



April 2016

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### Recommended Citation

Norris, Marcos (2016) "Dr. King and the Image of God: A Theology of Voting Rights in Ava DuVernay's *Selma*," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 40.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss2/40>

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## Dr. King and the Image of God: A Theology of Voting Rights in Ava DuVernay's *Selma*

### Abstract

This article argues that Ava DuVernay's 2014 film *Selma* develops a theology of voting rights by staging a conflict between President Lyndon B. Johnson and political activist Martin Luther King, Jr. Though many reviewers fault the film for its besmirching portrayal of LBJ, DuVernay's (mis)representations of Johnson establish a link between the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and King's theological anthropology. In King's view, mankind was created in the image of God, endowed with free will and the capacity to reason. The denial of Black voting rights, while literally depriving African Americans of their political agency, also represented the disavowal of God's image, for King. DuVernay shows how King defers moral responsibility from himself to Johnson, who, equipped with the image of God, can make the rational free choice to pass legislation on Black voting rights and thereby restore Black political agency and, with it, the image of God.

### Keywords

Martin Luther King, Jr., Theology, Voting Rights, *Selma*, DuVernay

### Author Notes

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In Ava DuVernay's 2014 film *Selma*, Martin Luther King, Jr. [David Oyelowo] shakes hands with President Lyndon B. Johnson [Tom Wilkinson], who congratulates King for his reception of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. Assuring King that "civil rights is a priority of [his] administration" and that "ending segregation [was] the proudest moment of [his] life," Johnson leads King to a seat in the center of the oval office where, in the background, portraits of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, two slave-owning founding fathers, can be seen hanging on either side of the Resolute desk.<sup>1</sup> Johnson says that he would rather see King leading the civil rights movement than those "militant Malcolm X types," and, taking a seat opposite King, asks what he can do to help. "Well, Mr. President," King begins, leaning back in his seat, "I'm here to speak specifically about the denial of a basic American right for the Negro citizen—the right to vote." Johnson objects that Black Americans "technically" do have the right to vote, to which King replies: "Technically we already have it, yes, Mr. President, but we both know that, in the South, Black voters are kept off the rows and out of the voting booths by systematic intimidation and fear.... Now, you asked how you can help. We want federal legislation granting Negroes the right to vote, unencumbered." King demands the "robust enforcement" of federal protocol to protect the rights of Black voters, but Johnson, impelled by other "political priorities," tells King "that this voting thing is just gonna have to wait," encouraging him, in the meantime, to join his own efforts in the war on poverty. King becomes visibly agitated and, rising from his seat, states the following:

It can't wait, Mr. President.... There have been thousands of racially-motivated murders in the South.... And you know the astounding fact that not one of these criminals who murder us when and why they want has ever been convicted. Not one conviction because they are protected by White officials, chosen by an all-White electorate, and on the rare occasions that they face trial they are freed by all White juries—all White because you can't serve on a jury unless you are registered to vote.

But Johnson remains firm in his decision, informing King that his administration needs to set the voting issue “aside for a while.” Bidding the president a reluctant farewell, King rejoins his party in the lobby and states, “Selma it is,” signaling the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) next move in the political battle for African American voting rights.

Readers already familiar with *Selma* are likely aware that many reviewers faulted the film for its historical inaccuracies, criticizing DuVernay for her besmirching portrayal of President Johnson, who, according to historical record, played an instrumental role in passing the 1965 Voting Rights Act, around which the film is based. Joseph Califano of *The Washington Post*, for example, writes that “[c]ontrary to the portrait painted by 'Selma,' Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr. were partners in this effort. Johnson was enthusiastic about voting rights and the president urged King to... lead a major demonstration.”<sup>2</sup> Califano calls DuVernay irresponsible, writing that the Selma marches “didn't need any embellishment to work as a big screen historical drama.”<sup>3</sup> Mark Updegrave of *PoliticoMagazine* similarly states that *Selma's* “characterization of the 36th president flies in the face of history. . . . [A]t a time when racial tension is once again high, from Ferguson to Brooklyn, it does no good to bastardize one of the most hallowed chapters in the Civil Rights Movement by suggesting that the president himself stood in the way.”<sup>4</sup> While the concerns of such reviewers are certainly justified, the importance of historicity isn't as clear-cut as many would contend. A.O. Scott of *The New York Times*, for example, defends the film, writing that *Selma* “is not a manifesto, a battle cry or a history lesson. It's a movie.”<sup>5</sup> And in a piece celebrating David Oyelowo's performance, Mark Kermode of *The Guardian* argues that *Selma* “goes beyond historiography. The history may be a little skewed. And the speeches necessarily circumlocutionary, but Oyelowo keeps our attention focused on the real story in triumphant fashion.”<sup>6</sup> Depending on the epistemic underpinnings of one's historiography, what constitutes the “real story” may be a matter of debate, but Kermode and Scott sidestep this epistemological question by choosing instead to focus on the political value of misrepresentation.

