignoring other people's needs is wrong."). It is important to note that many Marxist scholars today would disagree with King's interpretation of Marx as a "metaphysical materialist" and an "ethical relativist" — here King was a typical American!

<sup>34</sup>See "What a Christian Should Think about the Kingdom of God" (King Collection, 1955-1961, Mungar Memorial Library, Boston University), p. 2: "Jesus took over the phrase 'the Kingdom of God,' but he changed its meaning. He refused entirely to be the kind of a Messiah that his contemporaries expected. Jesus made love the mark of sovereignty. Here we are left with no doubt as to Jesus' meaning. The Kingdom of God will be a society in which men and women live as children of God should live. It will be a kingdom controlled by the law of love. . . . Many have attempted to say that the ideal of a better world will be worked out in the next world. But Jesus taught men to say, 'Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.' Although the world seems to be in a bad shape today, we must never lose faith in the power of God to achieve his purpose."

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Francis L. Broderick and August Meier, eds., *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 272.

without the "Thou." Selves who recognize their interrelatedness must be nurtured in order for the Beloved Community to emerge.

Significant insights can be gained into King's interpretation of the Beloved Community when it is realized that he viewed the civil-rights movement as a microcosm of the Beloved Community. The people who attended the mass meetings and rallies, who participated in the demonstrations, and who worked in other innumerable ways were from every segment of society in the U.S.A. Professional leaders (teachers, lawyers, doctors, clergypersons, etc.) worked and walked with domestics and day-laborers. Every social class and every age group was represented. The highly educated and the illiterate, the affluent and the welfare recipient, white and black and other ethnic groups — people who had heretofore been separated largely by rigid social mores and laws — all were brought together in a common cause.

After the march to Montgomery in the Spring of 1966, several thousand people were delayed at the airport because their planes were late. King, impressed by the heterogeneity yet the obvious unity of the crowd, remarked: "As I stood with them and saw white and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizers, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shopworkers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I knew I was seeing a microcosm of . . . the future. . . ."<sup>36</sup> He viewed the civil-rights movement as a preview of the interrelatedness of human existence that would characterize the Beloved Community. In other words, his vision of the future was a society that would be free not only from the malformation of persons resulting from racial hatred but also from the abnormality of all persons suffering from economic injustice and exploitation.

When King spoke about justice for everyone, he meant that Christians should be

. . . dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of a dark past and every family will have a decent sanitary house in which to live. Let us be dissatisfied until the empty stomachs of Mississippi are filled and the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until our brothers of the Third World — Asia, Africa and Latin America — will no longer be the victim of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy and disease.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear that when he spoke about justice he included all poor persons — Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, Native Americans, etc. It is also equally clear that he included not only Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, but also Hindus and Muslims.<sup>38</sup> In short, King's vision of the Beloved Community and its

<sup>36</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup>Honoring Dr. Dubois, *Freedomways* 8 (Spring, 1968): 110-111.

<sup>38</sup>See "I Have a Dream," in Washington, *Testament of Hope*, p. 220; and King, *Where Do We Go*, p. 167.

politicoeconomic expression in democratic socialism was an ecumenical vision in the broadest sense of that term.

It is important to emphasize, having concluded that King saw democratic socialism as the ideology most congenial with the distinctively Christian goal of society, that he believed his economic views were rooted primarily in the teachings of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, not those of Karl Marx. With them as his guides he could not envision a society apart from the alleviation of economic inequality and the achievement of social justice. Hence, Harvey Cox was on target when he observed that King combined two traditional biblical themes, "the holiness of the poor" and the "blessed community." "It is . . . essential to notice," Cox explained, "that the two elements, the holy outcasts and the blessed community, must go together. Without the vision of the restored community, the holiness ascribed to the poor would fall short of politics and result in a mere perpetuation of charity and service activities."<sup>39</sup>

