

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND MORMONISM: DIALOGUE, RACE, AND PLURALISM

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... in my experience, our efforts as Mormons to join with others in civil rights actions and to build bridges and respond positively to black aspirations will bring special kinds of misunderstanding and pain and will sometimes make the cross harder to bear.

—Eugene England¹

I think you are the greatest living American, Dr. King, a true disciple of Gandhi and Jesus. Don't let public opinion turn you from the way you know to be right.

—Edris Head²

Introduction

Scholars, from various humanities and social science disciplines, have debated the dilemma cultural diversity presents to Western societies and religions. One part of the problem is tackling implicit and explicit forms of ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism by reimagining a world that

1. Eugene England, "The Mormon Cross," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 85.

2. Edris Head, "Letter from Edris Head to [Martin Luther King Jr.] about [Mormons] and the Presidential Election," May 20, 1967, The King Center, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-edris-head-mlk-about-mormans-and-presidential-election>.

affirms the difference of the Other.³ Since the middle of the twentieth century, there has been a particular debate within Mormonism about the form, content, and whether there needs to be further discussions about what many perceive as the legacy of racism in the Church's history and theology.

On one hand, Church officials, leaders, and the rank-and-file of the community—including prominent figures such as President Gordon B. Hinckley, President Ezra Taft Benson, President David O. McKay, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, and Mormon theologian Robert Millet—have contributed, though perhaps unintentionally, to a palpable culture of silence regarding “race talk” with those both within and outside of the Church. Many assume, for instance, that the ban prohibiting men of African descent from becoming priests was properly dealt with forty years ago with Official Declaration 2.⁴ Armand L. Mauss, a sociologist of Mormonism, explained that to most white Mormons, the race problem was resolved in 1978, despite the Church's not offering a coherent

3. Jarich Oosten, “Cultural Anthropological Approaches,” in *Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Frank Whaling (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 232; Robert Wuthnow, “Responding to the New Religious Pluralism,” *CrossCurrents* 58, no. 1 (2008): 43–50; Risto Saarinen, “After Rescher: Pluralism as Preferentialism,” in *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue*, edited by Viggo Mortensen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 409; David W. Wills, “The Central Themes of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White,” in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, edited by Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1996), 7–20; and Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 477–514.

4. Official Declaration 2, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, available at <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2>; and Armand L. Mauss, “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain’: The Extent and Limits of Progress since 1978,” in *Black and Mormon*, edited by Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 82.

explanation of the origins and the timing for the removal of the ban.⁵ In the aftermath of Official Declaration 2, President Hinckley said that the revelation speaks for itself and, therefore, nothing more needs to be done.⁶ Millet added that non-Mormon faiths who criticize the Church because of past teachings should ask themselves if they are prepared to apply the same standards of judgment to their own tradition.⁷

On the other hand, a cohort of Mormon studies scholars and Latter-day Saint activists—such as Darrell Campbell, Joanna Brooks, Boyd Petersen, Mark L. Grover, Brian Birch, and many members of the Sunstone community—have encouraged more robust dialogue on multicultural issues with those within and outside of the Church.⁸ Margaret Toscano maintains that LDS members should admit that the 1978 revelation was not about God changing his mind but the correction of human prejudice.⁹ Additionally, Darron Smith has claimed that there is a reluctance among Church officials to engage in serious race

5. Mauss, “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain,’” 91; Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

6. Gordon B. Hinckley, *What of the Mormons?: A Brief Study of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2004), 20; and Mauss, “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain,’” 82, 92.

7. Robert Millet, “What Do We Really Believe?: Identifying Doctrinal Parameters within Mormonism,” in *Discourses in Mormon Theology: The Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*, edited by James M. MacLachlan and Loyd Ericson (Sandy, Utah: Kofford, 2007), 272; Richard J. Mouw, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012).

8. Boyd Petersen, “The Continuing Importance of Dialogue,” *Dead Wood and Rushing Water* (blog), Apr. 21, 2016, <https://boypetersen.com/2016/04/21/the-continuing-importance-of-dialogue>.

