"An Autobiography of Religious Development"

[12 September–22 November 1950]
[Chester, Pa.]

In this revealing essay written for Davis's course the Religious Development of Personality, King reviews the influences of his family and church on his religious beliefs. King's essay reflects Davis's emphasis on the experiences of childhood and adolescence. King recalls a nurturing family life—closely intertwined with activities in his father's church—which conditioned him to be optimistic about human nature. "It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love," King writes, "mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present." King relates seminal events in his religious development, including his baptism into the church and his call to the ministry while in college. He attributes the decision to become a minister to his father's "noble example"; despite their theological differences, King retains his "admiration for a real father." He also recounts two formative experiences: the shock of a childhood confrontation with racism and the death of his grandmother. Davis marked the paper "Excellent."

My birthplace was Atlanta Georgia, the capital of the state and the so-called "gate-way to the south." I was born in the late twenties on the verge of the great depression, which was to spread its disastrous arms into every corner of this nation for over a decade. I was much too young to remember the beginning of this depression, but I do recall how I questioned my parent about the numerous people standing in bread lines when I was about five years of age. I can see the effects of this early childhood experience on my present anti-capitalistic feelings.

I was the second child of a family of three children, having one brother and one sister. Because of {our} relative closeness of ages we all grew up together, and to this day there still exist that intimate relationship which existed between us in childhood. Our parents themselves were very intimate, and they always maintained an intimate relationship with us. In our immediate family there was also a saintly grandmother (my mother's mother) whose husband had died when I was one years old. She was {very} dear to each of us, but especially to me. I sometimes think that I was his favorite grandchild. I can remember very vividly how she spent many evenings telling us interesting stories.

From the very beginning I was an extraordinarily healthy child. It is said that at my birth the doctors pronounced me a one hundred percent perfect child, from a physical point of view. Even today this physical harmony still abides, in that I hardly know how an ill moment feels. I guess the same thing would apply to my mental life. I have always been somewhat precocious, both physically and mentally. My I.Q. stands somewhat above the average. So it seems that from a hereditary point of view nature was very kind to me.  

1. Davis wrote in the margin, "Good! I like a man who has an intelligent evaluation of his abilities."
The same applies to my environment. I was born in a very congenial home situation. My parents have always lived together very intimately, and I can hardly remember a time that they ever argued (My father happens to be the kind who just wont argue), or had any great fall out. I have never experienced the feeling of not having the basic necessities of life. These things were always provided by a father who always put his family first. My father has always been a real father. This is not to say that I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth; far from it. My father has never made more than an ordinary salary, but the secret is that he knows the art of saving and budgeting. He never wastes his money at the expense of his family. He has always had sense enough not to live beyond his means. So for this reason He has been able to provide us with the basic necessities of life with little strain. For the past three years he has had the tremendous responsibility of keeping all of us in school, (my brother in college, my sister in graduate school, and me in the Seminary) and although it has been somewhat a burden from a financial angle, he has done it with a smile. Our mother has also been behind the scene setting forth those motherly cares, the lack of which leaves a missing link in life.

The community in which I was born was quite ordinary in terms of social status. No one in our community had attained any great wealth. Most of the Negroes in my home town who had attained wealth lived in a section of town known as "Hunter Hills." The community in which I was born was characterized with a sought of unsophisticated simplicity. No one in our community was in the extremely poor class. This community was not the slum district. It is probably fair to class the people of this community as those of average income. Yet I insist that this was a wholesome community, notwithstanding the fact that none of us were ever considered member of the "upper upper class." Crime was at a minimum in our community, and most of our neighbors were deeply religious. I can well remember that all of my childhood playmates were regular Sunday School goers, not that I chose them on that basis, but because it was very difficult to find playmates in my community who did not attend Sunday School.

I was exposed to the best educational conditions in my childhood. At three I entered nursery school. This great childhood contact had a tremendous effect on the development of my personality. At five I entered kindergarten and there I remained for one year until I entered the first grade.

One may ask at this point, why discuss such factors as the above in a paper dealing with ones religious development? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the above factors were highly significant in determining my religious attitudes. It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances. It is quite easy for me to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences. It is impossible to get at the roots of ones religious attitudes without taking in

2. Davis agreed: "Correct!"
account the psychological and historical factors that play upon the individual. So that the above biographical factors are absolutely necessary in understanding my religious development.

