

## INTRODUCTION

The XXth century has been defined both by the greatest achievements in technological, economic and health areas, as well as by the most devastating wars in which millions of people have lost their lives, sometimes in behalf of democratic principles, but, unfortunately, mostly due to ethnic, religious, economic and military national interests. This century's technological progress has enabled men to reach the stars, but it has also confronted world leaders with the possibility of mankind's destruction, by nuclear weapons or ecological breakdown.

Furthermore, the XXth century was one of previously inconceivable human controversy. While there were millions living in the worst human conditions in third-world countries, there was more than one economic power that spent millions of dollars in increasing military power, instead of contributing to a worldwide economic progress. While there were thousands killed for a religious or an ideological cause, world powers remained submerged in religious and ethnic discrimination. While there were people who had a well-defined national identity, others were still searching for their national soul. While there were millions willing to kill for their nation, there were a few men who sacrificed their lives for the sake of mankind.

The XXth century also witnessed the rise of the United States to world hegemony, based on the misconception of its Manifest Destiny. Since its creation in 1776, this nation has presented an international image of promoter of the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, such as democracy, freedom, tolerance and equality, among others. The United States had taken part in the most devastating world wars and has invaded several nations in order to overthrow "military" dictators as well as Communist-supported regimes. It seems as if the United States has been loyal to its mission as God's chosen land, for it has believed itself to have made the world free for democracy, as most American presidents have proclaimed. Looking back through XXth century American history, it seems as if the United States deserves to be honored as the world leader, after having defeated Hitler's army during World War II; having forced the Japanese to surrender by dropping two atomic bombs on their soil; having stopped the Communist expansion in Southeast Asia, Africa and Southern America, by supporting mercenary forces that killed thousands of innocent lives; and, of course,

after having buried the Soviet Union, its most dangerous enemy. The United States is a great power, for it has exported its democracy to the world, on Maquiavelli's premise, "the ends justify the means."

The United States really has had major international achievements, for which we all should be grateful. After coming out of the self-imposed isolationism in the 1940s, Americans have experienced their country's fulfillment of the American Dream, for it has reached a level of economic development, industrialism and individual prosperity never seen before. Unfortunately, like the history of the XXth century, that of the United States is defined by the most devastating controversies. Some of them have already been overcome, but the ones related to race and welfare are still defining not only American politics, but the nation's identity and integrity.

Like the French and Russian Revolutions, the American Revolution helped to define the political ideology of modern times, because it ended the ruling of abusive monarchies, empowered people to control government, established the principle of democracy, and even proposed a society in which all people were equal before the law. It is an irrefutable fact that the Founding Fathers gave birth to a nation that for many others has become the political and ideological model to follow. Therefore, to be an American should be close to the greatest pride a person could feel. Unfortunately, this pride has been overshadowed by the way not only the American government, but Americans themselves, have assumed, implemented and portrayed the principles to which they feel deeply related.

History has shown us that being American doesn't necessarily mean acting according to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, for a misguided interpretation of American ideals has damaged not only the American identity, but also the American Creed. In a country known for its principle of freedom, men were forced to live in slavery; in a country known for its principle of equality, there were men living in segregation and disfranchisement, and still suffering from discrimination; in a country known for its pursuit of prosperity, millions still live under the minimum wage standards; in a country known for its principle of democracy, there still are members of ethnic minorities without any political representation and protection of the law; in a country known for its principle of tolerance, certain men are still committed to white supremacy; in a country known for its freedom of spirit, there

still are men who believe in the fallacy of race; and in a country known for its freedom of speech, one great American was killed for raising his voice against a corrupted America.

The emergence of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Montgomery bus boycott was neither a coincidence nor an isolated event in American history, but he became the ultimate and catalytic factor in the redefinition of America as a principle, as a nation, as a people, and as a member of the world community. Ever since his first public appearance, King was able to capture the nation's attention, due to his presence, his controversial philosophy and methods, his oratorical skills, his commitment to the cause, his radical religiosity, but especially due to his fervent faith in God's will. Being constantly in the eye of the hurricane not only brought him great achievements but also important defeats. President Kennedy was the most praised American politician of the second half of the XXth century, but King was, by far, the most important civil leader of the XXth century, because, among other achievements, he helped to destroy the myth of white supremacy in America and was able to challenge a nation's identity for the benefit of its survival. He was a great black leader because he was "*the man who introduced intellectual dynamism to the Negroes, who has transcribed Hegel's philosophy of strength through struggle, harmony out of pain, in terms of the Negro's new awareness.*"<sup>1</sup> He was a great American leader due to his courage, and he remains a great universal icon for his faith. One expression of King's immense faith is in his statement: "*...this is for hope of the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow with a cosmic past tense, 'We have overcome, we have overcome, deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome.'*"<sup>2</sup>

The main purpose of this work is to present the reasons why King has become, against all odds, the latest all-American symbol, an elemental part of the American myth - one who, with his life commitment and teachings, inspired and urged the redefinition of the entire concept of America, as well as of her principles and of her people. It is irrefutable that King was a great black preacher, a symbol of his people's struggle for the civil rights, and a great American spiritual and ideological leader who contributed to the improvement of the American democratic system. According to Hanes Walton, King deserves to be considered "*more than the principal leader, catalyst, architect and prophet of the black revolution; he was a chief theorist and*

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Lewis, *Portrait of a Decade: The Second American Revolution* (NY: The New York Times, 1964), 82.