9. Margaret Toscano, “Is There a Place for a Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology?: An Investigation into Discourses of Power,” in *Discourses in Mormon Theology*, 212.

discussions, which reinforces the falsehood that racism is no longer a significant social problem.¹⁰

This essay approaches intrafaith dialogue within Mormonism by examining Martin Luther King Jr.'s perspective on dialogue and race—including his acts of civil disobedience and his studies of the comparative philosophy of religion. He has been a vital resource for Mormon scholars, leaders, and laity to readdress cultural, political, and religious concerns within their tradition. The essay begins by discussing the sources and norms of King's rhetoric of inclusion in Black Atlantic (post)colonial culture and his ideas regarding cosmopolitanism—to take seriously the lives and works of people of African descent living in a pluralistic age. Then, Mormon responses to King's public theology are considered, focusing primarily on Eugene England's thought and Edris Head's letter addressed to King. While England wrote extensively about the ethics of diversity in the Church,¹¹ Head's personal letter to King has received limited scholarly attention.

This methodology is significant because it presents and assesses King's ideas about religious and racial diversity within the context of "Mormon outsiders." This can help scholars better ascertain his broader vision of theology and its purpose. This approach also adds to the studies of "Mormon agitators" who seek to make the Church of Jesus Christ of

10. Darron T. Smith, "Unpacking Whiteness in Zion: Some Personal Reflections," in *Black and Mormon*, 150; and Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormon and Black: Grappling with a Racist Past," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 8, 2008, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=9497769&itype=NGPSID>;

11. Eugene England, "Are All Alike unto God?: Prejudice against Blacks and Women in Popular Thought," *Sunstone* 15, no. 2 (1990): 21–31; Eugene England, "Becoming a World Religion: Blacks, the Poor—All of Us," *Sunstone* 21, no. 2 (1998): 49–60; Eugene England, "'No Respector of Persons': A Mormon Ethics of Diversity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 79–102; and Eugene England, "On Being Mormon and Human," *Sunstone* 118 (2001): 76–78.

Latter-day Saints a more culturally sensitive and diverse ecclesiastical body in the modern era.

King's Hermeneutical Account of Race and Dialogue in Black Atlantic Culture

To discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing.

—Martin Luther King Jr.¹²

As Paul Tillich argued about theology in general, the theologian must answer a series of questions about any theological system: What are the sources? What is the medium in which those sources are received? What is the norm that determines the use of those sources?¹³ The major norms that informed King's approach to dialogue about race were shaped largely by three sources: the African diaspora experience, which becomes evident in his language of "exodus"; the southern African American prophetic Christian tradition, where he stood in the line of ministers all the way back to slavery; and his higher education experience and interest in the comparative philosophy of religion, which included Eastern thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi and Western philosophers like Georg Hegel.¹⁴

12. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Influence of the Mystery Religions on Christianity," Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/influence-mystery-religions-christianity>.

13. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

14. David J. Garrow, "King's Intellectual Development: Influences and Commentaries," in *Martin Luther King Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator* (Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, Volumes 1–3), edited by David J. Garrow (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1989), 437–52; James H. Cone, "The Theology of Martin Luther King Jr.," in *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator*, edited by David J. Garrow (Brooklyn,

A central theme of King's ethnic and religious pluralism was how deeply entangled it was in his African diaspora experience of exodus. He possessed a religious consciousness rooted in an African diaspora experience—a consciousness that is much more than a doctrine. It is an ethos and an attitude. It is a philosophy. Anyone familiar with King will know that he was explicit about the need for continued dialogue about race within the context of one's ethnic and religious heritage. In fact, King exclaimed, "I have come to hope that American Negroes can be a bridge between white civilization and the nonwhite nations of the world, because we have roots in both. Spiritually, Negroes identify . . . with Africa."¹⁵ King understood how under the conditions of white supremacy, the colonized (Black) identity and (Black) consciousness become alienated from themselves. Yet he believed that the relationship between African and African American cultural and religious identity was not severed due to the African slave experience. Specific geopolitical hot spots that resonated with King's fight for social justice included Africa, India, South America, and the Caribbean—the places most affected by Western (post)colonialism and societies made up of people of color.¹⁶

Thus, "exodus" became an impetus for King's message of universalism. To counter the lingering effects of colonialism and racism, King referred to an interrelatedness of life using the image of a "single gar-

N.Y.: Carlson, 1989), 216–18; and Martin Luther King Jr., "*An Autobiography of Religious Development*," Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/autobiography-religious-development>.