Now for a more specific phase of my religious development. It was at the age of five that I joined the church. I well remember how this event occurred. Our church was in the midst of the spring revival, and a guest evangelist had come down from Virginia. On Sunday morning the guest evangelist came into our Sunday School to talk to us about salvation, and after a short talk on this point he extended an invitation to any of us who wanted to join the church. My sister was the first one to join the church that morning, and after seeing her join I decided that I would not let her get ahead of me, so I was the next. I had never given this matter a thought, and even at the time of my baptism I was unaware of what was taking place. From this it seems quite clear that I joined the church not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childhood desire to keep up with my sister.

Conversion for me was never an abrupt something. I have never experienced the so called “crisis moment.” Religion has just been something that I grew up in. Conversion for me has been the gradual intaking of the noble ideals set forth in my family and my environment, and I must admit that this intaking has been largely unconscious.

The church has always been a second home for me. As far back as I can remember I was in church every Sunday. I guess this was inevitable since my father was the pastor of my church, but I never regretted going to church until I passed through a state of scepticism in my second year of college. My best friends were in Sunday School, and it was the Sunday School that helped me to build the capacity for getting along with people.

The lessons which I was taught in Sunday School were quite in the fundamentalist line. None of my teachers ever doubted the infallibility of the Scriptures. Most of them were unlettered and had never heard of Biblical criticism. Naturally I accepted the teachings as they were being given to me. I never felt any need to doubt them, at least at that time I didn't. I guess I accepted Biblical studies uncritically until I was about twelve years old. But this uncritical attitude could not last long, for it was contrary to the very nature of my being. I had always been the questioning and precocious type. At the age of thirteen I shocked my Sunday School class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. From the age of thirteen on doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly. At the age of fifteen I entered college and more and more could I see a gap between what I had learned in Sunday School and what I was learning in

3. Davis remarked in the margin, “Right!”
4. This event probably occurred at the age of seven. In his Crozer application, King mentions that he joined Ebenezer on May 1936. He was baptized two days later. Reverend H. H. Coleman, the guest evangelist who led a revival at Ebenezer in April 1936, was the former pastor of Atlanta’s Beulah Baptist Church and pastor of the Macedonia Baptist Church in Detroit in 1936. See “Revival Drawing Big Crowds at Ebenezer,” Atlanta Daily World, 1 May 1936, p. 1.
5. Davis suggested that King “see Mr. [word illegible].”
6. Davis commented, “This is interesting, for I do not think it characterizes most people.”
7. Davis wrote in the margin, “This is early.”
college. This conflict continued until I studied a course in Bible in which I came to see that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape.\(^8\)

One or two incidents happened in my late childhood and early adolescence that had tremendous effect on my religious development. The First was the death of my grandmother when I was about nine years old.\(^9\) I was particularly hurt by this incident mainly because of the extreme love I had for her. As stated above, she assisted greatly in raising all of us. It was after this incident for the first time that I talked at any length on the doctrine of immortality. My parents attempted to explain it to me and I was assured that somehow my grandmother still lived. I guess this is why today I am such a strong believer in personal immortality.

The second incident happened when I was about six years of age. From about the age of three up until this time I had had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. He did not live in our community, but he was usually around every day until about 6:00; his father owned a store just across the streets from our home. At the age of six we both entered school—separate schools of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school, of course this was not my desire but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with me no more.\(^10\) I never will forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. We were at the diner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it\(^11\) I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older this feeling continued to grow. My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him. At this point the religious element came in. The question arose in my mind, how could I love a race of people who hated me and who had been responsible for breaking me up

---

8. King took George D. Kelsey's two-semester course on the Bible at Morehouse during his junior year.
9. Jennie Celeste Williams died on 18 May 1941, when King was twelve.
10. Davis remarked in the margin, "How tragic!"
11. See King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 18–19: "While I was still too young for school I had already learned something about discrimination. For three or four years my inseparable playmates had been two white boys whose parents ran a store across the street from our home in Atlanta. Then something began to happen. When I went across the street to get them, their parents would say that they couldn’t play. They weren’t hostile, they just made excuses. Finally I asked my mother about it. . . . My mother took me on her lap and began by telling me about slavery and how it had ended with the Civil War. She tried to explain the divided system of the South—the segregated schools, restaurants, theaters, housing; the white and colored signs on drinking fountains, waiting rooms, lavatories—as a social condition rather than a natural order. Then she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: 'You are as good as anyone.'"
with one of my best childhood friends? This was a great question in my mind for a number of years. I did not conquer this anti White feeling until I entered college and came in contact with white students through working in interracial organizations.

My days in college were very exciting ones. As stated above, my college training, especially the first two years, brought many doubts into my mind. It was at this period that the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body. This is why, when I came to Crozer, I could accept the liberal interpretation with relative ease.