<sup>2</sup> James M. Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 178.

*interpreter as well, and his social and political philosophy was built on the solid rock of the existential character of the American liberal, humanistic, idealistic and democratic tradition with its capacity for growth, renewal, and extension to the new world of higher possibilities and more inclusive realities.*"<sup>3</sup> But, for long time, his greatness was not integrated as an undeniable part of American Civil Religion, for he wasn't a white American and could be neither given a national holiday nor elevated to the place where Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln are in the American collective mind.

King, a man ahead of his time, knew about America's deep wound that was making her fundamentals fall apart. Despite the perception of America as a well-defined and integrated nation, it is now confronted with a great danger of fragmentation, due to the lack of a political vision that could redefine the American identity and integrate absolutely all ethnic groups that form this nation. The nation isn't any longer one of only European immigrants and black slaves. King realized that integration, not the white supremacy's segregation or the Black Nationalism's separatism, was the real cure to the American Dilemma. Fearless as he was, he went even further, as he affirmed that integration had to take place first in the American collective mind in order to be successful in the legal system. Unless the American sense of identity was changed, white Americans couldn't see their black, Asian or Latino fellow Americans as one multicultural people.

King was a committed religious man, deeply convinced that Christ's social gospel shouldn't remain a utopian vision of the world, but must be applied to America in order to reduce the infinite gap between wealth and poverty. He was a man of a great commitment to the oppressed: first to the Southern blacks, later to the Northern blacks and poor people, finally to all people all over the world who suffer any kind of oppression. In the mid 1960s, he even opposed the Vietnam War, because "*he was a profound pacifist and proponent of non-violence and because he was a great spiritual leader.*"<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Hanes Waltson Jr., *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972), XXII.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *I May not Get there with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: The Free Press, 2000), 52.

I chose the School of Myths and Symbols within the theoretical frame of American Studies to support my proposal, for it has presented how the essence of American culture and American identity could be culled by reading representative great individual works of the American imagination. This approach, which is explained in Chapter I, enables a better understanding of the way Americans look at their nation and how they identify with the symbols that have become a sacred part of the American identity, for there are two myths that represent much of the utopian vision Americans have about their country. In Bruce Kuklick's opinion, the unique role of the imaginative literature is to portray the culture's *Zeitgeist*, for "*the myth symbol group offers a schema which is to explain the behavior of Americans throughout our history.*"<sup>5</sup>

First, the myth of the garden portrays America as the virgin land of an agrarian society, devoted to the principles expressed by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, as well as the land of infinite possibilities, in which any person is able to reach the American Dream. Second, the myth of the machine represents the other great symbol of the American identity: modernism and industrialism. As we can see, both myths defined the close relation between American principles and capitalist dogmas as fundamentals of the American nation. Furthermore, I had a deeper look into American Civil Religion, which is the collection of the major symbols that embody American values and determine American identity, in order to define the importance and the impact of King on the American collective mind, for King not only challenged American Civil Religion, as he urged its renewal, but also became part of it. King's national holiday is the ultimate expression of his influence on the renewed American collective mind in behalf of a new kind of identity, based on the utopian vision of the myth of the machine in the garden, but with a greater approach to a multiracial and multicultural America.

King couldn't have had such an influence on the entire American society unless he was completely committed to the struggle of his people and racial integration. Therefore, in order to comprehend the magnitude of his relevance for achieving reconciliation between blacks and whites in America, I portray in Chapter II the history of African-Americans since their arrival to the New World, which gives us a better understanding of how fragmented, corrupted and racist American society was and how far it had betrayed the nation's principles and denied the black man his natural rights for the benefit of white supremacists. In Hanes Waltson's opinion, "*the*

---

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly* No. 24: 82.

*contradiction between racism and the country's democratic ideals and commitments has been radical, pervasive, and pathetic; the consequences have been tragic and far-reaching.*"<sup>6</sup> Along with the suffering of African-Americans, I decided to delve into the history of black protest, which definitely determined King's formation as a black leader. Finally, I do believe that the role of the federal government in the achievement of the civil rights is very important, not due to any extensive support and preoccupation for the black cause since the Emancipation Proclamation, but mainly for its having been forced to act at the moment a nation was falling apart.

