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How did the ideology of the social gospel influence the theology of Martin Luther King?

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1. Introduction

50 years ago, on April 4th 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was fatally shot on the balcony of his hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. Post mortem King has not only been awarded honors and a commemoration day introduced in his name, but he is still revered until today as a hero. As the best-known representative of the civil rights movement King's name is still closely associated with the fight against racism not only in the US, but also in the rest of the world. He is regarded as a role model when it comes to non-violent protest against social injustice. King's work against racial discrimination, however, cannot be seen independently of his deep Christian faith and his work as a Baptist pastor. His speeches, sermons and books usually deal with the deeply rooted problem of racism in American society, which he experienced firsthand all of his life, starting with him being a Black child growing up in the Southern United States.

Throughout his studies King read the works of numerous philosophers and theologians and acquired a profound knowledge of them. It would of course be very difficult to refer to all the people King ever studied, so in this research paper I will limit myself to a few who seemed particularly relevant, as they were described as relevant by King. While King certainly had numerous influences, one stands out in particular: the social gospel.

In this paper I will have a close look at the influence of the social gospel on the theology of Martin Luther King. I want to show that the social gospel was not only one of the many concepts that King included in his work, but that it was the most important of all.

In order to give the reader an easier understanding of what the social gospel is, I am going to start with a short introduction of its beginning. Subsequently, I will dig deeper into the social gospel, with a focus on the leading social gospel advocate Walter Rauschenbusch and his influence on King. As a comparison to Rauschenbusch, I will then turn to Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most famous critics of the social gospel. He, too, influenced Martin Luther King. To explain King's conviction of non-violent resistance, I will then show the influence of Mahatma Gandhi on King. Finally, I will discuss at the role of King's African-American background. In

my conclusion I will be returning to the question of whether the ideology of the social gospel was indeed the most influential one in King's theology.

2. The social gospel

The social gospel movement emerged from the ideas of Christian socialism in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century. The main reason why many liberal theologians thought it to be necessary to change social structures were the economic problems and the social injustice that resulted from the rapid industrialization starting in the second half of the 19th century.[1] An early leading figure of the movement, sometimes even referred to as the "Father of Social Gospel"[2], was Congregational minister Washington Gladden (1836-1918). Although to him the need for social reforms was of great importance, Gladden's theology was always rooted in the necessity of "Christianizing America"[3]. According to him however it was not enough to Christians to have a "personal union with God that was 'merely sentimental and emotional'"[4] but rather "find ways to live out their faith ethically"[5]. Another fundamental thought of Gladden was his reinterpretation of the Kingdom of God. In contrast to many contemporary revivalists, for liberals like Gladden the Kingdom of God was a "concept synonymous with the ability of humans to live out God's will fully on earth" or more concrete: "building a righteous society in America".[6] Gladden was convinced, that the Kingdom of God appears as an "entire social organization in its ideal perfection"[7].

In his book *The Social Gospel in American Religious history* (2017) Christopher H. Evans defines the social gospel as follows:

[1] Cf. Mark G. Toulouse: Social Gospel, in: Hans Dieter Betz/Don S. Browning/Bernd Janowski/Eberhard Jüngel (Eds.), Religion Past & Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion, Vol. 12 (Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart), Leiden/Boston 2012, pp. 76–77, here p. 76.
[2] Brian Hebblethwaite: Social Gospel, in: Gerhard Müller/Horst Balz/James K. Cameron/Brian L. Hebbletwaite/Gerhard Krause (Eds.), Theologische Realenzyklopädie (Theologische Realenzyklopädie 31), Berlin/New York 2000, pp. 409–419, here p. 409.
[3] Christopher Hodge Evans: The Social Gospel in American Religion. A History, New York 2017, p. 22.
[4] Jacob Henry Dorn: Washington Gladden. Prophet of the Social Gospel, Columbus 1967, p. 178.
[5] Evans, 2017, p. 34.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Robert T. Handy: The social gospel in America. 1870-1920; Gladden, Ely, Rauschenbusch (A library of protestant thought), New York 1966, p. 103.

> The social gospel was an offshoot of theological liberalism that strove to apply a progressive theological vision to engage American social, political, and economic structures. Rooted in wider historical-theological developments in American Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the social gospel integrated evangelical and liberal theological strands in ways that advocated for systemic, structural changes in American institutions. The movement had a wide-ranging impact on religion and society throughout the twentieth century, cresting during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.[8]

Even though the active social gospel movement ceased to play a decisive role after the First World War at the latest, many ideas survived, as Evans says, right up to the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King.