15. Martin Luther King Jr., "A Testament of Hope," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins), 318.

16. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Negro is Part of That Huge Community Who Seek New Freedom in Every Area of Life," Feb. 1, 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/negro-part-huge-community-who-seek-new-freedom-every-area-life>.

ment of destiny” to highlight the fact that we are all caught in a network of mutuality.¹⁷ He instilled a sense of community whereby the African American sense of *anomie*—as Émile Durkheim would put it—or *two-ness*—as W. E. B. Du Bois would put it—was abated partly because of God’s love. King concluded that African Americans have come to feel that they are “somebody” because their religion revealed to them that God loves all of his children.¹⁸ King drew upon the cultural formations to envision a global “beloved community.”¹⁹ In his most famous address, “I Have a Dream,” King ended with a slave song: “And when this happens . . . we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”²⁰ African retentions, such as the singing of slave spirituals, enabled King to nurture the aesthetic resources to resist oppression.

King’s insistence on the need for more dialogue to eradicate racism emerged during the twentieth century—a particular stage of African

17. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Apr. 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.

18. Martin Luther King Jr., “Address at the Freedom Rally in Cobo Hall,” June 23, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/address-freedom-rally-cobo-hall>.

19. Joshua F. J. Inwood, “Searching for the Promised Land: Examining Dr. Martin Luther King’s Concept of the Beloved Community,” *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 41, no. 3 (2009): 487–508.

20. Martin Luther King Jr., “‘I Have a Dream,’ Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” Aug. 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

American religio-cultural development in North America.²¹ During this epoch of new market forces and the process of globalization, African Americans were turning to multiple sources for insights within and beyond Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to inform their worldview. King sought resources wherever he could, to create transnational intra- and inter-religious alliances to fight against racism, materialism, and war—issues that hindered justice, freedom, and peace.

For example, King jostled his private and public acumen—knowing both the established Western (white-male) scholarly canon while studying, knowing, and preserving his own African diaspora history.²² White North American and European thinkers heavily influenced King. As a student, King learned about and adopted Hegel’s dialectical method of reconciling opposing positions into a coherent one. He used Hegel to help him respond to social dilemmas. As a seminarian, King studied non-African American religions. He traced anthropological and sociological arguments for the origins of religion, concluding that truth exists in various religious and ethical traditions.²³ He followed truth wherever it was found and did not base his openness on the stature of the religious leader. Mentors introduced King to Eastern religious teachers, including Gandhi, and he made Gandhian nonviolence a central feature of the civil

21. Caleb Oladipo, “Confession, Tradition, and Perspectives: Response and Reflection of Afro-Americans to the Age of Religious Pluralism,” in *Theology and the Religions*, 73, 82; and Viggo Mortensen, “For All God’s People: Being Church in Multireligious Societies,” in *Theology and the Religions*, 465.

22. Chester M. Hedgepeth, “Philosophical Eclecticism in the Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.,” in *Martin Luther King Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator*, 541–48.

23. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Origin of Religion in the Race,” Feb. 9, 1951, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/origin-religion-race>.

rights movement.²⁴ Despite being raised as a fundamentalist, King did not downplay his formal education. He, instead, would use his extensive training to broaden his pluralistic preaching style.

King criticized racist and fundamentalist theologies that sought to diminish discourse(s). He did not want to hamper the flourishing, for example, of an open-minded society, where care for others was essential. As an illustration, King disagreed with Back-to-Africa movements and the Nation of Islam's monolithic conception of Black culture.²⁵ King's conviction that there are no superior and inferior races was an act of resisting the temptation to create an essentialized consciousness that reifies identity—Black or otherwise. King wrote, "An individual has value because he has value to God. Whenever this is recognized, 'whiteness' and 'blackness' pass away as determinants in a relationship and 'son' and 'brother' are substituted."²⁶ For King, *agape*, or unwavering godly love—as opposed to *philos*, friendship, and *eros*, eroticism—toward all others, irrespective of their racial makeup, stood at the center of his spiritual belief.

King argued that interfaith dialogue should be a humble art form, slowly winning over—and never punishing—the Other. In "Six Steps of Nonviolent Social Change," he taught about using grace, humor, and intelligence to translate antagonisms between groups into opportunities for mutual respect. King assisted parties with different viewpoints to reach a "higher universality." For example, civil rights marches included

24. Martin Luther King Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Apr. 13, 1960, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/pilgrimage-nonviolence>.