This article takes a similar approach, contending that DuVernay does, in fact, manipulate the so-called canons of U.S. history but does so in order to highlight the theological underpinnings motivating much of the Civil Rights Movement. This isn't to say, of course, that the urgency King expresses over voting rights in *Selma* must be explained in terms of the reverend's theological views. As King says to President Johnson, racially-motivated crimes are going unpunished in the South because the legal system consists entirely of white racists. Until Black voters are permitted to register, he argues, they will not be able to serve on juries or elect Black officials who will help combat the racial injustices committed against them. In other words, the voting issue “can't wait” for King, very simply, because innocent people are being killed—a fact that DuVernay foregrounds early in the film when she shows four young Black girls murdered by the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Readers may also notice that King's impatience in the film echoes the impatience he expresses in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” written just two years prior to the Selma marches, after King was arrested for non-violent protest in the SCLC's campaign to end segregation. In the letter, which would be included in his 1964 publication *Why We Can't Wait*, King writes, “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. . . . There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, there are practical reasons King pressed Johnson for legislation protecting voting rights, but we must not forget that King was a Baptist minister who no doubt invested those reasons with theological significance. “Once plagued with a tragic sense of inferiority resulting from the crippling effects of slavery and segregation,” King writes in *Stride Toward Freedom*, “the Negro has now been driven to re-evaluate himself. He has come to feel that he is somebody. His religion reveals to him that God loves all His children and that the important thing about man is not . . . the color of his skin but his eternal worth to God.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, King's politics were theologically-motivated

and the Selma marches reflect, at least in part, an attempt by King and the SCLC to reclaim the divine image.

Looking closely at King's theology, I argue that the civil rights leader conflated the right to vote with human free will, or the capacity to make rational choices which, for King, was integral to the image of God. DuVernay uses the conflict between King and President Johnson to illustrate how the systemic denial of Black voting rights left Black Americans quite literally without a choice, divested of their free will and, in King's view, dispossessed of God's image. That DuVernay could have developed this leitmotif without manipulating a master narrative of U.S. history is certainly possible, but her creative revisions help develop a theology of voting rights that shines cinematic light on King's theological anthropology—a point overlooked by the film's detractors. If history is always already perspectival—constructed from the privileged view of politically-motivated subjects—then representations of the past are never transparent accounts, free of prejudice and personal interest, or lacking in ideological consequences. Rather than uncover the so-called truth of history, privileging a master narrative over minority accounts, this article examines the political value of DuVernay's historical (mis)representations, locating in her revisionist narrative a theological perspective that underscores the Judeo-Christian foundations of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Thus, DuVernay stages a conflict between King and President Johnson to develop what this article is calling a theology of voting rights. According to some reviewers, the conflict is historically unfaithful, but we must recognize that any effort to depict history “as it really happened” is epistemologically suspect.

Like other revisionist historiographies that ground their epistemic approach in poststructural theory, this article claims that representations of the past and, indeed, representation itself are based on arbitrary, differential constructions. Thus, there is an important distinction between a *history of consciousness* and what traditional historicism considers an objective, verifiable *history of events*. While the latter views the past as a single, linear progression of “homogeneous empty time,” in Walter

Benjamin's famous coinage, the former maintains that cultural memory and the discursive material informing our dominant historical narratives are largely the politicized constructions of privileged people groups.<sup>9</sup> That other, less popular points of view exist and, with them, alternate constructions of history should not be ignored, for it is precisely the repression of multiple historical perspectives in favor of a single master narrative that perpetuates the racist and socioeconomic power structures that a now longstanding tradition of revisionist histories has sought to overturn. As Benjamin writes in his landmark "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was".... Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past that unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.<sup>10</sup>

Historical representations that assert their objective authority are dangerous, in Benjamin's view, because they silence other interpretations and underrepresented depictions of the past—referred to by Benjamin as the "tradition of the repressed."<sup>11</sup> According to Benjamin, one "must attain a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism" and other violent regimes bent on a univocal depiction of history and, with it, the preservation of political power.<sup>12</sup> DuVernay's project and others like it help bring about this "state of emergency" by acknowledging the constructedness of historical representation and, concomitantly, the perspectival nature of the historical past. Like Benjamin and the countless revisionist historians to follow him, DuVernay disrupts a master narrative by offering an alternate reading of history and, in doing so, she forces viewers to confront the epistemic problems that accompany hegemonic conceptions of historical accuracy. *Selma* therefore

gestures toward a revisionist historiography and, with it, a poststructural epistemology that breaks down traditional distinctions between accurate and inaccurate historical depictions. DuVernay's portrayal of President Johnson may not align perfectly with the record books, but, as Benjamin demonstrates, documenting the past is always an interpretive process. A master narrative of U.S. history is, therefore, subject to scrutiny and reinterpretation. I see no reason to fault DuVernay's directorial choices because what "really happened" is always a reflection of the author's limited, ideologically-informed perspective.

That said, DuVernay does not depict Johnson as a man intent on perpetuating racial discrimination, as some reviewers suggest, but as a man in transition, learning to sacrifice his professional interests for the good of the country—a portrayal that, as far as historical records are concerned, isn't that far from the truth. As President Barack Obama stated at the Civil Rights Summit on April 10th, 2014: "During his first twenty years in Congress, [President Johnson] opposed every Civil Rights bill that came up for a vote, once calling the push for federal legislation a farce and a shame."<sup>13</sup> The professionally ambitious Johnson spent decades of his political career siding with the South, though eventually, to his credit, he passed both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act during his presidency. In the same address, President Obama explained that Johnson, though "born into poverty, [and] weened in a world full of racial hatred, somehow found within himself the ability to" empathize with Black Americans.<sup>14</sup> This empathy is what eventually led Johnson to support the Civil Rights Movement after twenty years of political opposition. In *Selma's* penultimate scene, Johnson attempts to persuade George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, to help resolve the voting issue. "We shouldn't even be thinking about 1965," Johnson states, "we should be thinking about 1985. . . . [W]hat do you want looking back? You want people remembering you saying 'Wait' or, uh, 'I can't' or 'It's too hard'? . . . I'll be damned if I'm gonna let history put me in the same place as the likes of you." DuVernay portrays a man who is at first resistant but who eventually plays an instrumental role in the Civil Rights Movement. It could be argued, then, that, while DuVernay revises the so-called canons of U.S. history, she nevertheless presents a much fuller



picture of President Johnson than her detractors care to acknowledge. But, as before, this article is not concerned with historical accuracy which, for Benjamin and, ostensibly, DuVernay, is championed by the ruling classes to legitimize their political agenda. Nor is this article invested in further rehearsing well-known academic arguments to promote the value of a revisionist historiography. Instead, it draws attention to the implications of DuVernay's historical revisions, for what is usually regarded as strictly socio-political is also, readers will find, profoundly theological. *Selma* affords viewers an opportunity to reflect on the controversy surrounding the 1965 voting rights act, presenting a theological argument for African American voting rights through its contentious portrayal of the relationship between King and President Johnson.