3. Martin Luther King

The following is a brief biography of Martin Luther King in order to better understand the most important events in his life.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15th 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. His father was a minister at Ebenezer Baptist Church,[9] where King himself would later hold the parish office. He first studied at Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology in 1948.[10] He then studied Theology at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, graduating with a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1951.[11] That same year, King began his doctorate in systematic Theology at Boston University, which he received in 1955.[12] In 1954, he decided to take a parish post in Montgomery, Alabama. After Rosa Parks was arrested in 1955 for not giving her bus seat to a white man, King became one of the organizers of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.[13] In the following years, King increasingly assumed the role of a leader and spokesman of the civil rights movement. He experienced numerous arrests and attacks on him and his family. He published

[8] Evans, 2017, p. 2 f.
[9] Cf. Martin Luther King/Clayborne (Ed.) Carson: The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., London 2000, p. 1.
[10] Cf. ibid., p. 13.
[11] Cf. ibid., p. 17.
[12] Cf. ibid., p. 30.
[13] Cf. ibid., p. 50.

books and met President Eisenhower[14] and President Kennedy[15], among others. At the "March on Washington" in 1963, in which more than 200,000 demonstrators took part, King gave his most famous speech "I have a dream" in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C..[16] In later years, King extended his civil rights activities to poverty in general and also took a public stand against the Vietnam War.[17] He gave his final speech "I've Been to the Mountaintop" the day before his death on April 4th, 1968, when he was shot on the balcony of his hotel in Memphis.[18]

3.1 Walter Rauschenbusch

During his time at Crozer Theological Seminary, which perhaps influenced his theological progress the most[19], King "spent a great deal of time reading the work of the great social philosophers"[20], such as Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. Although he did not agree with Rauschenbusch's optimistic view of human nature, his understanding, "that the gospel deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body; not only his spiritual well-being but his material well-being"[21] convinced King.

The Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) was possibly the most important figure of the social gospel. He attended lectures at several German universities and studied at the University of Rochester and Rochester Theological Seminary, New York.[22] Although he was highly respected by the faculty, his liberal theological convictions were not welcomed by everyone.[23]

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[14] Cf. ibid., p. 100.
[15] Cf. ibid., p. 229.
[16] Cf. ibid., p. 221 ff.
[17] Cf. Heinrich Grosse: King, Martin Luther Jr., in: Hans Dieter Betz/Don S. Browning/Bernd Janowski/Eberhard Jüngel (Eds.), Religion Past & Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion, Vol. 7 (Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart), Leiden/Boston 2012, pp. 186–187, here p. 186.
[18] Cf. King/Carson, 2000, p. 356.
[19] Cf. David J. Garrow: The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King Jr.: Influences and Commentaries, in: Martin E. Marty (Ed.), Native American Religion and Black Protestantism (Modern American Protestantism and its World 9), Munich/London/New York/Paris 1993, pp. 206–221, here p. 207.
[20] Martin Luther King: Stride toward freedom. The Montgomery story (Perennial library), New York [et.al.] 1964, p. 73.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Cf. Christopher Hodge Evans: The Kingdom is Always but Coming. A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch (Library of religious biography), Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2004, p. 32 f.
[23] Cf. ibid., p. 43.

The extreme poverty of “Hell’s Kitchen”, an area in New York City, where Rauschenbusch served as a pastor at the Second German Baptist Church, led him and some friends to found a group called “The Brotherhood of the Kingdom” in 1892, which focused on strong piety on one hand and the social side of Christianity on the other.[24]

In 1897 he became a teacher at the German department at Rochester Theological Seminary and in 1902 he was appointed professor for church history at the University of Rochester. Until his death in 1918 Rauschenbusch published several books, all of them revolving around the topic of the social gospel.