25. Martin Luther King Jr., "To Edward H. Page," June 12, 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/edward-h-page>.

26. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Ethical Demands for Integration," in *A Testament of Hope*, 122; and Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 256.

people from different parts of the country who belonged to different faiths.²⁷ King viewed African American prophetic Christianity on par with other socially-conscious faiths that contributed to the furthering of global social justice. He commented positively on the vitality of other faith traditions such as Indian spirituality.²⁸ Focusing on the plight of African Americans, King sought to usher in an era of justice through concerted dialogue—especially for religious and ethnic identities that were deemed Other.

The genius of King's rhetoric that all human beings belong to a shared humanity was that it was not just a theory but also a praxis. King emphasized that ideas have their value relative to their impact on oneself and on the world. He preached sermons like "Paul's Letter to American Christians" at the United Presbyterian Church's Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations and participated in marches, travels, and events to be in solidarity with the Other. He renewed a call for new foundations of intrafaith relation by emphasizing ecumenical social thought and action. Along with Hegel, Gandhi was King's premier role model, which enabled him to expand his theological horizon toward a commitment to global praxis. King exclaimed, "Gandhi not only spoke against the caste system but he acted against it."²⁹ King insisted that abstract notions of truth and love are insufficient to change the status quo and must become grounded in the real world. He exclaimed, "unarmed truth and unconditional love . . . have the final word in reality."³⁰ This is

27. Hans Jochen Margull, "The Ecumenical Movement in the Churches and at the Parish Level," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume 2: 1948–1968*, edited by Harold E. Fey (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), 366.

28. Martin Luther King Jr., "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," July 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/my-trip-land-gandhi>.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Martin Luther King Jr., "Acceptance Address for the Nobel Peace Prize," Dec. 10, 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stan-

a reason why King was so dismayed with fellow white clergymen in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”: men who supported civil rights with their words but not via their actions. From King’s perspective, dialogue about racism by itself does not translate into material freedom.

Therefore, a major driving force determining King’s commitment to dialogue about race was his African American Christian diaspora identity. His ministerial lineage and seminary training led him to become concerned about discussing the relationship between Christianity and other religions. King’s confidence in God’s grace helped him respond creatively to legacies of Western hegemony and colonialism, with its history of racial and religious oppression. Ultimately, King should not be interpreted narrowly as a Southern civil rights minister alone, but as a public theologian of inclusion who successfully constructed a universally appealing message, which led to his becoming a national and international icon—a living legend.

King’s Hermeneutical Account of Race and Dialogue as a Resource for Mormon Theology and Culture

... the allegation of an unspecified act or choice in the pre-existence which blacks cannot know about or repent of . . . essentially states that the most noble black man who has ever lived (choose your own example: Elijah Abel, Martin Luther King, Ralph Bunche) is in some crucial sense not up to the level of—is, in a word, inferior to—the most depraved white man (Hitler, Stalin, Charles Manson).

—Eugene England³¹

ford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/acceptance-address-nobel-peace-prize>.

31. England, “The Mormon Cross,” 80.

I used to be a Mormon, and my first doubts about the Church were on [the priesthood] subject.

—Edris Head³²

Max Stackhouse, scholar of public theology, argues that a serious dialogue that is not simply political posturing will recognize the validity of many possible sources and norms that could contribute to the general welfare of all.³³ Mormons have used King's views of dialogue and race as a constructive resource for themselves to counter what they perceive to be inconsistencies, contradictions, and paradoxes within Mormon theology and history. King enabled England and Head to respond to their traditions in three interrelated ways: (a) nurturing a critical self-consciousness of one's cultural identity within the context of one's religious identity to help transform social awareness, (b) recognizing the fallible nature of fundamentalist perspectives, seeing that claims to religious knowledge could be incorrect and, thereby, seeing value in other viewpoints that contribute to liberationist frameworks, and (c) clarifying how discourse(s), viewpoint(s), and ideologies are not separable from but constitutive of praxis and power.