war

II

King not only broadened his vision of the structural alterations the United States would have to make, but he also changed his view of the tactic that would have to be employed to achieve that vision. Since he spent most of his time during the later part of 1966 and most of 1967 travelling around the country speaking against the war in Vietnam, it was not until the Fall of 1967 that he began to formulate a plan to achieve the desired changes and to articulate the means to implement it. The plan was described as "A Poor Peoples' Campaign," to be held in Washington, DC, in April, 1968, and the tactic would be "a massive wave of militant nonviolence."<sup>40</sup> The campaign would be waged by sufficient numbers of people [about 3,000 at first] and of such duration [two or three months] as to "dislocate" and "disrupt the operation of the national government." His hope was that the Poor Peoples' Campaign would demonstrate that the civil-rights movement had moved from "an era of reform" to "an era of revolution," maintaining nonviolence, while escalating it to new heights.

The Poor Peoples' Campaign, according to King, would push, as Bayard

<sup>39</sup>Harvey Cox, *On Not Leaving It to the Snake* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 133. See King, "Pre-Washington Campaign: To Minister," p. 6: "You don't have to go to Karl Marx to be a revolutionary. I didn't get my inspiration from Karl Marx. I got it from a man named Jesus. . . . He said he was anointed to heal the broken hearted. He was anointed to deal with the problems of the poor, and those who were in captivity. . . . That's revolutionary. And that is where we get our inspiration."

<sup>40</sup>Showdown for Nonviolence," p. 24; and "Pre-Washington Campaign: To Minister," p. 20.

Rustin had been advocating for a long time,<sup>41</sup> for "An Economic Bill of Rights for Jobs and Income for the Disadvantaged." After stating that "we will call on the government to adopt measures recommended by its own commission" [President's Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders],<sup>42</sup> he spelled out his meaning as follows:

We need an Economic Bill of Rights. This will guarantee a job to all people who want to work and are able to work. It would also guarantee an income for all who are not able to work. . . . It would mean creating certain public-service jobs. . . .

Our whole campaign will center on the job question, with other demands, like housing, that are closely tied to it. We feel that much more building of housing for low-income people should be done. On the educational front, the ghetto schools are in bad shape in terms of quality, and we feel that a program should be developed to spend at least a thousand dollars per pupil. . . . Medical care is virtually out of reach of millions of black and white poor.<sup>43</sup>

In his discussions of the subject of income, King returned again and again to the need for "a guaranteed annual income," by which he meant that a person not only has a right to a job but also

deserves an income because without a liveable wage you do not have life in reality in all of its dimensions. I could talk about the practical side of this. Everybody ought to know that it will help the whole nation, would lift the gross national product, it would increase services and goods, and it looks like business leaders ought to see that a guaranteed annual income for all families would be the rational . . . practical thing to do. But I am looking at it from a moral point of view. And I say that we have got to bring our nation to this because . . . this is the only way ultimately to solve the problem of poverty. We may have token programs here and there but until we come to the point in America of saying that every family must have a liveable wage, then we aren't going to solve the problem.<sup>44</sup>

King was aware that his call for a guaranteed annual wage required "a radical redefinition of work." "Our society," he argued, "must come to see that the most

<sup>41</sup>For Rustin's statement of his view of the "aims and objectives" of the Poor Peoples' Campaign, see his "Memo on the Spring Protest in Washington, D.C.," dated January 1, 1968, that King had asked him to write, in Bayard Rustin, *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), pp. 202-205.

<sup>42</sup>*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Bantam Books, 1968).

<sup>43</sup>Showdown for Nonviolence," pp. 24-25. See "State of the Movement," p. 2: "I find five basic causes of the riots: 1. The white backlash; 2. Pervasive discriminatory practices; 3. Unemployment; 4. The war in Viet Nam; 5. Urban problems, crime and extensive migration."