King's universal symbolism can't be totally absorbed without knowing the philosophical theories and Christian teachings that inspired him to attempt to change, first, the perception of African-Americans of themselves within America; second, the perception of white Americans within an integrated and egalitarian society; third, the perception of an integrated America as the promoter of democracy and Christian love; and finally, the perception of the world as a beloved community. Chapter III, therefore, endeavors to provide a better understanding of King's philosophy of non-violence based on Christianity, Gandhian thought and Thoreau's civil disobedience.

Gandhi was a great leader that gave King the methodology for his social action, while Thoreau gave him the justification for opposing an unjust system, and Christianity intensified his faith in his calling as the man who was going to destroy some American myths, challenge others and create new ones, for "*myths perform the double function of serving both as models of and models for cultural attitudes and behaviors, because they are idealizations of social conditions.*"<sup>7</sup> King wanted to destroy the belief in white supremacy, the idea of segregation and the idea of racial discrimination in order to revitalize the myth of America as the land of democracy and equality. He knew that a myth had the function to give the status quo a justification with some level of historical sanctity, and he promoted the introduction of the myth of America as the beloved community with the purpose of explaining the origin of differences so that the needs of the group could be satisfied. By establishing a new heterogeneous myth of America, people of different races and religious creeds would start feeling a part of the American brotherhood.

---

<sup>6</sup> Waltson, *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, XIV.

<sup>7</sup> M. F. Ashley Montagu, *Man's most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1945), 4.

This chapter also presents how magnificently King managed to encourage a hopeless people, both whites and blacks, in order to communicate his teachings, and how he made the latter enter into the American spirit with such a strength that they became undefeatable. The successful induction of thousands into his philosophy of non-violence was only possible due to his religious background and his commitment to the word of his personalist God and the gospel of Christ, because the Black Church had always been considered by blacks as their main source of strength and faith in their long-lasting struggle.

Finally, Chapter IV presents King as the all-American symbol that created a new American myth, seen from three different perspectives: his martyrdom, his symbolism within American Civil Religion and his legacy. First, King is portrayed as a symbol of the old democratic tradition that is to be found in the creation of America. His life, his commitment and his achievements made him not only the symbol of the American Dream, but also of an integrated America. Second, King's unconditional faith in God and his fervent admiration for the life of Christ made him sacrifice himself for the sake of America. He is considered by many Americans the latest symbol of America's redemption or America's rebirth, as Lincoln was, as well as a symbol of the world's salvation, due to his opposition to unjust wars and his proposal of a social democracy based on Christ's social gospel. Finally, third, According to William Faulkner, "*human beings must obey an inherent moral necessity for the sake of their souls' tranquility.*"<sup>8</sup> King agreed with the idea that moral truths were inscribed in the human heart; therefore, he dedicated his life to make people understand that attitudes and beliefs should be changed in order to move forward, because a country that remains static is condemned to extinction. In this part of the chapter King is seen as the symbol of a new generation of Americans, for they are the ones who will decide whether they commit to King's cause or let America die.

This work is based on the analysis of books, and of articles in American and international magazines and newspapers, as well as on websites. Many books were found in the library of the Universidad de las Americas, Puebla, but mainly in the libraries of Harvard University, Boston University and of the US Congress. During my research, I had the incredible opportunity to visit Martin Luther King's hometown, Atlanta, Georgia, on several occasions, as well as Montgomery,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 126.

Alabama and other sites important in the King legacy. In Greenville and Charleston, South Carolina, I had the opportunity to talk to old people who let me feel the way their communities experienced the King years. The moment you get down from the plane in Atlanta's international airport, you are able to feel King's majestic presence all over, for he is the city's national hero. Nothing, however, compared to the experience of visiting the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Sweet Auburn, where King spent most of his childhood, and of spending several days in the Martin Luther King Center for Non-violent Social Change, where I not only had access to many articles of newspapers and magazines that have been written about King all over the world in the past 50 years, but also was able to interview some of the collaborators with King's wife, Coretta Scott King, who was not only King's greatest supporter, but is today the fiercest protector of his legacy. As she said once, I might repeat, "*I hope that this work will encourage people to further investigate the philosophy and methods of non-violence that Martin Luther King, Jr. embraced and applied in the Movement and that today remain our best hope for a more just, compassionate and peaceful world.*"<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, I do believe that Americans have a great opportunity to keep King's dream alive, and that perhaps, one day not so far away, after racism, intolerance, inequality and discrimination are definitely overcome, America will get a new identity, based on a new culture of racial integration, tolerance, real democracy, equality, welfare and faith. Only if Americans are able to realize that King's legacy is an invitation to redefinition and reinvention will America remain alive, with her old principles, but with a new identity.

---

<sup>9</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, VIII.