Understanding King's theological anthropology—what he believed to be the intrinsic value and fundamental purpose of human life—begins with his belief in a personal, loving God who created mankind *out of need*. Structuring the universe in accordance with his divine reason and unchanging moral character, God created humanity in his own image for the purpose of eternal, loving communion with himself and others. In this unorthodox approach, King reasoned that God would not have created human beings if he could accomplish his divine purposes without them. Thus, for King, human personality and moral character were eternally significant, bound not only to the metaphysical structure of the universe but to God's own personality and moral constitution. King diverged from two of his theological influences, Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman, in this regard, arguing that the term *personality*, when applied to God, was not anthropomorphic (as Tillich and Wieman claimed) but theomorphic, an attempt to understand personhood in relationship to the ultimate personality, God himself. As King writes, society must recognize “the sacredness of human personality. Deeply rooted in our political and religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Our Hebraic-Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term *the image of God*.”<sup>15</sup> As image-bearers, people are morally responsible beings capable of autonomous decision-making in a

rationaly-ordered universe. Here, King aligned himself with Immanuel Kant, who opined through the categorical imperative an objectivist morality tantamount to universal law. “I call the world, in so far as it may be in accordance with all moral laws which, by virtue of the freedom of rational beings it may, and according to the necessary laws of morality it ought to be, a moral world,” Kant writes in *Critique of Pure Reason*; “The idea of a moral world has therefore objective reality, . . . conceived as an object of pure reason in its practical employment,” so that “free-will, [when] placed under moral laws, possesses a thorough systematical unity both with itself and with the freedom of everybody else.”<sup>16</sup> For Kant and likewise for King, “to violate moral law is to go against the grain of the universe, which,” King scholar Richard Burrow explains, “is to disregard God's law. There can be nothing but grave consequences for [the] violation of moral law, just as if one violates a physical law, e.g., the law of gravity.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, morality is not relativistic, in King’s view, the outworking of sometimes oppositional cultural beliefs and values, but an organizing, spiritual force giving intelligibility and metaphysical structure to the universe. Morality can therefore be approached rationally, King thought, and the only thing keeping people from living righteously was not their fallen nature, as many theologians contend, but a deliberate, self-conscious decision to do what's morally wrong. “Man is a free and responsible being,” King asserts in a student paper he wrote at Boston University; “The Kantian ‘I ought therefore I can’ should stand out as a prelude in the modern Christian’s thinking about man. There have been attempts in theological thinking . . . to maintain that man is a responsible being yet lacking freedom. But such thinking leads us into needless paradoxes.”<sup>18</sup> To choose evil is to act unreasonably, King argued, as morality is part and parcel with the metaphysical structure of the universe.

Like Augustine, King believed that human beings were inherently good, created by a benevolent God who was wholly incapable of begetting evil. “Sin is to a nature what blindness is to an eye,” Augustine writes in *City of God*; “The blindness is an evil or defect which is a witness to the fact that the eye was created to see the light . . . Were it not for this capacity, there would be no reason to think of

blindness as a misfortune.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, mankind was created for loving communion with God and the rest of creation, but Adam’s sin separated humanity from God’s presence, blinding people to the truth about themselves and perverting a relationship that was, by nature, perfect. As Augustine explains, “The very sin which deprived this nature of happiness in God and left it miserable is the best proof of how good that nature was, as it came from the hand of God.”<sup>20</sup> King scholar Richard Wills Sr. corroborates this point, writing that, for Augustine, it was “neither the material world nor physical bodies but humanity's interiority that was in need of being rescued from the damaging effects of Adam's sin,” but even this was too extreme of a position for King.<sup>21</sup> King, in fact, did not believe in a literal fall from grace, persuaded as he was by evolutionary accounts of humanity's biological origins, but maintained, contra Augustine, that Adam's fall was a symbolic representation of the moral turpitude that results from the irrational decision to disobey God. Aligning himself with neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in a letter he wrote to the Dialectical Society in 1954, King states that “[t]he fall is a mythological expression for what is psychologically true in each person. . . . original sin and the fall are not literal events in history; they are rather symbolic or mythological categories to explain the universality of sin.”<sup>22</sup> What is described here as an interior, psychological defect, however, does not affect, in King’s view, mankind’s capacity for rational decision making. The reverend saw people as inherently good, created by a benevolent God for righteous living.