<sup>44</sup>Frogmore Speech, pp. 21-22.

noble work is when you are working to fulfill your own nature, to rise to higher levels of fulfillment. You are working when you are serving people, and helping them to develop."<sup>45</sup>

As he thought about the means to actualize these economic objectives, he reluctantly came to the conclusion that the tactics previously employed — such as demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts, and, on occasion, civil disobedience focused upon a specific “unjust law” — were not “coercive” enough to achieve them. Therefore, he proposed “an alternative [massive civil disobedience] that will force people to confront issues without destroying life and property.”<sup>46</sup> He wrote:

... non-violence must be adapted to urban conditions and urban moods. Non-violent protest must now mature to a new level, to correspond to heightened black impatience and stiffened white resistance. This high level is *mass civil disobedience*. There must be more than a statement to the larger society, *there must be a force that interrupts its functioning at some key point*. . . . *To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer lasting, costly to the larger society, but not wantonly destructive. It is a device of social action that is more difficult for a government to quell by superior force. . . . Civil disobedience in its mass application has a prospect of success. It is militant and defiant, but not destructive.*<sup>47</sup>

One of the best elaborations upon what King had in mind is found in a statement, one that surely would embarrass him today, made by Young in January, 1968:

Dr. King reached the conclusion that something needs to be done to really shock this country into its senses. To use a psychiatric metaphor, the country is sick and it needs a shock treatment. . . .

We have been reluctant to tie up a big city like we did in Birmingham. But we decided that we had better go ahead and dramatize these problems; and if it means tying up the country, then we just have to do it. . . .

The way Washington is a few hundred people on each of those bridges would make it impossible to get in or out. . . . It would mean that every day going back and forth you are thinking about three or four hours each way. That's another kind of civil disobedience.<sup>48</sup>

When it was asked how “mass civil disobedience” would differ from the

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 23. See “America's Chief Moral Dilemma,” p. 8: “John Kenneth Galbraith has said that we could guarantee an annual income for all families in our country for about twenty billion dollars. And this would be less than we're spending today in the war in Viet Nam.”

<sup>46</sup>Showdown for Nonviolence,” p. 24. See “Why We Must Go,” p. 10: “We must find a way to be dislocative if necessary, without destroying life or property.”

<sup>47</sup>“State of the Movement,” pp. 4-5, italics added. See King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, pp. 14-15; and idem, “A New Sense of Direction,” p. 8.

<sup>48</sup>*Christianity and Crisis* 27 (January 22, 1968): 327-328.

tactic used previously, King was ready with a clear answer. In a meeting on January 15, 1968, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, with a group of ministers gathered to hear King outline his plans for the Poor Peoples' Campaign, he told them that, whereas the kind of civil disobedience employed previously had challenged specific local and state laws that were clearly unconstitutional according to federal law, now massive civil disobedience would be “deliberate non-cooperation, to dramatize *an unjust situation* [unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, and medical care] *not regulated by law*.” He continued:

Conditions are now so bad, that it may be justifiable, in order to call attention to evil conditions, for a group of people to just go up to brother Eastland's office . . . and just sit there, and say we aren't leaving, because we are here to call attention to an unjust condition. . . . It may be necessary to break the usual law, in order to call attention to the ultimate purpose of the law, which is . . . to create the abundant life. . . . We are demanding things that are not clearly mirrored in the constitution. . . . When we were struggling in Alabama, it was often the federal government that came to our aid. . . . In this instance [Poor Peoples' Campaign], we will be confronting the very government . . . that has come in as our aide.<sup>49</sup>

Massive civil disobedience would disrupt the functioning of the social system — a form of “nonviolent *sabotage*.”<sup>50</sup>

King's plans for the Poor Peoples' Campaign were opposed by some members of the S.C.L.C. staff, principally James Bevel and Jesse Jackson,<sup>51</sup> and such notables as Michael Harrington and Bayard Rustin, both of whom were members of the “research committee” King had established some years before. In a memo, for example, “prepared at his [King's] request on January 1, 1968,” Rustin wrote:

Given the mood in Congress, given the increasing backlash across the nation, given the fact that this is an election year, and given the high visibility of a protest movement in the nation's capital, I feel that in this atmosphere any effort to disrupt transportation, government buildings, etc., can only lead to further backlash and repression.

