

# CHAPTER I

## AMERICA AS SYMBOL AND MYTH

### 1.1 THE SCHOOL OF MYTHS AND SYMBOLS

Men have always developed symbols that justify and reinforce people's dependence on a certain group, nation, or man's universality. Bruce Kuklick observes that "...*symbols and myths designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing: an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image.*"<sup>1</sup> A great part of universal literature, certainly including American literature, has created a series of figures that belong to the collective imagination in order to portray a subjective experience within a cultural framework. These figures are to be considered as symbols, which are quite different from facts, because the latter have a specific temporal location, while that former have a place in the mind. These symbols, even if seen as a personal experience, are transcendent and become "*cultural, not merely private and individual, images.*"<sup>2</sup> They have conceptual and cuotional associations that resonate in the collectivity.

A great part of the role of American literature in earlier centuries was to create a national integration through the literary images that represented the ideals to which all Americans, in a certain degree, feel called. The result of this enterprise was the creation of an American collective mind, which is, definitely, the consequence of the melting pot's heterogeneity. Despite its different layers, the American collective mind still is one single unity, due to the experiences that formed it, which are truly American, because they only occurred in the New World. Regardless of the ethnic or religious background, the American collective mind is to be found in any American, for it is "*the enduring form in our intellectual history with themes such as Puritanism, Individualism, Progress, Pragmatism, Transcendentalism, Liberalism, etc...*" and it is characterized by "*hope, innocence, and idealism within a world of boundless opportunity.*"<sup>3</sup> America is a country marked by diversity, which is doomed to fragmentation unless Americans are able to find a common group of thoughts and images that symbolize their unity. By using literary myths of the past, which were part of the democratic utopia, Americans have managed to

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<sup>1</sup> Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies", 438.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Nash Smith, "Can American Studies Develop a Method?" *American Quarterly* No. 9: 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*

overcome a deeper fragmentation, based on religion, ethnicity and culture. Such literature made “*no distinction between race and gender, and the entire American society was seen as one.*”<sup>4</sup> This kind of literature embodies the American Dream, envisioned by all Americans, regardless of their differences.

In order to overcome fragmentation, the School of Myths and Symbols, which had a greater impact on the American literary world in the 1960s and 1970s, had tried to present images of a shared and stable identity, based on the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine, both related to democracy and to the society as a whole. The representatives of this movement worked on the assumption that “*something like the essence of American culture could be culled by reading representative great individual works of the American imagination, though some move out of the canon into popular texts.*”<sup>5</sup> According to Alice Kessler Harris, this attempt by the School of Myths and Symbols intended to introduce a concept to Americans that “*this nation was to be based on a variety of identities from which one new identity would spring.*”<sup>6</sup> The different groups that formed America didn’t have to give up their identity, their cultural and religious background. They only had to accept to develop a new kind of homogenous identity for all groups as Americans, while keeping their individuality.

The School of Myths and Symbols was represented by a group of American intellectuals who tried to give Americans a unified sense of national identity by embodying the American collective mind in symbols like the farmer, the frontiersman, the engineer, the locomotive, or the bridge, among many others, giving Americans a closer relation to the fundamental meaning of America. The goal of this movement was based on the generalization of all Americans as “*a whole culture from inside literary texts*”<sup>7</sup> in order to reach intellectual abstractions of the American collective mind. According to the representatives of this movement, all Americans have a shared experience, the myth of Eden, which “*is indeed the central myth in all American experience.*”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem

<sup>5</sup>-----, *The School of Myth and Symbols*, Available in <http://www.wsu.edu/-amerstu/tm/myth.html>, Accessed 25 May, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies”, 439.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 478.

In this chapter, we will get a deeper look into the two myths that defined the American collective mind and the concept of America as a country with a God-given abundance of freedom, equality, democracy and progress. The images of America as a garden and as a machine are so deeply rooted in the American collective mind that they seem to be the most sacred representation of America; they have become the protectors of the belief in an American utopia. For Alan Trachtenberg, “*society needs utopias to provide a myth that might serve as an ideology to guide America in history,*”<sup>9</sup> while for Henry Nash Smith, “*the relation of images to historical events is always changing; images impose coherence on the data of experience and most important, images are never, of course, exact reproductions of the physical and social environment.*”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the introduction of such myths and symbols not only gave the American collective mind a vision of what America was, but also led Americans to what America should still become. Both the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine are fundamental and constructive parts of the American Civil Religion, which is the ultimate representation of America, and which “*at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people.*”<sup>11</sup>