As such, King was highly critical of post-reformation Protestant theology that sought to deepen the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, particularly Martin Luther's stance that human free will and the capacity to reason were quashed in a postlapsarian age. “[E]ven reason, according to Luther, was altogether darkened, the physical body was altogether corrupt, and one's will,” rather than rationally seeking out the good and godly, Wills explains, “remained fallen apart from grace. Human reason was unwilling and, moreover, incapable of making choices that were essentially good.”<sup>23</sup> As Luther writes in his well-known dialogue with Desiderius Erasmus, “all men are ungodly and unrighteous. . . . it is

apparent that ‘free-will’, even in the noblest of men, not only does not possess and cannot effect anything, but does not even know what is righteous in God’s sight.”<sup>24</sup> For Luther, humanity was utterly incapable of choosing good, slave to a sinful nature that only an all-powerful, sovereign God had the power to transform. He argues that “man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realises that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of Another—God alone.”<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, King was equally intolerant of the anthropological views of John Calvin, who, like Luther, viewed the will as subject to a fallen nature. As Calvin states in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “When the will is enslaved by sin, it cannot start to be good, let alone maintain good ways.”<sup>26</sup> The compatibilist stance developed by Calvin that volition is the natural outworking of deterministic forces—specifically, the belief that sinful choices are *caused* by a sinful nature—was unacceptable to King, whose incompatibilist view of free will as the ability to choose otherwise was, in his mind, a requisite of moral responsibility. “King’s discomfort with the orthodox/reformed tradition grew out of his sense that it negated humanity’s obligation to act responsibly,” Wills writes; “To suggest that humanity cannot do good was to create a self-fulfilling prophecy that somehow justified humanity’s inhumanity against itself. It was to suggest that society could not rise above the self-defeating cycles of racism, classism, and militarism,” which, for obvious reasons, was irreconcilable with King’s political project.<sup>27</sup> For King, human beings were endowed with the image of God, equipped with a capacity to reason and the ability to choose otherwise in a rationally-ordered universe, so racists could overcome their prejudices and freely align themselves with moral truth, regardless of their ideological orientation.

Thus, it was in light of humanity’s role as image-bearers that King and the SCLC broached issues of desegregation and Black voting rights. DuVernay underscores the theological impetus behind the Civil Rights Movement numerous times in the film, ostensibly using her knowledge of King’s theological views to portray the reverend on the silver screen. At one point in the film, DuVernay shows King

preaching to a congregation of 700 Black Americans at a church in Selma, Alabama, shortly after his arrival to the city with other members of the SCLC. “Boycotting the buses in Montgomery. Segregation in Birmingham. Now voting in Selma,” King begins his sermon; “One struggle ends just to go right to the next and the next. If you think of it that way, it's a hard road, but I don't think of it that way. I think of these efforts as one effort, and that one effort is for our life. Our life as a community. Our life as a nation.” Preaching to a congregation of believers, King contrasts the fatalistic view of mankind he associates with the post-reformation Protestant theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin with a very different anthropological view. If one accepts the belief that human beings are inherently evil, corrupted by original sin, then the Black community is facing a “hard road” ahead, according to King, opposed on every front by White racists whose clouded minds and depraved natures prevent them from doing what's morally right. One struggle leads, inevitably, to the next, from this perspective, because, subject to original sin, people lack free will and the capacity to reason, enslaved, as it were, to a sinful nature but also to a racist ideology.

King's view, by contrast, is optimistic. Every person, he argued, is an image-bearer who is endowed with the God-given freedom to choose good over evil, so racism, King thought, can be effectively rectified with the right steps. King states in the film that the denial of Black voting rights, segregation, and the bus boycotts can be linked to a single problem, which itself can be resolved once and for all by raising the consciousness of White Americans who, when faced with the truth of human equality, will be forced to recognize that every person, regardless of race, is created in God's image. The campaign for equal voting rights, King explains, is therefore “one effort,” not only for Black Americans but for “Our life as a nation.” To recognize the dignity and worth of human life, for King, is to acknowledge univocal truth in a universe structured by a rational, benevolent God. As King states upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in the opening sequence of the film, “I accept this honor for the more than twenty million American negroes who are motivated by dignity. Together we believe that what the

illusion of supremacy has destroyed the truth of equality can nourish.” King claims, unequivocally, that White supremacy is an illusion. The truth—universal, unchanging, and eternal—is that all people are created equal, their intrinsic, metaphysical value rooted in God's own image.

The sermon continues and King references the four young Black girls who, early in the film, are murdered in a racially-motivated bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. King explains to the congregation in Selma that the girls “are the sainted ones in this quest for freedom,” and that, like all other Black Americans who die in the struggle for equal rights, they “speak to us” from beyond the grave. “They say to us,” King continues, “that it is unacceptable for more than fifty percent of Selma to be Negro and yet less than two percent of Negroes here being able to vote and determine their own destiny as human beings. They say to us that the local White leadership use their power to keep us away from the ballot box and keep us voiceless.” DuVernay makes use of this scene by establishing a relationship between voting rights and the image of God, conflating the right to vote with the ability to “determine their own destiny as human beings”—a statement that resonates politically but, in a more profound way, theologically. To be denied voting rights is to be rendered voiceless, King argues, subjected to violence and robbed of the God-given capacity to self-determine. Voting rights, therefore, take on emblematic significance in the film, the legal recognition of Black equality indicating, in King's mind, the theological recognition of their value as image-bearers. “As long as I am unable to exercise my constitutional right to vote, I do not have command of my own life, I cannot determine my own destiny,” King proclaims to the congregation; “Those that have gone before say no more, no more. That means protest, that means disturb the peace, that means jail, that means risk, and that is hard. We will not wait any longer. Give us the vote!” The congregation chants the command back to King, indicating their enthusiastic agreement with what may rightly be called a theology of voting rights. To vote, the reverend argues, is to exercise control over one's own destiny, a capacity for self-determination that, historically, King attributed to the image of God. The church expresses their commitment to the issue, even though it

means subjecting themselves to physical harm and possibly death. One may convincingly argue, in light of this, that their urgency is fueled not only by a desire to legally combat racist crimes but by a theological impulse to reclaim the image of God.