England, a Mormon scholar, and Head, once a lay Mormon, share similar attitudes about Mormonism. England's "The Mormon Cross" was written as a response to Lester Bush's seminal essay on the history of the race ban. Head wrote King a brief letter, summarizing the key features of Mormon belief and practice (e.g., missionizing, baptism, women's roles, Church hierarchy, genealogies, priesthood ban), particularly in light of the Church's support of the presidential candidacy of George Romney, a Mormon.³⁴ Head saw that there was a lot of misinformation

32. Head, "Letter from Edris Head to [Martin Luther King Jr.]"

33. Max L. Stackhouse, "General Introduction," in *Religion and the Powers of the Common Life*, edited by Max L. Stackhouse and Peter J. Paris (Norcross: Trinity Press International, 2000), 7.

34. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-Day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

published by Mormon news outlets about the faith and there had not been any rebuttal by African American leaders. Head believed that a direct critique of Mormonism by King would transform the Church for the better. Indeed, King had condemned the Nazism of Hitler's Germany, the fascism of Mussolini's Italy, the apartheid and colonialism of Great Britain's India and South Africa, and American white supremacists like those of the White Citizens' Councils. As a member of the LDS Church since youth, Head felt a moral responsibility to educate King and elicit his help. It seems that, for Head as well as for England, remaining silent to injustice would have been a form of complicity.

England and Head both presented a critical overview of Mormonism and the United States at a time when King preached about the need for a nonviolent revolution because of militarism, poverty, and racism.³⁵ England himself confessed, "When I was growing up in the 1940s and 50s in Utah, I was a racist in what appeared to be a thoroughly racist society. In the 1960s, as the forces that produced black theology—the Civil Rights and Black Power movements—gained in strength, there was criticism, both from without and within the [Church], of the priesthood ban and racist Mormon teachings."³⁶ England wrote about and Head wrote to King, whom they both personally admired, during a time when not everyone agreed with his messages.³⁷ England's and Head's comments about King and the civil rights movement were a departure from what other LDS leaders had said (and had not said) about

35. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

36. Eugene England, "Response to Professor Hopkins," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, edited by Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2007), 372.

37. Thomas R. Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988); and Marshall Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

him and the freedom cause. President Benson connected the civil rights movement to communism as a means of discrediting the movement.³⁸ The majority of white Southern fundamentalists at the time supported white supremacist laws and disagreed with King's pronouncements on the Christian gospel. King taught, "I do not feel that a man can be a Christian and a staunch segregationist simultaneously."³⁹ King hoped that Christians would (re)define themselves in truth and love. England and Head positioned themselves against Mormon customs by publicly challenging the aspects of LDS racial animus. They wanted to eradicate the individual and institutional racism that they saw in the Church. Therefore, they stressed how the Church's race ban was indicative of and central to understanding Mormon culture.

Brigham Young and other Mormon prophets (e.g., John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Harold B. Lee) originally denied African descendants from becoming priests for a handful of reasons, including the so-called biblical reasons. Some ideas advanced included the notion that they were not "valiant enough" in heaven⁴⁰ and that they bore the curse of Cain.⁴¹ Like Mormons, King believed that a loving God revealed himself through prophets and scripture. Yet King recalled that there was a time when people tried to

38. Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 29–October 1, 1967 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), available at <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1967sa>; and Ezra Taft Benson, "A Witness and a Warning," Oct. 1979, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1979/10/a-witness-and-a-warning?lang=eng>.

39. Martin Luther King Jr., "Advice for Living," Sept. 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/advice-living-0>.

40. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 65–66.

41. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 109.

justify racial supremacy based on the biblical witness: “Strange indeed how individuals will often use, or should I say misuse, the Bible to crystallize the patterns of the status quo and justify their prejudices. So from some pulpits it was argued that the Negro was inferior by nature because of Noah’s curse upon the children of Ham.”⁴² King’s method of biblical hermeneutics challenges instances where sacred texts, such as the Bible, are used to justify the racial inferiority of others.