### 1.1.1 SYMBOLS THAT DETERMINED THE AMERICAN MYTH

There has always been a necessity to create symbols in order to identify oneself with a religious, political, ethnic or social conviction and to create a closer bond between a person and a group. According to Alan Trachtenberg in *Brooklyn Bridge*, “*a symbol has its place in the mind, or in the collective imagination of Americans.*”<sup>12</sup> Americans have created a series of symbols and myths in order to secure national unification as well as a basis for any kind of American patriotism; these myths are representative of what America is about, its meaning, at all levels. The School of Myths and Symbols attempted to explain the importance of these myths for the American vision of itself and of the world. There are two main myths that defined America. The first is the myth of America as a garden or a Virgin Land, best defined by Leo Marx, Henry Nash

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 167.

<sup>10</sup> Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies”, 75.

<sup>11</sup> William G. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, ix.

Smith and Richard Hofstadter. This myth was created in the XVIIIth century and reached its idealization in combination with progress in the XIXth century. The second myth is of America as a machine, represented by Alan Trachtenberg and Henry Nash Smith. This myth became representative of the United States in the second half of the XIXth century, as this country moved toward hegemony.

Definitely, in order to understand the relevance of both the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine, not only for the place they have in the American collective mind and in the American Civil Religion, but also for King's symbolism within American society, it is necessary to approach the fundamentals of both myths. For the purpose of this study, the examination of both myths gives us a closer look at the way Americans created, glorified and perpetuated a myth in order to fulfill personal and collective expectations as well as to create a sense of national unity. As the vision of America as a Virgin Land or as a mighty machine in the garden have become fundamental parts of the American identity for the past centuries, the vision of King as a mythical unifying symbol has gained its place in modern American history as a pillar in the creation of a renewed American identity.

First of all, the myth of the garden turned America into a nation committed to very unique values, to which all American great men are committed to with the primary purpose of maintaining the American Dream. America was the land of the immense abundance due to infinite natural resources and vast land, in which all men were able to reach their own personal American Dream: freedom, equality and prosperity. King was a man who deeply believed in the idea of America as a Christian land of endless opportunities and reachable dreams, which wasn't far away from Thomas Jefferson's, Benjamin Franklin's and Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's vision of the new world as a Virgin Land. In both visions the common man is at the center of a new religiously based society, created by Puritans, who were confident that they were God's chosen people, the new Israel. This belief was also intensified by their continuous wandering in Europe, which was similar to the Jews' exodus from Egypt. Religious and political persecution influenced the new form of relation between the people and the government, quite different to former European governments because this one was created in order to protect the individual's freedom at all levels.

Along with other great Americans, King inherited the Puritans' faith, devotion to God's will and the irrevocable trust in providence. America had become a paradise, where a mild government promoted the individual property as well as freedom and equality, in contrast to Europe, where there was a real lack of freedom and a great exclusion from prosperity for most of the population. Crèvecoeur was one of the first to portray the differences between the oppression and exploitation of the European monarchies and the freedom and richness of the new colonies, as he described in *Letters from an American Farmer*: “..there Americans regained ancient dignity, and formed a race of cultivators; there everything is prosperous and flourishing.”<sup>13</sup> While, in Crèvecoeur's opinion, America represented freedom, dignity, equality, democracy, prosperity, opportunity, tolerance, equitable division of richness, and balance between nature and civilization, Europe was defined by tyranny, degradation, hierarchy, poverty, restriction, intolerance, excessive wealth in the hands of a small minority, overcivilization and artificiality.

In Crèvecoeur's vision, the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism turned America into the Middle Landscape, the ideal balance between civilization and nature, and its society represented the ideal balance between poor and rich, while its mild laws created the conditions of freedom, a man's natural right. For the first time, men who had lived under an almost tyrannical regime realized that freedom is key to prosperity, which is based on a good government, hard work and honesty. In America, wrote Crèvecoeur, “*your future success will depend entirely on your own conduct; if you are a sober man, as the certificate says, laborious and honest, there is no fear, but that you will do well.*”<sup>14</sup> The presentation of America as a free and egalitarian society became fundamental part of the American Dream; it supported the vision of America as a garden of abundance and of opportunity in which “*every man is a King in theory,*”<sup>15</sup> because men had the same rights to aspire for prosperity, regardless of their origins, religion or political conviction.