Rauschenbusch explained the problem of social injustice using the history of the United States as a basis: Originally all land in America was public land, ideally distributed so everyone had the same opportunities, very similar to the idea of communism. However, after the free land was used up and more and more immigrants came to the U.S., a social gradient arose through the formation of a monopoly on the land. Rauschenbusch feared that a society would emerge out of "the great proprietor, the tenant farmer, and the agricultural laborer" that would bring "poverty and ignorance in the country”. He showed that this gap has long been created by the growing industrialization in the cities. In capitalism, the worker no longer has a share of the materials and machines that he works with. The only thing he has is his manpower, which is in constant danger to be exploited.[25]

King, too, referred to communism in general and Karl Marx in particular, who he thought “had analyzed the economic side of capitalism right.”[26] King was a sharp critic of capitalism, describing himself as rather socialistic than capitalistic. Nevertheless, in his opinion, no true Christian can be a communist, as communism demands revolution in the face of social injustice, while the ethical way – and therefore Christian way – of social change should be evolutionary.[27]

This thought in turn has a direct parallel to Rauschenbusch: he saw revolution as the last resort in the fight against social injustice, as it always carries with it violence

[24] Cf. Hebblethwaite, p. 412.
[25] Cf. Walter Rauschenbusch: Christianity and the Social Crisis, New York 1908, p. 221 ff.
[26] Garrow, p. 210.
[27] Cf. Martin Luther King: Advocate of the social gospel. September 1948 - March 1963 (The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. 6), Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2007, p. 123 ff.

and suffering. Instead, fundamental and sustainable reforms are supposed to lead to social changes. This idea is based on evolutionary principles, although Rauschenbusch himself was not convinced by Darwin's theory of evolution, especially in its social interpretation.[28] However, Rauschenbusch emphasized that this change must be addressed with a certain urgency: both democracy and ethical values, which are so closely linked to Christianity, are in serious danger unless something is done about the growing social injustice.[29]

King had a similar view on things. He was convinced that industrialization has brought a lot of knowledge and progress into the world, but that the moral progress could not keep up with the scientific one. In order for civilization to survive, man "must rediscover the moral and spiritual ends for living."[30]

In this fight for social justice Rauschenbusch was convinced of God's support. God showed himself in history, because "all history becomes the unfolding of the purpose of the immanent God who is working in the race toward the commonwealth of spiritual liberty and righteousness."[31] The active leaders, who are trying to build a more just society do so with the support of "superior spiritual forces"[32], which means that God is not just some power hovering in the background but that he is actually involved in the changing of society trough those social justice advocates.

King took up this idea himself: in 1960 he wrote about how he recently came to the conviction of a "personal God"[33] who gave him hope and strength for his exhausting task as a civil rights activist. He was convinced that "man has a cosmic companionship"[34] in the struggle for justice. Similar to Rauschenbusch's understanding, God seems to be directly involved in social change through the people who fight against social injustice.

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[28] Cf. Milenko Andjelic: Christlicher Glaube als prophetische Religion. Walter Rauschenbusch und Reinhold Niebuhr, Zugl.: Heidelberg, Univ., Diss., 1996 (Internationale Theologie 3), Frankfurt (Main)/Berlin/Bern [et al.] 1998, p. 53 f.
[29] Cf. Rauschenbusch, 1908, p. 253.
[30] King, 2007, p. 88.
[31] Walter Rauschenbusch: Christianizing the Social Order, Reprint, orig. publ. 1912, New York 1926, p. 121.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Martin Luther King: Threshold of a new decade. January 1959 - December 1960 (The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. 5), Berkeley 2005, p. 424.
[34] Ibid.

As we have seen earlier, King generally agreed with Rauschenbusch's critique of "the evils of capitalism"[35]. Nevertheless, King expressed criticism concerning the fact that the former identified an economic and social system with the concept of the Kingdom of God. One might argue that King on the other hand also partly defined his idea of the Kingdom of God based on economic systems, though not a specific one: a synthesis between the "individual enterprise" of capitalism and the "collective enterprise" of communism would be ideal.[36]

Although it might be true that Rauschenbusch had a specific economic system in the back of his head, his whole concept of the Kingdom of God is based on love. To him the Kingdom of God was "not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven."[37] In order to achieve this, one must place love at the center of life, and thus also of society. When one follows Jesus, then one will find love with him, which is "not a flickering and wayward emotion, but the highest and most steadfast energy of a will bent on creating fellowship."[38]

This last concept of love seemed to be very similar to King's idea of *agape*, a word Rauschenbusch did not use, but might have been familiar with. In various of his sermons King preached about the understanding of the Greek word *agape*, which translated to love, although "nothing sentimental or basically affectionate". According to King, *agape* is the "love of God, operating in the human heart", which makes us, when we rise to it, to "love men not because we like them […], but we love them because God loves them".[39] With the power of *agape*, the "Kingdom of God" can be established, which King often described as "beloved community"[40]. This ideal of a beloved community was, like Rauschenbusch's ideal of the Kingdom of God, not a utopian one, but rather an achievable one, if all unrighteousness is eliminated. It was a very integrative ideal, where all humans can live together in a brotherhood and "respect the dignity and worth of all human personality"[41].

