When religion, however, on the strength of its own postulates, speaks to men of God and the moral order of the universe, when it utters its prophetic burden of justice and love and holiness and peace, then its voice is the voice of the eternal spiritual truth, irrefutable and invincible.

What is the purpose of religion? Is it to perpetuate an idea about God? Is it totally dependent upon revelation? What part does psychological experience play? Is religion synonymous with theology?

Harry Emerson Fosdick says that the most hopeful thing about any system of theology is that it will not last. This statement will shock some. But is the purpose of religion the perpetuation of theological ideas? Religion is not validated by ideas, but by experience.

This automatically raises the question of salvation. Is the basis for salvation in creeds and dogmas or in experience? Catholics would have us believe the former. For them, the church, its creeds, its popes and bishops have recited the essence of religion and that is all there is to it. On the other hand we say that each soul must make its own reconciliation to God, that no creed can take the place of that personal experience. This was expressed by Paul Tillich when he said, “There is natural religion which belongs to man by nature. But there is also a revealed religion which man receives from a supernatural reality.” Relevant religion therefore, comes through revelation from God, on the one hand, and through repentance and acceptance of salvation on the other hand. Dogma as an agent in salvation has no essential place.

This is the secret of our religion. This is what makes the saints move on in spite of problems and perplexities of life that they must face. This religion of experience.

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1. King may have also considered the purpose of religion in a Morehouse paper that is no longer extant, as he began a third Morehouse paper, “Last week we attempted to discuss the purpose of religion” (King, “The Purpose of Education,” September 1946–February 1947, in Papers 1128).

2. “Harry Emerson Fosdick” in American Spiritual Autobiographies: Fifteen Self-Portraits, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 144, “The theology of any generation cannot be understood apart from the conditioning social matrix in which it is formulated. All systems of theology are as transient as the cultures they are patterned from.”

3. King further developed this theme in his dissertation, “[Tillich] finds a basis for God’s transcendence in the conception of God as abyss. There is a basic inconsistency in Tillich’s thought at this point. On the one hand he speaks as a religious naturalist making God wholly immanent in nature. On the other hand he speaks as an extreme supernaturalist making God almost comparable to the Barthian ‘wholly other’” (King, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” 15 April 1955, in Papers 2535).

4. Commas were added after the words “religion” and “salvation.”
by which man is aware of God seeking him and saving him helps him to see the hands of God moving through history

Religion has to be interpreted for each age; stated in terms that that age can understand. But the essential purpose of religion remains the same. It is not to perpetuate a dogma or theology, but to produce living witnesses and testimonies to the power of God in human experience.

[signed] M L King, Jr.

“The Philosophy of Life Undergirding Christianity and the Christian Ministry”

[September 1948–May 1951?]

[Chester, Pa.]

Basically Christianity is a value philosophy. It insists that there are eternal values of intrinsic, self-evidencing validity and worth, embracing the true and the beautiful and consummated in the Good. This value content is embodied in the life of Christ. So that Christian philosophy is first and foremost Christocentric. It begins and ends with the assumption that Christ is the revelation of God.

We might ask what are some of the specific values that Christianity seeks to conserve? First, Christianity speaks of the value of the world. In its conception of the world, it is not negative; it stands over against the asceticisms, world denials, and world flights, for example, of the religions of India, and is world-affirming, life-affirming, life creating. Gautama bids us flee from the world, but Jesus would have us use it, because God has made it for our sustenance, our discipline, and our happiness. So that the Christian view of the world can be summed up by saying that it is a place in which God is fitting men and women for the Kingdom of God.

Christianity also insists on the value of persons. All human personality is supremely worthwhile. This is something of what Schweitzer has called “reverence for life.” Human being must always be used as ends, never as means. I realize that there have been times that Christianity has short at this point. There have been periods in Christian history that persons have been dealt with as if they were means rather than ends. But Christianity at its highest and best has always insisted that persons are intrinsically valu-