Meeting again with President Johnson, King announces the SCLC's decision to “march from Selma to Montgomery to protest and amplify,” in a public arena, the racist crimes committed against the Black community. Johnson grows agitated with King and quickly rejoins, “This was always part of the plan, wasn't it? Provoke some tragedy in little ol' Selma and then go big. Get someone killed and march on the state capitol. . . . You march those people into rural Alabama, unprotected, it's gonna be open season. It's too damn far and too damn dangerous.” At this, King interjects by urging Johnson to propose new legislation, but Johnson refuses. “We need your involvement here,” King persists, “We deserve your help as citizens of this country, citizens under attack.” King appeals to the legal rights afforded to U.S. citizens, but these rights, as outlined by the Declaration of Independence and reiterated by King in his famous “I have a Dream” speech, are themselves rooted in the theological belief that God created everyone as equals. “You listen to me,” Johnson replies, “You're an activist; I'm a politician. You got one big issue; I've got a hundred and one. Now, you demanding more and putting me on the spot with this visit—that's okay. That's your job. That's what you do. But I am sick and tired of you demanding and telling me what I can and can't do.” The statement is overtly ironic—Johnson criticizing King for impinging upon his agency while the Black community actively fights for their own agency in the form of voting rights. Like all Whites, Johnson *does* have the power to self-determine, as DuVernay emphasizes time and again, though he consistently chooses his political interests over what's morally right. “Meet me halfway on this, Martin,” Johnson says, to which King replies, “I can't, Mr. President.” “Can't or won't?” Johnson asks, and here DuVernay makes the contrast between King and Johnson explicit. It isn't that King is merely unwilling to meet Johnson halfway; it's that King has no choice in the matter. Unlike Johnson, who can choose to advance or delay the movement on legal grounds, King

and other Black Americans are not free to exercise the political agency that comes with the right to vote. “I came here,” King explains, “hoping to talk to you about people. People are dying in the street for this. It cannot wait.”

DuVernay reinforces this point later in the film when a White clergyman, Reverend Reeve, is killed after the second round of Selma marches. Johnson phones King to complain about people using the White House tour as a protesting opportunity, urging King to “stop them.” The implication, again, is that King can exercise political agency (which he certainly does in his refusal to intercede and stop the protesters) but, as King sees it, he has no choice in the matter because the government still refuses to acknowledge Black equality. If anyone has the power to stop the protesters, King suggests, it's those who exercise political agency through voting. Until African Americans can cast their votes, they remain subhuman in the eyes of the state, dispossessed of God's image. “No, *you* can stop them. You, sir, can do more,” King objects, deferring responsibility from himself to Johnson and, by extension, all White people, who, unlike King and his Black compatriots, have voting rights and can, therefore, exercise free choice in a political setting. “I'm glad to hear that you called reverend Reeve's widow,” King continues; “I only wish that Jimmie Lee Jackson's family would have received the same consideration from their president.” Earlier in the film, Jackson is shot and killed by an Alabama State Trooper while trying to protect his mother and grandfather during a rally. Johnson shows more empathy to the White family than he does to the Black family, and King uses the opportunity to point out the racist ideology informing Johnson's political decisions. The president claims that King, not himself, is responsible for the young man's death because he “cho[se] to send people out,” knowing it could result in violence. King, however, remaining consistent in his theological views, replies that “We will continue to demonstrate until *you* take action, sir. And if our president won't protect our rights, we will take this fight to court.” Again, King defers responsibility from himself to Johnson, emphasizing that he and other Black Americans have been deprived of free will, or the capacity to self-determine, their voting rights systematically denied by



a racist government. The right to vote, King emphasizes, means the freedom to choose your own destiny. The question of who is culpable—King or President Johnson—and King's insistence that Johnson, not himself, has the capacity to choose, establishes a link between voting rights and King's theological anthropology. The right to vote is emblematic of free will, or self-determination, which King saw as fundamental to humanity's role as image-bearers.

As the previous analysis helped to demonstrate, DuVernay establishes a link between voting rights and the image of God. Perhaps drawing on her understanding of King's theological anthropology, she stresses that, for Black Americans in the South, the right to vote during the 1960s was more or less commensurate with self-determination, or the ability to act against the deterministic forces of a prejudiced legal system. In the film, King states that “[a]s long as I am unable to exercise my constitutional right to vote, I do not have command of my own life, I cannot determine my own destiny.” The statement has obvious theological resonances. It is not simply that Black Americans need voting rights in order to legally combat racially-motivated crimes; it's that, without voting rights, Black Americans have no command over their destinies, which, along with the capacity to reason, was integral to King's understanding of human dignity and the image of God. As his dealings with President Johnson make clear, King believes that the president and all White people can recognize, on rational grounds, that racial discrimination is morally wrong. Because humans are intrinsically good and created by a benevolent God, King believed that all people, even the most bigoted of racists, were capable of doing the right thing. As image-bearers, they retained the freedom to disobey God, but only by closing their eyes to self-evident metaphysical truths. Indeed, King believed that, when presented with the truth of human equality and the dehumanizing effects of racial discrimination, even White supremacists were likely to do the right thing. As King wrote in an essay for one of his graduate courses at Boston University, “Does man ever become so corrupt and wicked that he can have no conception of the good? I think not. It seems to be that no matter how low an individual sinks in sin, there is still a spark of good within

him.”<sup>28</sup> By this same logic, one could argue that, for King, even the most close-minded, ideologically-entrenched racists are able to recognize the intrinsic dignity of all people and make the right moral decisions.