Regarding America as a Virgin Land, its inhabitants, influenced by the principles of freedom and equality, embraced the vision of a greater unified nation, one seen as “*a terrain of*

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<sup>13</sup> Albert E. Stone, ed., *Letters from an American Farmer and more Sketches of XVIIIth Century America* (NY: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1957), 37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1982), 153.

*rural peace and happiness,” and in Jefferson’s conviction “the American landscape was unspoiled and conducive to the nurture of moral sense.”*<sup>16</sup> At this point and according to the mythical vision of the garden, America became synonymous with redemption and salvation, as well as with an improved and justice-oriented government whose authorities urged Western expansion. While the myth of the garden perpetuated the idea of constant expansion of the American system of felicity to the rest of the world, the myth of the machine implied that expansion would be not only of ideals, but also of power and hegemony. By committing to the expansion of their own political and ideological system, America defined her own Manifest Destiny, one based on the American Dream.

Nearly all Americans, King included, have aspired to both the dream of freedom and equality and the garden of abundance. In contrast to an individualist majority, King belonged to a selective group of Americans who not only wanted to dream and live in the garden, but intended to make it a reality for all members of the American society. The belief of the uniqueness of the Virgin Land is the ultimate basis of American Civil Religion, because it comprehends the entire hope and desire of America being the Promised Land, the great agrarian republic whose yeoman farmer is, in Richard Hofstadter’s opinion, “*the incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy, happy human being.*”<sup>17</sup> The yeoman became through the American Revolution the symbol of a new nation, one blessed by God. A man lives in the middle state because he is “*the creature who occupies the middle link in the great chain of being, the point of transition between the lower and the higher animal and intellectual forms of being.*”<sup>18</sup> The yeoman farmer represents the best expression of connection between nature and society, for he was taught the necessity to respect and protect nature in order to create a prosperous society.

That part of American history enabled the emergence of the yeoman farmer and of popular images such as Daniel Boone, Leatherstocking, the fur trapper, the Mountain Man, etc..., which became symbols of that period and represented the common man, the one able to live in harmony with nature and society. Their symbolism in the American collective mind implied the

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<sup>16</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* ( NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), 142.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryant to Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*, 100.

importance of freedom as the one absolute necessity of existence as well as the adoption of the Jeffersonian ideal that “*the people of the United States will remain virtuous as long as they are primarily agricultural, and this will be the case while vacant lands are available in any part of America.*”<sup>19</sup> As the westward expansion kept moving, the figures were changing, but all of them had in common the defense of freedom and equality and the pursuit of happiness.

At this point it is important to mention that those popular figures not only became representatives of their age, commonly portrayed in stories in newspapers, but they also symbolized the feeling of unending freedom, pursuit of democracy, real justice, religious tolerance, respect for the natural human rights and the creation of a better world for all later American generations. Like those popular figures, King shaped his own generation by promoting just the same values and principles, but within a multicultural and urban American society. By doing so, he kept not only the myth of the garden alive, but he also showed America a way to a better implementation of those principles. King was one of the leading figures of his age who has appeared constantly in almost every American newspaper from his first appearance in Montgomery, Alabama until the present day.

The garden was the most important myth of America during several decades after the American Revolution, but ultimately it had to share its supremacy with the myth of the machine. Both were combined to overcome the myth of the American desert during the westward expansion. The elevation of the machine to mythic status was only possible after the absolute culmination of the myth of the garden, with its implication that American moral and political life had achieved freedom, equality and democracy. The transition from the Jeffersonian ideal of the agrarian myth, embodied in the myth of the garden, into the myth of the machine wasn't an easy one, for the latter indicated that agriculture was secondary while the machine became the most important tool of progress. Any transition implies opposition and even rejection in the first stages, but in the end it might reach acceptance and even assimilation. Just as the defenders of the myth of the garden considered the introduction of the machine as a clear danger for the American values, the defenders of the status quo in the King years feared a destruction of their own concept of American society. None of them was able to envision the necessity of progress, not only at the technological, but mainly at the ideological level. A society is doomed to death unless it is able to

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (NY: Vintage Books, 1957), 241.

keep in constant progress, and the American society was in the 1960s in a long-lasting social and intellectual stagnation as well as ideological denial. Though at different times, the machine and King became catalysts of radical change in favor of an improved society.

