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**Avoiding Abusive/Legalistic Christian Religion
and Its Effects**

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Introduction: Wellman on Liberals and Evangelicals

I would like to initiate this discussion by quoting from James K. Wellman’s book on Liberals and Evangelicals, where he characterizes these two Christian groups in his Pacific Northwestern study with regard to their views of and reactions to the Mel Gibson film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Wellman says in his really balanced and unbiased study and characterization of the two groups:

For evangelicals, the movie was emotionally moving, deeply pious, and showed God's compassion for humanity through the sacrifice of God's Son. For liberals, it was ‘primitive’ in its sensationalism of Jesus' scourging; it falsely depicted the Romans as innocent and merciful while it made the Jews look rapacious and guilty; it did not capture the ‘message’ of Jesus, but rather mired it in a sacrificial theology that is ‘superstitious and archaic.’ Needless to say, these are two different moral and theological worlds.”²

I quote Wellman here, not as a way of endorsing or rejecting either of these theological stances, for as Wellman clearly points out in his work, they each have every right to their theological positions, which he shows are well-grounded in their worldviews. But I look upon the author’s comparison as a starting point for seeing and acknowledging these two possibilities, among others, for theological understanding and development. Wellman’s point in the last sentence of the quotation about “different moral and theological worlds” is instructive also, in that it brings to my mind the truth of the existence of many different moral and theological worlds we may encounter in examining theological and religious views of various Christians, both lay and ministerial, as well as scholarly.

I. Religion and Commitment Today

If one is serious and sensitive about being a Christian, he or she is likely to have particular theological views that guide and determine their behavior and reactions to everything in life. Religion is expected to mean commitment, and commitment determines one’s way of life, it would seem.

The issue I would like to raise, however, has to do with growth, theological and moral growth in the religious journey. For instance, I

² James K. Wellman Jr. *Evangelical vs. Liberal* (Kindle Locations 1625-1628). Kindle Edition.

would ask, are Christians today the same morally and theologically as Christians were in the time of Paul and other New Testament believers? Are individuals, for instance, meant to remain always on the same moral and theological plane as they were when they first became Christians? Most people have surely encountered in the vast world of Christian experiences those persons, groups, or even churches that possess and promote a rather narrow, constricted, even legalistic and abusive concept of Christian belief and practice. From the standpoint of such persons and groups we do not get a sense that the natural human tendency to develop their understanding and broaden their thinking in the faith as they experience and encounter other Christians and the world around them is very acceptable.

To be more specific, some, though not all by any means,³ evangelical, fundamentalist individuals and groups do possess such restrictive tendencies, which tend to stunt intellectual, social, and spiritual growth of believers by subjecting them to such things as salvation by works, following the letter of the law and not the spirit, etc.

II. Martin Luther King Jr. Paradigm, Part 1

To further push the notion of spiritual growth and development that is a natural human phenomenon one may experience in any religion, especially Christianity, I would like to use the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was raised in a very narrow and restricted Christian tradition, in which he entered the preaching

³ It should be noted that there are varieties of evangelical groups, as noted by different scholars, and where as they have some beliefs and practices in common, evangelicals distinguish themselves and their beliefs and practices primarily from fundamentalists in more recent times. James K. Wellman, Jr., points out how most evangelicals in his study “did not want to be called fundamentalists or identified as such. In one case an evangelical pastor said, when I asked him if he identified himself as a fundamentalist became indignant-saying that he felt this was tantamount to being called a ‘nigger’ (Wellman 2002). Quite striking language, but it also shows the length with which evangelicals have distanced themselves from the label-whether because of ignominy that has come to be associated with the term through liberal discourse (proving one’s ignorance) or through the associations of the word with religious extremists” James K. Wellman Jr.. *Evangelical vs. Liberal* (Kindle Locations 1330-1331). Kindle Edition. See also Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan, 2013, pp. 19-20, 43.

ministry. However, because of his educational training and social development, of which most people are not aware, he underwent phenomenal growth and transformation to become one of the most renowned scholars, preachers, theologians, and leaders of the 20th century. We know King as the accomplished leader, icon, of the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century, but we want to look at the basic pattern of his spiritual journey that can serve as a paradigm for the kind of spiritual growth that is possible in the Christian experience.