Though admirably optimistic for a man who was all-too-familiar with longstanding racial bigotry, King's belief in human free will and the capacity to reason does not come without its problems, from the standpoint of current race theory. King's distaste for the post-reformation Protestant theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin was due to their compatibilist belief that human volition is the natural outworking of deterministic forces. In their view, humankind was corrupted by original sin and, for this reason, people were unable to attain a salvific faith in God without divine intervention. The faithful were predestined for salvation by a sovereign God who intervenes in the lives of the elect to transform their sinful natures, though forgiveness, in their accounts, was, paradoxically, offered to anyone willing to receive it. But this dialectical union of determinism and free will was, as before, nonsensical to King. If mankind was captive to a sinful nature and, therefore, unable to choose God of its own accord, then people could not be held morally responsible for their sins. “We must believe that man has the power of choosing his supreme end,” King once wrote; “He can choose the low road or the high road. He can be true or false to his nature.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, for King and other free-will theologians, in order to retain moral culpability, the will must be self-originating, the uncaused cause of its own origin. If we argue, as Luther and Calvin did, that the will is moved by sinful desires which, themselves, are produced by a sinful nature, then people do not have the option to choose otherwise and, for this reason, they should not be held morally responsible for their decisions, regardless of the consequences.

Not surprisingly, King's neo-orthodox beliefs, in this regard, are in conflict with the political and intellectual strategies of today's academic left, particularly the tendency among critical race theorists to deconstruct essentialist depictions of racial difference, as well as the hierarchical binaries upon which institutionalized White supremacy is thought to depend. In his 2005 “Race and Revisability,” Richard A.

Jones summarizes the prevailing constructivist, or poststructural, stance. He writes that the “dissolution of absolute dichotomy renders race a tool—a tool in a language game, or a tool for achieving viable forms of life—that is infinitely revisable as the dynamic relationships (processes) between frameworks (or environments) and agents (or organisms) evolve over time.”<sup>30</sup> The potential for revision naturally accompanies a constructivist view of identity but, as Jones rightly points out, “race as a linguistic concept can be seen diachronically as having been a tool for domination and subordination in ‘master/slave’ scripts.”<sup>31</sup> While the construction of race may be “infinitely revisable,” as Jones contends, it should also be understood that, under a poststructuralist model of what Jones refers to as, “Foucauldian micropower,” all such revisions are always already informed by ideology, predetermined by the shifting discursive networks that alter how a subject’s volition and perception of the world are variously constructed. The prevailing constructivist view of race and the post-Reformation Protestant theology of Luther and Calvin therefore share a compatibilist model of freedom, where volition is the natural outworking of deterministic forces. Though the latter adheres to an essentialist conception of human identity, where evil actions are motivated by and result from evil desires, the cause-effect relationship between subjecthood and volition also characterizes the deterministic model of Foucauldian biopower advanced by many, if not most, of today’s critical race theorists and, for that matter, anyone working under the auspices of poststructural theory and an Althusserian model of subject formation. The incompatibilist freedom so important to King’s conception of the divine image is not only inconsistent with popular academic models of subject formation and human agency but also depends on the ontological autonomy of a self-originating, self-directed will. That race is “a sociohistorical convention that can be eliminated by the construction of a counter consciousness,” as Jones describes, may certainly be true, but how one reaches this counter consciousness, under a constructivist model of freedom, will always result from the discursive shifts in ideology that inform and ultimately determine the subject’s choices.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, if one accepts the argument that Black Americans are interpellated, in Althusserian terms, under a racist ideology, where race is constructed under the organizing forces of institutionalized White supremacy, then one must also accept the argument that White racists are subject to the same discursive forces, constructed to enact the prejudices of an ideological worldview. Thus, there is clear overlap between a constructivist view of racism and a theological view of original sin; just as totally depraved beings enact the desires of their sinful natures, so too, those interpellated by a racist ideology enact the logic of White supremacy. If one concedes, for example, that Black Americans have an internalized sense of racial and cultural inferiority as a result of their socialization, then one must also accept the argument that racial prejudice is not the result of self-originating choices but the natural outworking of discursively-produced subjectivities conditioned to act within the ideological strictures that constitute their being. Breaking free from a racist worldview and effectively *changing one's mind* is, therefore, not the result of rational free choice, as King postulated, but the result of shifting ideological forces—a view that King would no doubt disagree with because, in his mind, it excuses sinful behavior and, worse, it deprives people of their free will. Thus, the notion of constructed volition, or of ideologically-conditioned choices, is incompatible with King's sense of moral responsibility. Unless White racists are able to deduce the truth of Black equality on rational grounds—which itself is not the constructed logic of an egalitarian ideology but a God-given capacity to accurately parse out the metaphysical truths of the universe—then they cannot be held morally responsible for their racist crimes. As the previous analysis shows, King shifts responsibility from himself to Johnson because the Black community, dispossessed of God's image, has no choice in the matter and is, therefore, not culpable for inciting violence in their fight for equal rights. But if Johnson has no choice—constructed, we might say, to act within the cultural logic of a racist ideology—then there is little hope for self-directed political change. Such change, King opined, is only made possible by rational free choice, which, autonomous and self-originating, would no doubt transcend, in King's view, the discursive reach of ideology.