Such tactics will, I believe, not only fail to attract persons dedicated to nonviolence, but attract elements that cannot be controlled and that, on the contrary, will converge on the project with a variety of objectives in mind other than those of civil rights.

Given this position, I would hope that the spring protest will be limited to constitutional, nonviolent protest. . . .

<sup>49</sup>“Why We Must Go,” pp. 13, 14, 16, 17; italics added.

<sup>50</sup>See Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, vol. 3 (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), p. 176, *passim*.

<sup>51</sup>Minutes of Executive Staff Meeting,” December 27, 1967, pp. 8-9 (KLA).

There is in my mind a very real question as to whether SCLC can maintain control and discipline over the April demonstration, even if the methods are limited to constitutional and nonviolent tactics.<sup>52</sup>

In the main, King ignored Rustin's and others' advice and defiantly pushed ahead. Rustin continued to object, first privately and then publicly. When King held a meeting in early February, 1968, in Miami, Florida, to explain his plans to about 100 black clergy from across the nation, Rustin, according to Louis E. Lomax, bluntly told them that "Martin no longer had the power to lead such a prolonged nonviolent protest. Rustin flatly refused to direct the protest march and then called a press conference to tell all the world that he was not associated with the project."<sup>53</sup>

The fact that the Poor Peoples' Campaign as conducted after King's assassination did not use the disruptive tactics King had suggested does not obviate this question: had King abandoned the strategy of nonviolence by the time of his death? The answer to that question is an unequivocal No, provided we keep in mind the distinction between strategy and tactics, two components of a model of social change. Sidney Lens, writing in *Radicalism in America*, has observed:

In the final analysis there are only three ways of effecting social change: through persuasion of the men who hold power in the existing system, through a conspiratorial *coup d'état*, or through the open mobilization of the people against the prevailing order. The first is the technique [strategy] of liberals, the second of one type of anarchist, the third of most other radicals.<sup>54</sup>

Liberalism, anarchism, and radicalism are the alternative strategies, each of which, depending upon the context, employs a variety of tactics. King went to considerable lengths, as had Mohandas Gandhi before him, to disavow anarchism and to distinguish it from civil disobedience. Furthermore, King denounced in no uncertain terms both "urban riots" and "guerrilla romanticism," describing both as counter-revolutionary — "Violence begets Violence."<sup>55</sup> There were, to be sure, discernible shifts in King's use of strategy and tactics. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott and for several years thereafter, he attempted to persuade those in positions of power to see the justice of the black cause by appealing to their consciences to pass legislation that would abolish segregation and foster equal rights. This is what Lens calls "liberalism": change through moral suasion, education, and legislation. In later campaigns (for example, Birmingham and Selma), he used "creative disorder," which in some instances included civil disobedience. However, with

<sup>52</sup>Rustin, *Down the Line*, pp. 202, 205.

<sup>53</sup>Louis E. Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968), p. 191.

<sup>54</sup>(New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1966), p. 357. This section utilizes some of the material in Smith and Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*, pp. 137ff.

<sup>55</sup>King, *Trumpet of Conscience*, pp. 14ff.

the advocacy of "mass civil disobedience," the transition from liberalism to radicalism — "the open mobilization of the people against the prevailing order" — was completed. However, he considered radicalism to be a nonviolent strategy. One of his posthumously published articles contained this passage:

I'm just not going to kill anybody, whether it's Vietnam or here. I'm not going to burn down any building. If nonviolent protest fails this summer, I will continue to preach it and teach it. . . . I plan to stand by nonviolence because I have found it to be a philosophy of life that regulates not only my dealings in the struggle for racial justice but also my dealings with people, with my own self. I will still be faithful to nonviolence.<sup>56</sup>

### III

How does the foregoing analysis of the developments in King's thought help us to explain the designation of a national holiday in his honor, since it is obvious that the King depicted is not the King who has been eulogized during the commemorations of that holiday? As anthropologists and sociologists remind us, societies develop myths about persons who have been or become heroes or heroines after their deaths.