[35] Martin E. Marty (Ed.), Modern American Protestantism and its World, 14 Volumes, Vol. 9: Native American Religion and Black Protestantism, Munich/London/New York/Paris 1993, p. 210.
[36] Cf. King/Carson, 2000, p. 22.
[37] Rauschenbusch, 1908, p. 65.
[38] Ibid., p. 68.
[39] King, 2007, p. 325.
[40] Ibid., p. 324.
[41] King, 2005, p. 360.

3.2 Reinhold Niebuhr

While still studying at Crozer Theological Seminary King came in contact with the works of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was born on 21 June 1892 in Missouri. He was an American theologian of German descent. After studying at Eden Seminary in Illinois and Yale Divinity School, which he graduated from with a Master's degree, Niebuhr followed in his father's steps and became a pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit. He later took up a position as an associate professor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. As a result of his increasing fame he received further teaching opportunities, for example from Harvard, which he mostly rejected.[42] He died on June 1st, 1971 and was posthumously declared "the greatest Protestant theologian born in America since Jonathan Edwards"[43] by the American weekly magazine *Time*.

Compared to Rauschenbusch's optimistic view of human nature, Niebuhr's understanding of the "complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence"[44] was very appealing to King. Through studying Niebuhr, he gained an understanding of sin, which is not some abstract evil force trying to dissuade people from the right way, but runs through the whole character of man, even through the whole of society itself. As much as King praised Niebuhr for this realistic understanding of the human character, he also criticized him by saying that "his pessimism concerning human nature was not balanced by an optimism concerning divine nature."[45]

Nevertheless, Niebuhr's insight into the "relation between morality and power" and "man's potential for evil" led Martin Luther King on a path towards, in his words, "realistic pacifism".[46] While King agreed with Niebuhr that many pacifists are too optimistic in their idea of man and "unconsciously [tend] towards self-righteousness"[47], he rejected Niebuhr's criticism of pacifism, who saw it as "a sort of passive nonresistance to evil expressing naive trust in the power of love". King, basing his conviction on Mahatma Gandhi, said that that pacifism is not a subordination to

[42] Cf. Andjelic, 1998, p. 99 f.
[43] Anon.: Death of a Christian Realist, in: *Time*, No. 24, 14.6.1971, p. 80, accessed 9.9.2018.
[44] King/Carson, 2000, p. 25.
[45] Ibid., p. 31.
[46] King, 1964, p. 81.
[47] Ibid.

evil, but rather "a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love", because the only answer to hatred cannot be hatred, but must be love.[48]

As neither Niebuhr nor Rauschenbusch belonged to the African-American community, they may not have had the same urgency in addressing the problem of racial discrimination as Martin Luther King had. In fact, Walter Rauschenbusch was often criticized, despite being aware of the problem of racism, for remaining "relatively silent on issues of racial justice."[49]

Reinhold Niebuhr, on the other hand, focused slightly more on this problem. In his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he stated that in the course of time numerous institutions have been developed to improve the situation of African Americans in the USA. However, these improvements only ever move within the framework of the "given system of injustice", i.e. as far as they do not attack the system of white supremacy. Niebuhr was convinced that "however large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves completely with the Negro cause, the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so."[50]

In one of his sermons, Martin Luther King described a similar phenomenon: he recounted that he had met a white man who explained to him that he had always loved the Blacks, had even given money to their churches and to the Black man, who works for him. However, because of the civil rights movement and the subsequent tension, which had destroyed the peaceful relationship between Black people and white people, he now found it hard to love Black people. King concluded that the white man never really loved the Black people in the first place. He only loved them as long as they bowed to the white system, as long as he could retain power over how much the Black population should emancipate themselves.[51]

To combat racial discrimination, Martin Luther King invoked non-violent methods: instead of defeat friendship should be sought. "Non-cooperation and boycotts are not ends within themselves, they are merely means to awaken the sense of moral

[48] Cf. ibid., p. 80 f.
[49] Evans, 2017, p. 181.
[50] Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr: Moral Man and Immoral Society. A Study in Ethics and Politics, New York 1960, p. 252 f.
[51] Cf. King, 2007, p. 439.