III. Howard Thurman on Religious Development

Before looking at the King paradigm, I would like to point to the way in which Howard Thurman defines and describes the initial religious experience and the continuing religious development throughout one's religious life as something to take into consideration in the process of examining King's religious journey. In connection with the basic born again Christian experience, classically seen in the Pauline Damascus Road⁴ experience and the Augustinian Garden of Milan conversion,⁵ Howard Thurman declares from personal experience and study, that, "There need not be only one single rebirth, but again and again [one] may be reborn until at last there is nothing that remains between [the person] and God."⁶ Here it should be noted that Thurman validates the "born again" claim and carries it much further. He analyzes that experience and explains its effects on the person emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

Thurman defines it as basically a meeting of the individual person and God, which he determines as the "finding" of the person by God and the person's finding God, and the person's response. Thurman further explains what this encounter does to the person. One brings all that one is as he or she lives life with her/himself into the experience. And the person sees him or herself "from another point of view," being "in a very real sense" "stripped of everything" and

⁴ See Acts 9:1-19.

⁵ See *The Confessions of St. Augustine: The original, Classical Text by Augustine Bishop of Hippo, His Autobiography and Conversion Story*, by St Augustine.

⁶ Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Richmond, Indiana, Friends United Press, 1972), 40.

“stands with no possible protection from the countenance of the Other [God].”⁷ The person’s knowledge and understanding of the self is revealed through this experience, in terms of aims, purposes, desires, what manner of person he/she truly is. Changes take place in the person, and one can observe “gradual or sometimes apparent shifts in” his or her total pattern. He states further that, “This is particularly true in the traditional conversion experience in *evangelical Christianity*” (emphasis mine).⁸

This process of God-encounter and change and transformation continues throughout the individual’s life both in privacy and in group life and experience. This description by Thurman appears to be logical and generally true for the most part, although all aspects may not be experienced the same by each person undergoing such a spiritual transformation. But some such process does take place in the transformation and is observable in the experiences of particular individuals.

IV. Martin Luther King Jr. Paradigm, Part 2

Now we can move to the paradigm of Martin Luther King, Jr. In his famous essay, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,”⁹ King describes the personal, theological, and philosophical paths by which he arrived at his spiritual and political ideal and practices in the Civil Rights Movement. But we want to look more specifically at the personal religious journey he undertakes with undertones that are somehow reflected in his overall social activities. He states at the beginning of this essay that he was raised in “a rather strict fundamentalist tradition” and was “occasionally shocked” when his “intellectual journey” carried him “through new and sometimes complex doctrinal lands.” However, this unsettling experience or shock did not have a traumatic effect on him, as does happen in seminary experiences of some students from fundamentalist traditions when they encounter such ideas of philosophers and theologians.

King says the “pilgrimage was always stimulating” and gave him a “new appreciation for objective appraisal and critical analysis, and

⁷ Ibid., 39 and 40.

⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*” (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 147-55.

knocked” him out of his “dogmatic slumber.” What he encountered here was what fundamentalists find rather distasteful, Christian Liberalism.¹⁰ But King stated that Liberalism provided him with “an intellectual satisfaction that I had never found in fundamentalism.” For some time he was quite enamored with its insights. At first he was absolutely convinced of its position on the “natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason.” But this was soon to change with closer scrutiny of the theories of liberal theology.

Upon more thorough analysis and critical examination, he was able to accept some of its theories and remain skeptical of others. But he would continue to cherish liberalism’s “devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, and its refusal to abandon the best lights of reason.” Its “doctrine of man,” however, he felt strong objection to, as it failed to take into account the complexities of human social involvement and the “glaring reality of collective evil.” For instance, he saw that liberalism’s optimism concerning human nature overlooked the “fact that reason is darkened by sin.” To him reason devoid of the power of faith is a trap.¹¹

King went on in his intellectual and spiritual journey to examine neo-orthodoxy as a corrective of a sentimental liberalism but found it too pessimistic on the “question of man” and other issues. In stressing the transcendence of God much neglected in liberalism’s stress on God’s immanence, neo-orthodoxy went too far in presenting the notion of God as “hidden, unknown, and ‘wholly other.’” King saw in neo-orthodoxy a “mood of antirationalism and semifundamentalism, stressing a narrow uncritical Biblicism.”