Dead men make  
such convenient heroes: They  
cannot rise  
to challenge the images  
we would fashion from their lives.<sup>57</sup>

The myths developed express how a society would like its heroes and heroines to be remembered. People in the United States would like King to be remembered merely as a symbol of the supposed consensual and egalitarian character of American society; the truth is that by the time of his assassination King had rejected that view.

It is ironic, as David J. Garrow has aptly noted,<sup>58</sup> that it was the Federal Bureau of Investigation that perceived the real threat King posed to American society. It is a well-known fact that the F.B.I., with J. Edgar Hoover leading the way, considered King to be a "Communist," and we are encouraged to conclude

<sup>56</sup>"Showdown for Nonviolence," p. 25.

<sup>57</sup>Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., "Now That He Is Safely Dead," in Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., ed., *Drum Major for a Dream* (Thompson, CT: InterCulture Associates, 1977), p. 23; quoted in Vincent Harding, "Recalling the Inconvenient Hero: Reflections on the Last Years of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40 (January, 1986): 53ff.

<sup>58</sup>I am greatly indebted here to David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), chap. 6: "The Radical Challenge of Martin King," pp. 204-219.

from that that "King's entire public career might have been a spy's ruse."<sup>59</sup> This view of King, considering the source, might be easily dismissed if it were not for the fact that the F.B.I., far from being a deviant institution, should be seen as a "representative bureaucracy," meaning that it is "more a reflection of American beliefs and society than . . . either the product of idiosyncratic individuals or a unique institutional structure."<sup>60</sup> Garrow contended that the "representative bureaucracy" concept is rooted in what political sociologists call the "cultural threat" theory of social dysfunction or what Richard Hofstadter popularized as the "paranoid style of American politics." Hofstadter was careful to point out that he was not speaking of the paranoid *individual* in the "clinical sense" but, rather, the "paranoid style" that interprets social dysfunction as a threat "directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not [oneself] alone but millions of others," and that person's "sense that [one's] political passions are unselfish and patriotic . . . [which] goes far to intensify [one's] feeling of righteousness and [one's] moral indignation."<sup>61</sup>

The "representative bureaucracy" concept, as applied specifically to the F.B.I. by Frank J. Donner,<sup>62</sup> holds that "the FBI has long been an official example of the 'paranoid style,' and that the essence of the Bureau's role has been . . . to repress all perceived threats to the dominant status-quo oriented political culture." Moreover, this concept asserts that "the enemies chosen by the FBI were the same targets that much of American society would have selected as its own foes. . . . Anything that appeared foreign or strange to the dominant culture . . . thus became the recipient of a hostility that was societal as well as institutional." In other words, when confronted by social dissent, such as the civil-rights movement, "the paranoid style has been quick to explain the eruption of dissent not by reference to economic or social causes, but by reference to some 'outside agitator,' identified or unidentified, who is stirring up the happy natives who otherwise would be satisfied with their lot."<sup>63</sup> The irony, as Garrow concluded, is that King, properly understood, was "not . . . a threatening challenge to the central values of American society," but rather "an embodiment of the ideals for which the country always had stood. After his

<sup>59</sup>Taylor Branch, "Uneasy Holiday," *New Republic* (February 3, 1986), p. 24.

<sup>60</sup>Garrow, *The FBI*, p. 208. Garrow refers us to Samuel Krislov, *Representative Bureaucracy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974).

<sup>61</sup>Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 4. Garrow informs us that a similar view had been expressed earlier by Edward A. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies* (New York: Free Press, 1956). During the writing of the present article, the "Iranian arms deal" and the "Contra-connection" became public knowledge.

<sup>62</sup>See Frank J. Donner, *The Age of Surveillance: The Aims and Methods of America's Political Intelligence System* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 83: "For Hoover, Communists were more dangerous than criminals; they were godless, violent, immoral, deceitful, dirty, and unpatriotic. . . . The Director's anti-communism was total in its scope and depth. . . ."