The idea of a Mechanical Age made the machine the symbol of a new kind of culture controlled by technological progress. Alan Trachtenberg describes the machine as “*an autonomous, omnipresent human benefactor and a great emancipator of man from the bondage of labor.*”<sup>20</sup> The introduction of the locomotive, which became a symbol of progress and captured the public imagination in the second half of the XIXth century, transformed the relation between man and nature, and interrupted the idyll of America being a garden. The acceptance of the machine as part of national progress gave it a place in the garden. For Tench Coxe, a XIXth-century author, “*the machine is the instrument and not in itself the true source of America’s future power,*” and for Leo Marx, a XXth-century scholar, the machine can only be seen in the garden for “*the extraordinary abundance of land in America is what lend a unique significance to the machine.*”<sup>21</sup> According to both comments, the machine couldn’t have been so successful without the aid of the garden, which provided the former with a perfect environment for its development. The emerging mythology attributed the great progress reached by the United States in the second half of the XIXth century not only to the introduction of the machine, represented by the locomotive, but also to the garden, because “*the character of the American Empire was defined by not by streams of influence out of the past, not by a cultural tradition, nor by its palace in a world community, but by a relation between man and nature – or rather, even more narrowly, between American man and the American West.*”<sup>22</sup> The step from an agricultural to a mechanical society was the change from the farmer to the engineer as the symbol of an age. Once again, King, like the farmer and the engineer, was the symbol of his age, but also the unifying bridge between a predominantly European American society and a multicultural American society.

Not only the locomotive but also Brooklyn Bridge became the symbols of progress and technology, which broke down regional barriers and equalized the condition of men. Unfortunately, the utopian idea of equality, part of the myth of the garden, although reached

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<sup>20</sup> Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*, 155.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 217.

during the Golden Age vanished during the Mechanical Age, because “*the vision of middle class paradise, based on Protestant virtue*” disappeared, while there was a greater “*polarization of rich and poor.*”<sup>23</sup> While the myth of the garden symbolized equality and the myth of the machine symbolized progress, the modernization brought by the locomotive and the building of bridges intensified the contradiction between wealth and poverty within American society, because “*social intelligence had not kept pace with technological intelligence.*”<sup>24</sup>

According to Henry Nash Smith, this change in society meant that “*the steam engine not only subordinated the yeoman farmer to the banker and merchant of the new Western cities, but it eventually transformed him into a producer of staple crops for distant markets and thus placed him at the mercy of freight rates and of fluctuations in international commodity prices.*”<sup>25</sup> The locomotive became the ultimate symbol of mechanization and of economic and political change. Even if the introduction of the machine symbolized progress and the ideal of abundance for all, there were soon economic disparities among men. The emerging capitalism transformed much of the ideals of the myth of the garden, because in a capitalistic system, the citizen, conceived as the farmer yeoman, lost influence in the political system, which was subordinated to industry and the engineers, who in the end substituted for the farmer as the basis of society. Influenced by the myth of the machine, Americans have always been very fond of progress; and being such good transformers of nature into progress, they believed themselves to be the chosen people to expand this transformation to the rest of the world, and they embraced this destiny as the most sacred and patriotic commitment to their country. Americans also believed themselves to be chosen among all men to benefit from the combination of nature and technology, and they thus transformed the agrarian myth. Thereafter, the machine, in the image of the locomotive and the bridge, became a revelation of providence or a spur to the awakening of the mind. At this moment, the farmer yielded to the engineer, the town grew to the metropolis and the nature was introduced to technology.

Ever since the introduction of the myth of the garden in the American collective mind, the farmer had been the true symbol of American democracy “*not for his capacity to exploit opportunities and make money but for his honest industry, his independence, his frank spirit of*

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<sup>23</sup> Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 145.

<sup>24</sup> Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, 93.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 82.