Thus King continued his search for the truth regarding a spiritually and intellectually tenable view of humanity, which he found neither in liberalism nor in neo-orthodoxy, both which contained only partial truths, in his estimation. He later encountered the philosophy of Existentialism, studying such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, and Tillich, from

¹⁰ See Wellman, *Evangelicals Vs. Liberals: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest*, *Ibid.* See also Michael F. Bird, *Ibid.*, who speaks of being inoculated in his theology “early on against unwholesome deviations of Christian belief caused by either liberalism (a compromised gospel) or fundamentalism (a legalistic gospel) that might infiltrate our theological thinking” (p. 43).

¹¹ *Strength to Love*, 147-48.

all of whom he learned a great deal. The most impact on him among these came from Paul Tillich, whom he studied much more in depth and who tended to convince King that existentialism “grasped certain basic truths about man and his condition that could not be overlooked.” Such ideas they noted about “finite freedom,” the “perception of the anxiety and conflict produced in man’s personal and social life by the perilous and ambiguous structure of existence, human “existential estrangement” from their “essential nature” seemed to King much on target. Their pinpointing the threat of meaninglessness in modern existence was quite significant, and while the existentialists offered no ultimate Christian answer to the problems, they offered much insight for theologians with regard to an accurate description of the true state of human existence.¹²

At this point in his spiritual and intellectual journey, King then turns to social ethics. From this scenario of his life’s religious journey, we can possibly see why it could not remain purely spiritual, if indeed there is such a characteristic, but it had to expand into the social and ethical realms. For King, theology and philosophy could not explain nor determine a solution to the troubling and widespread realities of the twin evils of racial and economic injustices he then saw and experienced personally in the society. And his religious quest inevitably broadened into a socio-religious one, for he could not see how religion could be merely concerned with inner spiritual change and renewal and completely ignore the social relations and situations humans encounter in individual and group relations and social, political, and economic systems that maintain and foster human relations.

So King’s journal inevitably led to the interweaving of the spiritual and the social and to the search for social/ethical, as well as religious answers to the human predicament of the times. This is why such works as Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*¹³

¹² Ibid., 148-49.

¹³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 1932. Matthew Berke says of Niebuhr, he “was not a popular evangelist but rather a philosopher of public life, bringing the insights of biblical truth to bear on the great issues of politics and social ethics. He spoke to and within the Church, but also to a broader educated public” (*First Things*, March 2000, www.FirstThings.com/article/2007/01/reinhold-niebuhrmoral-man-and-immoral-society-1932-30, accessed November 14, 2013 .

and Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*¹⁴ became so important to him in that journey, offering profound insights though not ultimately solving the problems. And he came to a crucial point in his journey and quest finally when he was able to connect the central love-ethic of Jesus with the nonviolence method, *Satyagraha*, of Mohandas Gandhi; and from here he was able to undergird the further pathway of his journey with this understanding and spiritual/social foundation.

We know where this took King ultimately in his renowned leadership of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's. But the average Christian does not undergo the extent of intellectual challenges which King underwent. However, taking seriously the Christian walk through life and how that faith interconnects with and governs every aspect of one's life, both individually and socially, politically and economically, every Christian might be inclined to undergo a somewhat similar process of growth and development of her/his faith, and in this inclination no Christian should be thwarted by any sorts of strict rules and regulations, whether scriptural or group-related.

It might be noted that King was at first severely criticized by religious groups (Catholic, Protestant evangelical and liberal, Jewish, and otherwise) for the nonviolent direct action approach he was taking in the Movement, especially in Alabama; and some religious groups, of all races, never ceased to oppose his Movement, especially biblical literalists and fundamentalists, throughout its history. So it is and, no doubt, will be with all Christians who pursue their faith beyond the limitations and restrictions some individuals and groups

¹⁴ Walter Rauschenbusch, Macmillan Co., 1907. Gary Dorrien says of Rauschenbusch that it occurred to him "that Jesus had one center, the kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed and launched a postmillennial idea of the coming reign of God; and the church was supposed to be a new kind of community that transformed the world by the power of Christ's kingdom-bringing Spirit. Rauschenbusch later recalled: 'Here was a concept that embraced everything. Here was something so big that absolutely nothing that interested me was excluded from it. ... Wherever I went, whatever I touched, there was the kingdom of God. It carries God into everything that you do'" Gary Dorrien, "Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis," *The Christian Century*, November 27, 2007, pp. 29.

are accustomed to placing on their growth beyond narrow boundaries of race, class, gender, ethnic groups, and otherwise., even religions.