shame within the opponent. But the end is redemption. The end is reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness."[52] Here one can once more find parallels to Niebuhr: while Niebuhr rejected non-violent resistance in the sense of naive pacifism, he did have the opinion that violence made no sense in the fight of Blacks against racism. He explained this from a pragmatic point of view: "Non-violence is a particularly strategic instrument for an oppressed group which is hopelessly in the minority and has no possibility of developing sufficient power to set against its oppressors."[53] Because the Black population is outnumbered by the white population, it would have no chance in the case of a violent revolution. Even if there was more "social intelligence" among the population, this intelligence would still be destroyed by economic interests. Niebuhr admitted that not all problems are solved by non-violent resistance, but believed that - and here he referred to Gandhi - a "degree of justice which neither pure moral suasion nor violence could gain"[54] can be achieved through patience, discipline and perseverance.

King agreed with Niebuhr's statement, that reality alone as a constant sequence of bad events proved that there is no inevitable moral progress in society[55]. This believe was the main argument for King to criticize Rauschenbusch's optimistic philosophy towards the human possibility to constantly develop its wisdom and morals. King accused Rauschenbusch of having fallen victim to the "cult of inevitable progress"[56] as a child of his time. King, of course, lived during a time that was still strongly marked not only by racism, but also by war: in his youth and adolescence, World War II raged, followed by the Cold War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, all of which were connected to the United States. It is therefore not very surprising that he did not believe in the inevitable moral progress of man.

[52] Ibid., p. 324.
[53] Niebuhr, 1960, p. 252.
[54] Ibid., p. 245.
[55] Cf. Martin Luther King: Rediscovering Precious Values. July 1951-November 1955 (The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. 2), Berkeley 1994, p. 278.
[56] Cf. Handy, 1966, p. 259.

3.3 Mahatma Gandhi

When one thinks of Martin Luther King today, one automatically thinks of his method of non-violent resistance. This non-violent resistance is inseparably linked to the Mahatma Gandhi, who greatly influenced King's thinking. King described, though generally convinced by Jesus' words "but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt 5:18 KJV), that during his studies he reached a point where he could no longer believe that this philosophy of love could be a solution to social problems in the wider social context, or even in the international context. Here Gandhi remedied the situation: his concept of *satyagraha* (love-force) convinced King that a mixture of the Christian understanding of love and Gandhi's concept of non-violent resistance was the strongest weapon for the oppressed: "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method."[57] King's deep admiration for Gandhi was also shown when he called him the man "who more than anybody else in the modern world, caught the spirit of Jesus Christ and lived it more completely in his life."[58] This is of course particularly surprising, since Gandhi was not a Christian. King even justified this biblically with the gospel of John: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold." (John 10:16 KJV). King preached that inhere Jesus talks about followers who live and spread his message without being bound to him.[59] Incidentally, here we see that King was apparently convinced that it is more important to live according to Christian values than actually to confess to Christianity. Of course, one must not forget that he said this in the context of a sermon, therefore rhetorical aspects also play a role. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how fundamentally important to him the fight against social injustice with non-violent methods was that he presented to his listeners the man who stood for non-violence like no other, a non-Christian, as the greatest Christian of that time.[60]

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[57] Cf. King, 2005, p. 422 f.
[58] Ibid., p. 146.
[59] Cf. ibid.
[60] It should be noted, however, that King did not quote the whole Bible verse in his sermon, but only the beginning. The whole verse says: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be *one* fold, and *one* shepherd" (John 10:16 KJV). One could now ask whether King hasn't overlooked a decisive point here: It might seem as if it was Jesus' will to make all his sheep, including those from his other stables, familiar with his message and to show them the Christian God as the only one. On Gandhi, who never confessed to Christianity, this verse could then apply only partially.

3.4 African-American background

The greatest factor of influence on Martin Luther King's thinking was perhaps the one he could least choose: his African-American family background.

Even though King comes from a, in his opinion, rather conservative Baptist family, his father and grandfather were already supporters of the social gospel.[61] One can assume that King grew up in a social environment that was quite open to the theology of the social gospel, even though not in its full liberal interpretation. It is difficult to say to what extent his childhood and youth, whether consciously or subconsciously, influenced him in his later moral principles. His autobiography does not give us many clues about this matter, as it was, although written in large parts with the words of his books, letters and sermons, compiled after his death by Clayborn Carson.