Therefore, it was King's optimism rooted in his theological anthropology that led to his belief in the efficacy of non-violent resistance. When faced with the moral degradation of racially-motivated crimes, people would likely come to their senses and do the right thing, despite being socialized under a racist ideology. According to Burrow, King “possessed a general optimism and trust that people of any race are at least *capable* of doing the right thing; *capable* of making themselves worthy of being trusted.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, King organized and staged public protests in order to raise the consciousness of political leaders and fellow citizens. Non-violent resistance, he thought, tacitly presents a moral argument, so the SCLC advanced their political project in an attempt to persuade the masses and garner support. As King himself wrote in another student essay during his enrollment at Boston University:

[W]e must reject Luther's and Calvin's view that man is incapable of performing any saving good, and that man can do nothing to save himself. Certainly we must agree that the image of God is terribly scarred in man, but not to the degree that man cannot move toward God. As seen in the life and teachings of Jesus, humanity remains conscious of its humble dependence upon God, as the source of all being and all goodness. “There is none good save one, even God.” Yet in dealing with even the worst of men, Christ constantly made appeal to a hidden goodness in their nature. We must somehow believe that the lives of men are changed when the potential good in man is believed in particularly, and when the potential bad in man is sought to be overwhelmed.<sup>34</sup>

That King thought “even the worst of men” were capable of reform indicates his optimistic faith in non-violent resistance. If enough people could be reached, he reasoned, more minds could be changed and the social landscape transformed. “To hope for such dramatic social change,” Wills writes, “would have been thought futile apart from a belief that the human will could be altered given the proper appeal. In fact, more than futile, a hope that placed the lives of others in harm's way without the assurance of change could have been considered reckless”—an accusation that King often faced.<sup>35</sup> But King believed in the

potential good of mankind, and the SCLC deployed non-violent resistance under the assumption that God created all people as rational decision-makers, inclined toward the good and endowed with his divine image.

Important to note, however, is that while King shared many of the same beliefs generally advanced by secular humanism—namely, a belief in the intrinsic value of human life and a person's capacity to make rational free choices—he did not believe that social progress could be accomplished apart from God. God's moral character pervades the universe, King argued, giving it rational order and metaphysical structure, so when people arrive, empirically, at objective truth it is not on the basis of natural law, separated from its metaphysical origins, but the result of stepping closer to the divine and a salvific faith in God. For King, social progress was, perforce, spiritual in nature, so secular movements like liberal humanism were doomed to fail if they were not themselves working in conjunction with the divine. At the same time, however, King did not adhere to a classical view of divine omnipotence. A self-sufficient God, King argued, does not need humankind to achieve his divine purposes in the world. In other words, humanity was created out of necessity. Therefore, the telos, or eschaton, of creation can only come about through a cooperative effort between God and mankind. Thus, King believed that humanity has a major role to play in the struggle for human dignity, which is why voting rights and Black self-determination was such an integral part of his political project. King said that “both man and God, made one in a marvelous unity of purpose through an overwhelming love . . . on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man, can transform the old into the new and drive out the deadly cancer of sin.”<sup>36</sup> But, without voting rights, Black Americans could not actively take part in transforming the world. Political change, King argued, requires a cooperative effort, not only between different races but between humanity and God himself.

In DuVernay's film, the SCLC organizes a march on the Dallas County Courthouse—what King calls “a citadel defended by fanatics”—and, after sheriff Jim Clark and his officers physically abuse a

number of Selma's Black citizens, King and other members of the SCLC are incarcerated for causing a disturbance. Subsequently, Governor George Wallace gives a public address. "I stand here today in the cradle of Confederacy to remind its people of our founding fathers's goals of duty," Wallace states, "goals long since forgotten by progressives and liberals in favor of, what they call, a changing world. They seek to make us one mongrel unit instead of allowing each race to flourish from its separate racial station, as has been the standard for generations now." That George Wallace and, presumably, many White southerners oppose Black voting rights on the grounds of White supremacy indicates, in my reading, their socialization under a racist ideology. Wallace refers to the longstanding traditions of the Confederacy and ensures his fellow White citizens that he will fight to conserve the status quo, not on the grounds of reason and self-originating free choice but on the grounds of tradition—what he calls the "cradle of Confederacy," the ideological "standard" of previous generations. But socialization is no excuse, for King, who believes in humanity's intrinsic, God-given ability to self-determine, contra the social construction of moral character. If King believed that non-violent resistance was incapable of swaying public opinion through an appeal to rational free choice, he would not have subjected himself and other Black Americans to physical abuse that sometimes resulted in death.

DuVernay underscores this point in the scenes leading up to the SCLC's first demonstration at the Dallas County Courthouse. Before meeting with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) with whom the SCLC would organize their demonstrations, King is questioned by a reporter from the New York Times. "Dr King," the reporter says, "Are you truly non-violent if you're provoking violence, sir?" King responds by emphasizing the public nature of non-violent resistance: "We are here using our very bodies to protest and say to those who deny us that we will no longer let them use their billy clubs in dark corners and halls of power. We'll make them do it in the glaring light of day." King's strategy is to make public the racial discrimination and physical abuse carried out against them by government employees and officials. By drawing attention to their unjust crimes, King believes he can

sway public opinion, appealing to White America's God-given capacity, as image-bearers, to choose what's morally right. Addressing the leaders of the SNCC, King states:

We all understand that you young people believe in working in the community long term, doing the good work to raise Black consciousness. It's good grassroots work. I can't tell you how much we admire that. But what we do is negotiate, demonstrate, resist. And a big part of that is raising White consciousness, and, in particular, whatever White man happens to be sitting in the Oval Office. Right now, Johnson has other fish to fry and he'll ignore us if he can. The only way to stop him from doing that is by being on the front page of the national press every morning, by being on the TV news every night, and that requires drama.