V. My Own Experience

I can cite my own experience in this regard as one such example. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., I was born into an evangelical Baptist family background, very rigid and strict with regard to character, actions, dressing regulations. There appeared to be more don'ts than do's, one might say. My maternal grandfather (Rev. John Henry Graham) was a widely known and influential Baptist preacher in Meridian, Mississippi, and surrounding areas, pastoring a circuit of churches at the same time and serving as the patriarchal head and religious guardian in the area for miles around.¹⁵ All of Rev. Graham's many children were raised in the strict religiously fundamentalist/evangelical fashion, as was my mother, Odena Graham Gordon, his next youngest daughter. And my mother placed on her children similar restrictions as were described of Rev. Graham below:

Religious restrictions were placed on the young people of the Graham families, stemming from their grandfather's teachings. Clara (granddaughter) spoke of the teachings about dancing being wrong, "socializing parties," maybe some of their top interests they had as young people were strongly discouraged. Too much engaging in pleasures and good time was frowned on. They were never allowed to go to dances. Drinking, smoking, playing cards they never engaged in. They didn't forbid them to go to movies, which they did when older, but their parents never took them to places like that.¹⁶

My mother had further restrictions she conveyed from her upbringing, such as girls never wearing pants, young people not dating until a certain age, and a string of other do's and don'ts.

It should be noted that there have always existed certain discrepancies between White evangelical/fundamentalist beliefs and practices and those of Blacks. James K. Wellman, Jr. says this best in stating why he did not include African Americans in his study of evangelicals and liberals: "I intentionally left out the African

¹⁵ See Mozella G. Mitchell, *New Africa in America: The Blending of African and American Religious and Social Traditions among Black People in Meridian, Mississippi, and Surrounding Counties* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

American Christian movement. It is evangelical and conservative in theology but quite progressive on economic and some social issues. In particular, African American Christians have come out overwhelmingly against the Iraq War (Baylor Study 2006), thus making them distinct from white evangelicals (on political issues) and liberal Protestants (for theological reasons) in this study.”¹⁷ This is excellent insight on his part, as what he denotes here about the distinctions between Black and White evangelicals and Black and White liberals is quite true and can be seen in Black churches in their commitments to social and economic justice despite whether they are liberal or evangelical Christians.

Nevertheless, the strictness and narrowness are tendencies that have to be overcome if individual Christians are to be able to grow to maturity in their faith. Continuing with my own experience in my efforts to grow and develop beyond the narrow confines of my evangelical upbringing stemming from my maternal grandfather and my mother, I must say that I had to travel far and wide in order to reach the present point in my journey, which I will summarize briefly. Being widowed with eleven children, six boys and five girls, and moving from the rural Mississippi Delta to the large urban area of Memphis, Tennessee, my mother was compelled to broaden her thinking and social/religious principles.

Specifically, she had to rethink and modify some of the rules and restrictions she had thought were required by God, such as girls wearing pants, young people playing cards, anyone drinking alcoholic beverages, dancing, no premarital sex and the like, because they just did not hold up which she simply could not force her children to fully embrace. The sheer numbers and the logic of urban living were arrayed against her, and her evangelical father was not close by to support her claims. So our family religious principles began to seek more reasonable, sensible, and sustainable spiritual foundations in the changing times and diverse circumstances.

My mother learned to a great extent that so many of the rigid rules and restrictions she thought were set by God for all times, places, and circumstances were really manmade to suit particular times and circumstances. In other words, my mother grew spiritually

¹⁷ James K. Wellman Jr., *Evangelical vs. Liberal* (Kindle Locations 276-278).

and religiously and became more flexible and enlightened and mature in her religious development. One particular incident that stands out in this regard is that of my baby brother, child number 11 in his new birth and baptism.

The Baptist Church to which our whole family had belonged ever since we arrived in Memphis refused to accept my youngest sibling for baptism because he did not follow a certain prescribed way that a candidate for baptism was supposed to profess his/her desire for baptism. My mother's response was to take him to another Baptist Church that was more free and sensible in its requirements and where my brother was accepted on his profession of faith, and this was the church to which my mother moved her membership, and of course most of her children who were still at home followed her there.