King himself stated in his book *Stride toward freedom* that his "concern for racial and economic justice"[62] was already fundamentally pronounced before he attended college. Since childhood he has experienced racial discrimination, witnessed Black people being lynched and treated unfairly in court, as well as the Ku Klux Klan making its rounds. He soon noticed, however, that the poor white population experienced economic exploitation similar to that of the Black population, which led King to develop his perception of social injustice both in terms of racism and economy.[63]

Without implying that King, had he been white, would not have been equally supportive of the rights of African Americans, one can assume that his own background played a decisive role. Even if this cannot be proved with unequivocal certainty when it comes to his thought process, then at least on his role as preacher: he managed to "combine elements of African-American and European-American religious traditions."[64] He "sought to use his ministerial skills to mobilize blacks and his

[61] Clayborne Carson: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the African-American Social Gospel, in: Cornel West/Eddie S. Glaude (Eds.), African American Religious Thought. An Anthology, Louisville/London 2003, pp. 696–714, here p. 698.
[62] King, 1964, p. 72.
[63] Cf. King/Carson, 2000, p. 10 f.
[64] Carson, p. 696.

theological arguments to win over whites"[65] which earned him, at least for some time, unprecedented support among the population, and even the Nobel Peace Prize.

Especially the young Black population of that time was drawn to a charismatic leader like King because they focused "more on the responsibilities of the minister in civic affairs and as a moral, ethical force in this life, rather than as a strict interpreter of religion hereafter."[66] One could say that the combination of him being a Black preacher and the zeitgeist of the 50s and 60s was an optimal breeding ground for the spread of a theology of a Black Social Gospel, which King was able to use extraordinarily successfully for a while.

4. Conclusion

Martin Luther King was strongly influenced by the social gospel. He took his basic understanding of Christians in the context of their commitment to the struggle against social injustice from the ideas of the social gospel, which had already played a role through his father and grandfather and later mainly through Rauschenbusch.

However, King also found many of his ideas in the works of Reinhold Niebuhr, for example in the question of the malignancy of other people, which he had to experience firsthand. Niebuhr was able to convince him especially through his understanding of sin.

But even though King had to endure a lot of hatred and hostility, not least because he was African-American, he did not surrender to hatred towards all whites, but always pleaded for love, so that in the end his "beloved community" could arise, in which all humans grow together to a common unity.

Martin Luther King even felt so committed to justice that he extended his original fight against racial discrimination to a fight that also involved economic justice and peace among nations. He always remained convinced that non-violent resistance was the best, even after his own family was attacked with a bomb.[67] The philosophy of Gandhi, whom he highly valued, played a crucial role in this conviction.

[65] Charles V. Hamilton: The Black Preacher in America, New York 1972, p. 134.
[66] Ibid., p. 232.
[67] Cf. King/Carson, 2000, p. 78 ff.

What remains to be answered is whether the social gospel can actually be called the greatest influence on King's theology. As I have shown in this research paper, the social gospel can indeed be seen as the most important influence, under the condition that it can be interpreted in both directions. King influenced the social gospel at least as much as the social gospel influenced him. He succeeded in creating an ideology with social gospel as its basis that was more elaborate than Walter Rauschenbusch's, for example.

Walter Niebuhr, of course, plays a leading role here, since King preached a fundamentally social interpretation of the bible, albeit on the basis of a realistic conception of man. He was neither too strongly influenced by Rauschenbusch’s optimism nor by Niebuhr's pessimism. It seems as if King always tried to find a path of moderation between two extreme and opposing positions.

When one talks about King today, one usually talks about him as a civil rights activist. But he was always foremost a very religious person, who - because of his faith - made it his mission to fight against injustice. This faith itself is so closely linked to the social gospel that King himself said more than once: “I am a profound advocator of the social gospel.”[68]

[68] King, 2007, p. 72.

5. Literature

Andjelic, Milenko: Christlicher Glaube als prophetische Religion. Walter Rauschenbusch und Reinhold Niebuhr, Zugl.: Heidelberg, Univ., Diss., 1996 (Internationale Theologie 3), Frankfurt (Main)/Berlin/Bern [et al.] 1998.

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6. Declaration of Authorship

I hereby certify that the paper I am submitting is entirely my own original work except where otherwise indicated. Any use of the works of any other author, in any form, is properly acknowledged at their point of use.