While Head requested that King directly respond to the Mormon community, England concluded that King’s social justice efforts already helped liberate the LDS Church. England credited oppressed people for helping the “true Zion community”⁴³ to emerge. To be sure, the Black Church, under King’s leadership, was at the forefront of ending segregation laws in the South. A decade after King’s assassination, President Kimball declared, on June 8, 1978, that all the worthy male members of the LDS Church might be ordained to priesthood without any regard for race or color because the conditions had changed.⁴⁴ King’s message regarding social justice was understandable to those within his own tradition as well as those outside of it. He had preached as an insider in his African American religious community and as an outsider to non-African American religious people, which enabled him to work successfully in the American religious mainstream domain as well as with American religious outsiders. King said to Cesar Chavez, for example, that “our separate struggles are really one—a struggle for freedom, for dignity and for humanity.”⁴⁵ King’s race leadership did transform the

42. Martin Luther King Jr., “1966 Ware Lecture: Don’t Sleep through the Revolution,” Unitarian Universalist Association, <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/1966/ware>.

43. England, “Response to Professor Hopkins,” 377.

44. *Ibid.*, 373; and Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, edited by Reid. L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 135–36.

45. Martin Luther King Jr., “Telegram to Cesar Chavez,” Sept. 22, 1966, available at <http://remezcla.com/culture/1966-mlk-cesar-chavez-telegram>.

African American civil rights campaign into a worldwide struggle for peace and justice.

England and Head envisioned a Mormonism that was more dialogical, in the sense of having a self-critical orientation, and less dogmatic, in the sense of having a closed-minded attitude.⁴⁶ They were puzzled that “many Mormons [were] still in denial about that [race] ban, unwilling to talk in [Church] settings about it.”⁴⁷ Older versions of the Church Educational System’s seminary textbook on the topic of Church history did not mention the race ban.⁴⁸ King spent paragraphs at a time in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* on African American contributions to the West because “[the] history books . . . have almost completely ignored the contribution of the Negro in American history . . .”⁴⁹ England and Head praised King as one of the greatest preachers and leaders for social change of his time partly because of his dialectical thinking. Head mentioned that King embodied the best ideals of both Jesus and Gandhi. Indeed, King cultivated a spirit of critical inquiry. All ideas were, for him, subject to scrutiny. Despite ideological differences, King appreciated, for example, Malcolm X’s contribution to the Black civil rights cause: “I don’t want to seem to sound self-righteous, or absolutist, or that I think I have the only truth, the only way. Maybe

46. Boyd Petersen, “Eugene England and the Future of Mormonism,” *Dead Wood and Rushing Water* (blog), Jan. 28, 2016, <https://boypetersen.com/2016/01/28/eugene-england-and-the-future-of-mormonism>; and Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 148.

47. England, “Response to Professor Hopkins,” 371.

48. Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 102.

49. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, in *A Testament of Hope*, 581.

he does have some answers.”⁵⁰ King listened to all the viewpoints before proclaiming word and action.

That is, King looked to not only the African American heritage and the Christianity for inspiration, but he also used the ideologies of all the theologians and philosophers that were available to him—like Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Paul Tillich. He effortlessly fused Georg Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and Mahatma Gandhi into the civil rights campaigns, centering their thought on African diaspora pain and struggle. King rejected binary propositions like racial reasoning (e.g., “all white people are bad”), fatalist notions (e.g., “there is no escape from systemic oppression”), or revenge models (e.g., “the oppressed should become the oppressor”). For instance, King claimed: “We do not wish to triumph over the white community. That would only result in transferring those now on the bottom to the top. But, if we can live up to nonviolence in thought and deed, there will emerge an interracial society based on freedom for all.”⁵¹

In her letter to King, Head explained that she renounced her own Mormon faith after learning about the history of the priesthood ban. Yet, from a Kingian logic, religious adherents can stay within their ethically and theologically flawed, imperfect tradition while seeking to challenge the ignoble aspects within them. England chose King’s path. King criticized his own fundamentalist religious upbringing because of its absolutizing tendencies,⁵² the racism imbued and neutrality displayed

50. Martin Luther King Jr., “Chapter 25: Malcolm X,” Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr-contents/chapter-25-malcom-x>.

51. Martin Luther King Jr., “Our Struggle,” Apr. 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/our-struggle>.

52. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus,” Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/humanity-and-divinity->

by white people who belonged to churches,⁵³ and the emotionalism and classism exemplified in African American Christianity.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, King never rejected his African American Christian faith but instead sought to improve it. He articulated ethical and theological principles that resulted in groups acting out of moral conviction within their traditions.⁵⁵ In other words, intrafaith dialogue does not mean abandoning all of one's personal convictions but rather expanding those commitments to seek out higher forms of justice. It is through dialogue that one enters the process of becoming more self-aware.