Again, King emphasizes the public nature of their demonstrations, explaining to the SNCC that non-violent resistance is meant to raise White consciousness, not Black consciousness, because, unlike Black Americans whose voting rights are routinely denied by a racist judicial system, White Americans have the right to vote and, with it, the power to introduce new legislation. Raising Black consciousness, King explains, is “good grassroots work,” but it does no good for Black Americans who, dispossessed of God's image, lack the capacity to decide their own future. What King is targeting—and what DuVernay brings to the fore by staging a conflict between King and President Johnson—is White America's capacity to make rational, empathetic decisions, which the SCLC's non-violent demonstrations succeed in prompting. After the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, King states in a public interview that “no citizen in this country can count themselves blameless, for we all bear a responsibility for our fellow men. I am appealing to men and women of God and goodwill everywhere. . . . If you believe all are created equal, come to Selma. . . . Join our march against injustice and inhumanity.” King's vision is not of Black Americans reclaiming the image of God through militant action or autonomous, self-determination, but of White Americans acting in cooperation with divine truth to restore, in a legal milieu, Black America's



God-given right to command their own destinies. When President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act at the end of the film, the depiction is of a man swayed by reason who, endowed with God's image, exercises autonomous free choice to do what's morally right.

Therefore, moral responsibility resides with those in power, not with those who have been rendered voiceless—a point that DuVernay emphasizes throughout the film. From a legal standpoint, Black Americans are not equal citizens if they do not have the right to vote, and, as such, they cannot legally practice political agency as long as their voting rights are denied, though it is undoubtedly the efforts of Black protestors that initiate important changes in federal legislation. DuVernay's characterization of President Johnson may, in fact, revise a master narrative of U.S. history but, in my reading, her (mis)representations of the past exhibit political value. Because the final decision comes down to Johnson, DuVernay utilizes the conflict between King and the thirty-sixth president to foreground the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of the Civil Rights Movement. *Selma's* depiction of Johnson is instrumental to DuVernay's portrayal of King's theological anthropology in that it emphasizes the power of rational free choice. That God endowed all of humanity with his divine image, equipping them with free will and the capacity to reason, was, for King, motivation to repeatedly put Black lives at risk. After all, it is King's optimism, rooted in his belief in the image of God, that eventually reinstates, in a legal milieu, Black political agency and the power of self-determination. The political value of DuVernay's film, then, lies not in its historical accuracy which multiple reviewers have hotly contested but in its optimistic portrayal of human potential, which DuVernay locates in a theology of voting rights and, more specifically, the image of God.

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- <sup>1</sup> *Selma*. Dir. Ava DuVernay. Perf. David Oyelowo, Tom Wilkinson, Carmen Ejogo, Oprah Winfrey. Paramount Pictures, 2014. All *Selma* quotations come from this work.
  - <sup>2</sup> Joseph Califano, Jr., “The movie ‘Selma’ has a glaring flaw,” *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2014, [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-movie-selma-has-a-glaring-historical-inaccuracy/2014/12/26/70ad3ea2-8aa4-11e4-a085-34e9b9f09a58\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-movie-selma-has-a-glaring-historical-inaccuracy/2014/12/26/70ad3ea2-8aa4-11e4-a085-34e9b9f09a58_story.html).
  - <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>4</sup> Mark Updegrave, “What ‘Selma’ Gets Wrong,” *Politico Magazine*, December 22, 2014, [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/12/what-selma-gets-wrong-113743](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/12/what-selma-gets-wrong-113743).
  - <sup>5</sup> A.O. Scott, “A 50-Mile March Nearly 50 Years Later,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/arts/in-selma-king-is-just-one-of-the-heroes.html?referrer=google\\_kp&r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/arts/in-selma-king-is-just-one-of-the-heroes.html?referrer=google_kp&r=0).
  - <sup>6</sup> Mark Kermode, “Selma review—heartbreaking and inspiring,” *The Guardian*, February 8, 2015, [www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/08/selma-observer-film-review](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/feb/08/selma-observer-film-review).
  - <sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” *The Norton Reader 13<sup>th</sup> Edition*, ed. Linda H. Peterson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 821-822.
  - <sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 190.
  - <sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hanah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.), 261.
  - <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.
  - <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.
  - <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>13</sup> Barack Obama, “President Obama Delivers Keynote Address at Civil Rights Summit 2014,” *YouTube* video, 30:44, April 10, 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIj3nMhDjHA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIj3nMhDjHA).
  - <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 118-119.
  - <sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Muller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1781), 648-649.
  - <sup>17</sup> Burrow, Jr., *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2014), 23.
  - <sup>18</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “How Modern Christians Should Think of Man,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr* (Oakland: UC Press, 1997), 1:277.
  - <sup>19</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, S.J. and Daniel J. Honan (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of American Press, 1954), 417.
  - <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>21</sup> Richard Wayne Wills, Sr., *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 65-66.

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- <sup>22</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Oakland: UC Press, 1997), 2:274.
- <sup>23</sup> Wills, Sr., *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God*, 68.
- <sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), 275.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.
- <sup>26</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, eds. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 96.
- <sup>27</sup> Wills, Sr., *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God*, 73.
- <sup>28</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Notecards on Books of the Old Testament,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Oakland: UC Press, 1997), 2:166.
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- <sup>30</sup> Richard A. Jones, “Race and Revisability,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35.5 (2005), 628.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.
- <sup>33</sup> Burrow, Jr., *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance*, 25.
- <sup>34</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Comparison and Evaluation of the Theology of Luther with That of Calvin,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Oakland: UC Press, 1997), 2:190.
- <sup>35</sup> Wills, Jr., *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God*, 104.
- <sup>36</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Answer to a Perplexing Question,” *Strength to Love* (Cleveland: Collins-World, 1977), 124.

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