VI. The Church's Dark Ages – Thurman's Success

There are other stories of insensible experiences and inflexible and even cruel church practices that made for changes and growth in my and other members of my family's religious and spiritual development. And these showed me that the church itself was going through its own "dark" ages even in modern times and would need to come of age. One such practice that was quite unsettling and painful to church members was the practice of having young women who had become pregnant out of wedlock come up before the whole church and confess their sin and seek forgiveness.

This calls to mind the experience Howard Thurman had as a seven-year-old boy in Florida. His father was a very religious man who would not join the church (Baptist) to which Thurman's family belonged because he did not feel comfortable with all of their practices. So when his father died and the family wanted to have the funeral at the church, there were problems. They were able to negotiate to have the funeral there, but the pastor would not conduct it. And the traveling evangelist that were able to get to do the funeral literally preached his father into hell because he was not a member of the church and therefore "died out of Christ."¹⁸

¹⁸ See *Conversations with Howard Thurman Part I*, "Knowledge of the Love of the Lord," Landrum Bolling (San Francisco: The Howard Thurman Educational Trust, 1987).

The young Thurman was devastated by this minister's damning message about his father about whom the minister knew nothing. Not getting any satisfactory response about how this minister could do this, Thurman on the way home from the funeral vowed to never be a part of the church when he grew up. Fortunately, he did not keep this vow but continued his religious journey by fully exploring the question of religion and the meaning of God, becoming an ordained minister, attending seminary, pastoring, teaching religion, and becoming one of the foremost preachers in America, and one of the greatest Christian mystics of the twentieth century.¹⁹

The fact that Thurman avoided the possible damaging effect that this experience could have had on him does not detract from the harm that such practices and view do to so many other persons not so lucky as Thurman.

Conclusion: Mozella Mitchell on Absolute Truth

I myself have come through many experiences in the conservative evangelical churches which turned me away from the church for many years, especially during the disturbing and religiously challenging Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. When I returned to the church it was after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., when the quest for meaning and identity led so many to spiritual questioning and inner spiritual examination. I was called into the ministry and attended seminary, where I was led to study the life and works of Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Thurman, and the works of the many theologians, philosophers, ethicists, sociologists, and other thinkers and systems, as well as the Old and New Testaments.

After graduating and continuing to teach in college for four more years, I entered Ph.D. Studies in Religion at Emory University, and during this program of study, completed in three years, I encountered studies in religions and other subjects that led to extensive broadening of my religious understanding and spiritual growth. One year after graduating, I accepted a university teaching position in Religious

¹⁹ See Mozella G. Mitchell, *Spiritual of Howard Thurman's Theology* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Pub. Co., 1985); Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*: (New York: University Press of America, 1981).

Studies, while at the same time pastoring a Black Methodist Church, which I have done for 33 years.

During this time I have had to teach about all the religions of the world, major, minor, indigenous, and new religions, with equal regard and respect as my own religion of Christianity. And I have learned to retain my own religious grounding and expand my love and regard for my own religion by probing into other religions and seeing God's truth revealed there and thus appreciating in greater depth my experience with God in my own religion.

I want to stress that this is the kind of religious growth that is possible for anyone if they are not restrained by conservative restrictions from pursuing God wherever their capabilities and knowledge, as well as their spiritual inclinations, allow them.

It seems to me that what is meant by Absolute Truth is not some truth that a certain religion has discovered and experiences within its confines. But Absolute Truth is God, which of course is experienced everywhere and contained and confined nowhere. Absolute contains us but we cannot contain it. It holds us but we cannot hold it. Absolute Truth cannot be contained within the pages of any particular book, though it can be encountered there. But it is Infinite and no finite thing or entity can contain it; it is only expressed there in part. So this signifies to me that we cannot just get into a mindless pattern of living and think we are living the truth because that is the way we have always done it.

There is a difference between conforming and being transformed, and God is constant transforming. We have to come alive to Truth and not be dead weight. One of Jesus' statements was that, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). What Jesus challenged those of his time, and us today, to do was and is to undergo a radical thought change, a transformation required for living God's truth instead of their/our own which is derived from set traditions and patterned thinking.

Many people today use the Bible to justify a set way, to try to exercise control over others and convince them to think their way. They will derive, sometime seemingly innocently, things from the Bible to suit their program and try to give others direction. But they may not use Christ and the transforming way of Christ to convince and encourage them to live the truth.

There is one verse in the scripture where Paul, jerked free of the legalism, haunts so many: Romans 8:1 “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” The Spirit brought him out of a rut and it does so to others.



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