England and Head insisted that in order for the best version of the LDS Church to emerge the community needs to communicate openly and frankly about vital issues of the Church and of the day without fear of negative reprisals. Threats of excommunication and the incessant need to always "follow the prophet" do not allow for independent-minded dialogue. England asserted that the problem of racism was inseparable from the problem of sexism in the Mormon community.⁵⁶ In her letter,

jesus; Martin Luther King Jr., "What Experiences of Christians Living in the Early Christian Century Led to the Christian Doctrines of the Divine Sonship of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, and the Bodily Resurrection," Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/what-experiences-christians-living-early-christian-century-led-christian>; and Martin Luther King Jr., "How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction," Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/how-use-bible-modern-theological-construction>.

53. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope*, 295–96.

54. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, in *A Testament of Hope*, 501.

55. Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Paul Ricoeur: Tradition and Innovation in Rhetorical Theory* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 15.

56. Eugene England, "Combatting Racism and Sexism at BYU: An Open Letter to Faculty and Students," *The Student Review* 4, no. 3 (1989): 10; England, "No Respecter of Persons," 79–100; and Eugene England, "We Need to Liberate

Head raised the issue of the priesthood ban and the fact that women in the LDS Church do not have the same authority as men. Although King stressed that “people should be judged not by their skin color but by the content of their character,”⁵⁷ he omitted many qualified Black women from prominent leadership positions in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁵⁸ King accepted the gender norms of the day. England and Head saw racial equality as being connected to gender equality, which King had overlooked.

African descendants, despite the priesthood ban’s idiosyncrasies, have still found a home in Mormonism. The Genesis Group is one clear example.⁵⁹ Darius Gray, former president of Genesis, maintained that God did not put the race ban in place but instead removed it.⁶⁰ Technically, the priesthood ban was not official, canonical doctrine.⁶¹ Regardless of whether the ban was official doctrine or not, from a Kingian perspec-

Mormon Men: The Evidence of Mormon Literature,” *Exponent II* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 4–5.

57. England, “Response to Professor Hopkins,” 373.

58. Rufus Burrow Jr., “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Doctrine of Human Dignity,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 4 (2002): 230; Rufus Burrow Jr., *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2014), 213; Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 192; and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 178.

59. The Genesis Group, www.ldsgenesisgroup.org; and Mauss, “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain,’” 104.

60. Carrie A. Moore, “Black Mormons Say Life Better since 1978,” *Deseret News*, May 25, 2003, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/985698/Black-Mormons-say-life-better-since-1978.html>; and Ken Driggs, “How Do Things Look on the Ground?: The LDS African American Community in Atlanta, Georgia,” in *Black and Mormon*, 142.

61. Moore, “Black Mormons Say Life Better since 1978”; and Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 140.

tive, any church that endorses a theological or philosophical precept cannot be assessed in abstraction or isolation, disregarding its social function.⁶² Because of the ban, Black Mormons have experienced, and in many ways continue to experience, a “triple jeopardy,” possessing three “counter-identities”: one religious, one racial, and the other class-based. To mainstream Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christianity, Mormon remains a heterodox community.⁶³ Black Mormons are treated as the Other not only because of their religion and race but also because they have not achieved the “upward [mobility] and [economic success]⁶⁴ that many white people suppose black persons should have reached at this point in history.⁶⁵ It is no wonder, then, that Black Mormons still experience “special kinds of misunderstanding and pain”⁶⁶ because they do not feel fully integrated within the Church or the larger society.⁶⁷

King inspired African American Christians and non-African American Christians to embrace their ethnic and religious identities. His assertions like “Africa is our Home” and “I am a Black Man” were not mere rhetorical embellishments. They provided cultural meaning for himself and others. While in London, Eugene England applauded the culturally affirming effects that lifting the ban had on minority communities: “I went

62. Aasulv Lande, “Creative Dialogue,” in *Theology and the Religions*, 406–07.

63. Aleksandra Sandstrom and Becka A. Alper, “6 Facts about U.S. Mormons,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 30, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/30/6-facts-about-u-s-mormons>; and Scott Keeter and Gregory Smith, “Public Opinion About Mormons: Mitt Romney Discusses His Religion,” Pew Research Center, Dec. 4, 2007, <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/12/04/public-opinion-about-mormons>; and Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 16–17, 111–25.

64. Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 150.

65. *Ibid.*

66. England, “The Mormon Cross,” 85.

67. Jessie L. Embry, “Separate but Equal?: Black Branches, Genesis Groups, or Integrated Wards?,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no.1 (1990): 11–37.

each Sunday to the Hyde Park Ward and saw the congregation gradually deepening and brightening in color as the 1978 revelation giving blacks the priesthood began to produce more and more dark-skinned converts from London and the West Indies and Africa, some who came in flamboyant native dress.”⁶⁸ African diaspora humanity was reinforced using the projection of African symbols.

England and Head felt that the priesthood ban was far more consequential than many realized, as it affected Mormons of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. They suggested that many Mormons of European descent living in the United States—as practitioners of many other white fundamentalist, evangelical, and revelatory-based Christian traditions—view the world and their religion too optimistically. England wrote, “I grew up feeling that because I was Mormon, I was different from other humans. I was special, even ‘peculiar,’ separate, better than they: I sang, ‘I might be envied by a king, for I am a Mormon boy.’”⁶⁹ Such a perspective of the world can add justification for superiority between groups, thereby legitimatizing the good fortunes of “the few” over “the many.” The Mormon community might be too quick to assume that the goodness of their tradition more than compensates for its problematic past.

England and Head intimated that “Mormon optimism” as an extension of “whiteness” is a privileged status that people from European descent enjoy and employ in the Church and in society. It shields white LDS members from experiencing and seeing racial discriminatory attitudes and practices, which others of a different ethnic heritage do not benefit from. Throughout his life, King remained a guarded optimist on race relations improving. He was not colorblind. He was not a fatalist either. George Santayana’s famous proclamation that “those who ignore history are bound (or doomed) to repeat it” became a truism for King. King chose to use nonviolence to resolve social conflict. King knew that

68. England, “On Being Mormon and Human.”

69. *Ibid.*

achieving Black liberation was not inevitable, at least not for himself. In his final address, King preached, “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know . . . that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

King’s hermeneutical account of dialogue and race presents Mormon scholars, leaders, and laity with enduring sources and norms for reinterpreting him in the light of their own struggles for moral liberation. Overall, the people who were influenced by King insisted that the LDS Church not forget its past nor be crippled by it. The priesthood ban need not be rationalized or whitewashed but fully explored and wholly accepted, acknowledging where things went wrong and how the Church made amends or did not. Likewise, the stories focusing only on King’s civil rights successes are far easier to ruminate about than his particular failures. Neither King nor the LDS Church was perfect. In the Christian community, confession and forgiveness are closely aligned: “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9)

Examining England’s and Head’s intrafaith dialogue from a Kingian view also serves to shift LDS life and thought toward a distinctive and courageous theological tradition: demotheology. Robert Tapp, a religious studies scholar, defined demotheology as “religion on the ground.” The assumption that theological systems and religious organizations—after the demise of the founder—are developed and deployed entirely by head leaders (e.g., presidents, apostles) of those institutions, and then simply taught to and followed by the practitioners is a misguided notion of how theology actually works. In fact, both ordained and lay figures—many without formal rank and stature—have altered and added to the existing

70. Martin Luther King Jr., “‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,’ Address Delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple,” Apr. 3, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>.

dogma and doctrine, including the way these teachings are interpreted. England, Head, and King are all such examples. England and Head are “Mormon agitators” who share in the process of religious self-renewal by critiquing the elements of the established order that need to be changed in the Church. Head and England imitated King by not remaining silent to institutional sins but speak “truth to power,” empowering the people of faith. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and the Book of Mormon both proclaim that “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33).

In future areas of Mormon studies as well as King studies, scholars need to continue to include more histories, more persons, and more cultures—plus more religions—into their discourse. The Black community should also increase its knowledge of Mormonism, as Africans and African Americans are part of Mormon history and theology too.⁷¹ It should be noted that the LDS Church has recently installed two new apostles, one of Chinese descent, Gerrit W. Gong, and the other of Brazilian descent, Ulisses Soares, which signals possibilities for the expansion to new horizons.

71. E. Dale LeBaron, *All Are Alike Unto God: Fascinating Conversion Stories of African Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990).