It was in my senior year of college that I entered the ministry. I had felt the urge to enter the ministry from my latter high school days, but accumulated doubts had somewhat blocked the urge. Now it appeared again with an inescapable drive. My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something, on the contrary it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity. I guess the influence of my father also had a great deal to do with my going in the ministry. This is not to say that he ever spoke to me in terms of being a minister, but that my admiration for him was the great moving factor; He set forth a noble example that I didn't mine following. Today I differ a great deal with my father theologically, but that admiration for a real father still remains.

At the age of 19 I finished college and was ready to enter the seminary. On coming to the seminary I found it quite easy to fall in line with the liberal tradition there found, mainly because I had been prepared for it before coming.

At present I still feel the affects of the noble moral and ethical ideals that I grew up under. They have been real and precious to me, and even in moments of theological doubt I could never turn away from them. Even though I have never had an abrupt conversion experience, religion has been real to me and closely knitted to life. In fact the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life.

AHDS. MLKP-MBU: Box 106, folder 22.
An Autobiography Of Religious Development

By:
M.L. King Jr.
Birthplace was Atlanta, Georgia, the capital of the state and the so-called "gateway to the South." I was born in the late twenties in the wake of the Great Depression, which was its spread its disastrous arms into every corner of this nation for over a decade. I was much too young to remember the beginning of this depression, but I do recall how I questioned my parents about the numerous people standing in bread lines when I was about five years of age. I can see the effects of this early childhood experience in my present anti-capitalistic feelings.

I was the second child of three children, sharing one brother and one sister. Because of relative closeness of ages we all grew up together and to this day there still exist that intimate relationship which should exist between children. Our parents themselves were very intimate, and they always maintained
Our intimate relationship with a family and my immediate family that was also a family friend and grandmother (my mother’s mother) whose husband died when I was one year old. She was dear to each of us, but especially to me. Sometimes I think that I was her favorite grandchild. I can remember very clearly how she spent many evenings telling us interesting stories.

From the very beginning I was an extraordinarily healthy child. It is said that at my birth the doctor pronounced me a one hundred percent perfect child, from a physical point of view. Even today this physical harmony still abides, in that I hardly know for an ill moment. I guess the same thing would apply to my mental life. I have always been somewhat precocious, both physically and mentally. My I.Q. stands somewhat above the average. In it seems that from a hereditary point of view nature was very kind to me.
The same applies to my environment. I was born in a very congenial home situation. My parents were always kind together very intimately, and I can hardly remember a time that they ever argued. My father happens to be the kind who just don't argue, or had any great fall out. I have never experienced the feeling of not having the basic necessities of life. These things were always provided by a father who always put his family first. My father has always been a real father. This is not to say that I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth; far from it. My father has never made more than an ordinary salary, but the secret is that he knows the art of saving and budgeting. He never wasted his money at the expense of his family. He has always had sense enough not to live beyond his means. So far this reason I've been able to provide.
was with the basic necessities of life
with little strain. For the past three
years she has had the tremendous
responsibility of keeping all of us in school,
(my brother in college, my sister in graduate
school, and me in the Army) and although
it has been somewhat a burden from a
financial angle, she has done it with a
smile. Our mother has also been behind
the scene setting forth those motherly cars,
The lack of which leaves a missing
link in life.

The community in which I was
brought was quite ordinary in terms of
social status. None in our community
had attained any great wealth. Most
of the Negroes in my home town who
had attained wealth lived in a section
of town known as "Martin Hills." The
community in which I was born was
characterized with a respect of unspoiled
natural simplicity. No one in our
community was in the extremely poor
This community was not the usual district. It was probably fair to classify the people of this community as those of average income, yet I insist that this was a wholesome community, matured understanding the fact that none of us were ever considered members of the "upper upper class." Crime was at a minimum in our community, and most of our neighbors were deeply religious. I can still remember that all of my childhood playmates were regular Sunday school goers, not that I chose them on that basis, but because it was very difficult to find playmates in my community who did not attend Sunday School.

I was exposed to the best educational condition in my childhood. At three I entered nursery school. This great childhood contact had a tremendous effect on the development of my personality. At five I entered kindergarten and then I remained for one year until I
entered the first grade.

One may ask at this point, why discuss such factors as these alone? The paper dealing with one's religious development centers so much on religious attitudes, it is quite easy for one to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for one to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting, historic and environmental circumstances. It is quite easy for one to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences. It is impossible to get at the root of one's religious attitudes without taking into account the psychological and historical factors that play upon the individual. So that
The above biographical factors are absolutely necessary in understanding my religious development.