*equality, his ability to produce and enjoy simple abundance.*”<sup>26</sup> Thanks to his commitment to nature and to democracy, he made of the United States the most perfect land in the world. But the farmer gave his role as the voice of American democracy to the engineer, who continued with the commitment to perfection and democracy by using the locomotive and the bridge as his instruments. Just as the locomotive equalized the situation of Americans by connecting them to the world, this bridge connected poor Brooklyn with the heartlands of the continent, as “*a promise, a prophecy and a monument to democracy.*”<sup>27</sup>

Both the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine contributed to America’s sense of responsibility as the chosen land to expand an unlimited freedom and democracy beyond its borders. As a result of the deep belief in democracy and equality, Americans have learned to worship the myth of the garden as the most sacred gift given by God to men, because this land gave birth to a new kind of men, who were respectful of God, nature and mankind. They accepted their destiny, contemplated in the myth of the machine, which is to promote the quest for a new world. Both myths are of great importance for the American Creed, because they establish the ideological fundamentals on which the American nation was built, and which are venerated by most Americans, despite their race, creed, socio-economic level and political conviction. Both myths unified a multicultural land by giving its people a sense of belonging and of being an unfinished utopia.

Martin Luther King can be seen as a culminating symbol of the deep relation between the American collective mind and the myths of the garden and the machine. Throughout time, the myth of the garden has given American society a sense of collective identity, while the myth of the machine has intensified the urgency of progress and unification. On the one hand, the vision of a garden of abundance, in which all men are free and equal, became the ultimate symbol of the American Dream, and on the other hand, the vision of America as a machine enabled the expansion and implementation of that dream.

King, himself a symbol of his age, revitalized the spirit of the yeoman farmer and the values represented in the myth of the garden. The redefinition of America could have only taken

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<sup>26</sup> Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryant to Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol*, 124.

place by going back to the fundamental values of the nation in order to transform the misinterpreted principles, making all Americans, despite race or religion, feel part of this nation. Once redefined, the principles needed to be put into motion in order to reach all members of American society. The machine brought progress, but also disparities among Americans, and now King, the new symbol of change, had to achieve both the unification of a multicultural society - just as the locomotive unified a nation and the Brooklyn Bridge did the same between New York City and New Jersey - and the introduction of a fairer society, in which all Americans were able to share not only the principles but also their benefits. Just as both myths had determined the way Americans look at themselves and their nation for the past two centuries, King became a symbol of renewed American principles and values and their adaptation to a redefined American society.

## 1.2 AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

*"Without the assistance of the Divine Being  
who ever attended him, I cannot succeed.  
With that assistance, I cannot fail."<sup>28</sup>  
Abraham Lincoln<sup>28</sup>*

Religion has always been one of the most important institutions in society. Most societies need the belief in a supreme force in order to feel protected and to find a "divine" justification for their actions. Religion is described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz as "*a symbol system that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.*"<sup>29</sup> Religion is definitely a factor that shapes the character and culture, not only of the individual but of a nation. The United States has always had a religion that is distinct from, if parallel, to the well-institutionalized system of organized religions, one shaped by the ideals and myths that have formed the nation. This different kind of religion is the American Civil Religion, which, in Leroy

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<sup>28</sup> Philip Van Doren Stern, *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln* (NY: The Modern Library, 1940), 636.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Luther S. Luedtke, *Making of America: The Society and Culture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: US Information Agency, 1988), 303.

S. Rouner's opinion, is "*that transcendent loyalty to the values and purposes of American civilization that makes a community out of an individualistic and culturally diverse people.*"<sup>30</sup>

Despite the separation of church and state, there has been a real fusion of both in American life, defining the way Americans think and act not only privately but also politically. Unlike other religions, the American Civil Religion is not an institutionalized religion, but it still has national holidays, a national gospel, the National Anthem, and a national creed, the American Creed. American Civil Religion could be understood as a state religion or as "*a public religious dimension expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals,*"<sup>31</sup> not related to any party, but to the fundamental ideals of the United States. The origins of the American Civil Religion can be traced back to the American Revolution, when the Founding Fathers decided to create a nation based on the utopian dream of freedom, equality and democracy. At that time, the American Creed was molded by the Declaration of Independence's maxim that "all men are created equal." The American Creed is a combination of philosophical convictions of the Founding Fathers, other great American thinkers and Puritan values, all deeply rooted in the basis of the American nation: democracy.