<sup>63</sup>Garrow, *The FBI*, pp. 208, 209, 210. See King's April 16, 1963, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in King, *Why We Can't Wait*, pp. 77-100. This letter was written in response to the charge that he was an "outside agitator" (p. 79).

assassination King unfortunately came to be viewed by many people as a thoroughly successful American reformer whose triumph affirmed the myth of American society as both essentially good and increasingly perfectible. In truth King was much more a radical threat than a reassuring reformer."<sup>64</sup>

How, then, does the foregoing analysis, since it seems at first glance to argue against a national holiday, help us to explain its enactment? It is the combination of the myth-making process *and* the paranoid style that provides paradoxically the clue to both the enactment of the holiday and King's assassination. With the national holiday, we can have our cake and eat it too: we have made King a hero, but we have romanticized and sanitized the record. As such, it will serve only a narcotizing function. C. Eric Lincoln has summarized the point better than anyone else:

Martin Luther King was never on trial at all. America was on trial—self-consciously on trial, and America developed a defensive psychosis which inevitably led to the removal of Dr. King. He was the symbol—the unbearable symbol—of what is wrong with ourselves and our culture. . . .

It was inevitable that we would have to kill Martin Luther King, and it was just as inevitable that we would make of him a myth. . . . It was inevitable that we create King, the myth, because we were unprepared to deal with King, the Man, in any other way different from our traditional ways of dealing with men who are black. . . .

Myth has been the language with which we [Blacks and Whites] talk past each other and avoid confrontation. When the mythology is about a person, e.g., Martin Luther King, it is used as a vehicle for the displacement of emphasis and the distortion of values. Society may avoid, if it chooses, confronting what is truly significant about what a man is and what he does, by addressing itself to the less crucial issues embodied in the mythological screen which diffuses the impact of his personality. We do not have to be serious about a myth, and if the myth obscures the reality behind it, or in some ways qualifies that reality, we do not have to be serious about the reality either. The best of all possible postures is to be able to look over the man and the myth with the privilege of delayed option.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

The United States is still on trial today. The preeminent evils of racism, militarism, and economic exploitation that King wished to see abolished have

<sup>64</sup>Garrow, *The FBI*, p. 213.

<sup>65</sup>C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), pp. vii, viii, ix.

increased instead of decreased since his assassination.<sup>66</sup> Whereas the Kerner Commission Report, noted earlier, predicted "two societies, one black, one white — separate but unequal" over twenty years later the U.S.A. has become several societies — white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American — all separate and unequal. The tragedy is that that need not have been the case if our society had really seen King's vision of the Beloved Community and democratic socialism. The hope for the U.S. is that it is still not too late for King's vision to provide a common ecumenical vision for our religious communions, as well as a foundation for fruitful dialogue between Christians and Marxists.

### MARK'S P. AS REAFFIRM

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<sup>66</sup>For recent studies on the distribution of wealth and income in the U.S.A., especially the disparity between Blacks and Whites, see "The Concentration of Wealth in the United States: Trends in the Distribution of Wealth among American Families" (Washington, DC: Joint Economic Committee of U.S. Congress, 1986); "The Distribution of Wealth in the U.S." (Washington, DC: The Bureau of Census, 1986); and *Poverty Profile, USA: In the Eighties* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1985).

Aaron A. Milavec (R  
theology at the Athen  
University of Dayton,  
State University. He h  
Th.D. (1973) in hist  
Berkeley, CA. He has c  
cal Studies, San Franci  
scholar in the Consu  
Judeo-Christian Rese-  
has also studied priva  
Testament and patrist  
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on "The Analysis of Re  
On April 18, 1988, at  
Lecture on Roman Ca  
publications include *T*  
(Edwin Mellan, 1982);  
forthcoming *The Birth*  
in *J.E.S.*