Now for a more specific phase of my religious development. It came at the age of five that I joined the church. I well remember how this event occurred. Our church was in the midst of the spring revival, and a guest evangelist had come down from Virginia. On Sunday morning the guest evangelist came into our Sunday school to talk to us about salvation, and after a short talk on this point he extended an invitation to any of us who wanted to join the church. My sister was the first one to join the church that morning, and after seeing her join I decided that I would not let her get ahead of me, so it was the next week I had in mind to join the church. I gave this matter a thought, and even at the time of ordination I was unaware of what was taking place. From this it seems quite clear that I joined the church.
not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childlike desire to keep up with my sisters.

"Conversion for me was never an abrupt something. I have never experienced the so-called 'crisis moment.' Religion has just been something that I grew up with. Conversion for me has been the gradual intake of the color that's set forth in my family and my environment; and I cannot admit that this intake has been largely unconscious."

The church has always been a second home for me. As far back as I can remember, I was in church every Sunday. I guess this was inevitable since my father was the pastor of my church, but I never resented going to church until I passed through a state of rebellion in my second year of college. My best friends were in Sunday School, and it was the Sunday School that helped me to
build the capacity for getting along with people.

The lesson which I was taught in Sunday school was quite in the
fundamentalist line. None of my teachers ever doubted the infallibility of the
Scriptures. Most of them were unlettered and had never heard of Biblical
Criticism. Naturally I accepted the
 teachings as they were being given to
me. I never felt any need to
question them, at least at that time.
I didn’t. I guess I accepted Biblical
studies uncritically until I was about
twelve years old. But this uncritical
attitude could not last long, for it was
contrary to the very nature of my being.
I had always been the questioning
and precocious type. At the age of
13 I shocked my Sunday School
class by denying the bodily resurrection
of Jesus. From the age of thirteen
onwards began the spring forth.
Correnlently. At the age of fifteen I entered college and more and more could I see a gap between what I had learned in Sunday School and what I was learning in college. This conflict continued until I studied a course in Bible in which I came to see that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape.

One or two incidents happened in my late childhood and early adolescence that had tremendous effect on my religious development. The first was the death of my grandmother when I was about nine years old. I was particularly hurt by this incident mainly because of the extreme love I had for her. As stated above, she asserted greatly in raising all of us. It was after this incident for the first time that I talked at any length on the doctrine of immortality. My parents
I attempted to explain it to me and I was assured that somehow my grand-
mother still lived. I guess this is
today I am such a strong
believer in personal immortality.

The second incident happened when
I was about six years of age. From
about the age of three up until this
time I had had a white play-
mate who was about my age. We al-
ever felt free to play our childhood
games together. He did not live in our
community, but we were usually around
every day until about 6:00. His father
owned a store just across the street
from our home. At the age of six we
both attended school - separate schools of
course. I remember how our friendship
began to break as soon as we entered
school, of course this was not my de-
cision but his. The climax came when
he told me one day that his father
had demanded that he would play
with one exception. I never will forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and there for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on, I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older, this feeling continued to grow. My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white race, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him. At this point, the religious element came in. The question arose in my mind, "Tr"
I could not have a peace of mind until I could clear my conscience of my past actions. This was a great question in my mind for a number of years. I did not conquer the anti-white feeling until I entered college and came in contact with white students through working in interracial organizations.

My days in college were very exciting ones. As stated above, my college training, especially the first two years, brought many doubts into my mind. It was at this period that the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body. This is why, when I came to college, I could accept the liberal interpretation with relative ease.

It was in my senior year of college that I entered the ministry. I had felt the urge to enter the
the ministry from my latter high school days, but accumulated doubts had somewhat blocked through. Now it appeared again with an irresistible drive. My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something; on the contrary, it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity.

I guess the influence of my father also had a great deal to do with my going into the ministry. That is not to say that he ever spoke to me in terms of being a minister, but that my admiration for him was the great moving factor. He set forth a noble example that I didn't mimic following. Today I differ a great deal with my father theologically, but that admiration for a great father will still remain.

At the age of 17 I finished college and was ready to enter the seminary. On coming to the seminary I found it quite easy to fall in line with the liberal
tradition them found, presently because I had been prepared for it before coming.

At present I still feel the effects of the ridicule, moral and ethical ridicule, that I grew up under. They have been real and precious to me and even as moments of theological doubt I could never turn away from them. Even though I have never had an abrupt conversion experience, religion has been real to me and closely knitted to life. In fact the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life.