Definitely, American Civil Religion has been shaped by both Puritan values and the intellectual and political contribution of many great American leaders during the past centuries. As mentioned before, religion has always played a central role in American life, and it had a great influence on King's life, teachings and commitment to civil rights. On the one hand, having been raised in a Southern Baptist community, he was deeply influenced by Christian values; and on the other hand, being a faithful believer of the principles of the Declaration of Independence and of the Emancipation Proclamation, his cause was determined by the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, among many other great Americans. Therefore, for the purpose of this study I will examine the fundamentals of Puritanism as well as the contribution of Jefferson and Lincoln in order to understand how King defended and promoted them while he was alive and how his legacy has given him a special place as a great national hero in the American collective mind. King was one man able to combine America's profound faith and political commitment with the fundamentals of the nation.

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<sup>30</sup> Leroy S. Rouner, "What is an American? Civil Religion, Cultural Diversity and American Civilization" *The Key Reporter*, undated, 3.

<sup>31</sup> McLoughlin and Bellah, *Religion in America*, 6.

Like other varieties of Protestantism, Puritanism was a reformation and not a revolution. It is based on the medieval Christian principle of human salvation, but with the Calvinistic perspective of unconditional predestination. Puritanism is represented by the fundamental idea of the presence of God in man's life, especially as expressed in the idea of providence. Americans believe themselves to be chosen by God in order to achieve great goals on the political level and to act on His behalf, because "*in American political theory, sovereignty rests of course, with the people, but implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God.*"<sup>32</sup> Puritanism formed a basis of American democracy, for Locke, who is considered the father of modern democracy, was a Calvinist. Like democracy, Puritanism proclaimed a rebirth from a corrupted system. The puritan belief made people rely on faith, revelation and the supreme authority of the Bible, as the earthly expression of God's will. Puritans had an extremely limited existence, based on a large list of prohibitions imposed by the will of God, but it had a great respect for the human individual irrespective of his place in any ecclesiastical, political, social, economic, or other institution, as well as an unending respect for the dignity of man. The Bible taught men to conduct their own private search for truth, as democracy does. Despite the great severity of the Puritan doctrine, it always promoted man's attainment of wealth and earthly happiness.

Puritans promoted the ideal of equality of all men, just for being God's creation. A further aspect of the puritan doctrine is the profound belief in providence, which was in America confirmed by the experience of the frontier. Men believed that their destiny was somehow defined by a special providence that enabled them to conquer the wilderness and use the immense variety of natural resources for their own prosperity. Furthermore, the puritan conception of providence gave Americans "*a national identity, a national self-consciousness and a faith in their national future,*"<sup>33</sup> but also, along with the myth of the garden's quest for democracy, it gave them the conviction of Manifest Destiny, and the ideal of civic righteousness.

According to the puritan tradition, a man shouldn't pursue only his own happiness, but also should commit himself to the happiness of all men. Puritans also established a personal

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<sup>32</sup>Ibidem

<sup>33</sup> Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (NY: The Vanguard Press, 1944), 214.

relation to God's presence in order to create a paternalistic state, in which God was the ruler and his laws had to be obeyed by his human subjects as a just exchange for his favour. As the Constitution is the ultimate legal law in the United States, the Bible is the ultimate divine law for Americans. Among puritans, God was considered a wise counsellor, the most potent force, or the most devoted ally. Christian love is the ultimate expression of love for mankind by a righteous and devoted God, and it has to be achieved through human agencies, for the mission of men on earth was to spread Christian love.

A further contribution to the American Creed was the concept of democracy that emerged from the Enlightenment<sup>34</sup> as the ultimate basis of American political life. This concept reinforced the puritan tradition of respect for the human individual and his dignity. During the first decades after the American Revolution this concept not only defined the political system of the United States but also shaped the character of its inhabitants. While Puritanism relied on faith, the ideological and political ideas of the Enlightenment encouraged people to rely on man's own reason as the ground of truth. Locke's democratic concept also challenged the old order and proclaimed an evolution of the state in order to destroy a corrupted system. Puritanism made people submit to God's will, while the Enlightenment promoted common sense and the pursuit of happiness.

Deeply influenced by the utopian vision of America as the chosen land, the first four American presidents reflected the nation's belief in God as an invisible hand, which not only cares for the well-being of Americans, but also helps them to shape the nation's future. They saw God as actively involved in the development of America, the chosen land. This conviction has made Americans consider their country as a New Israel, or a promised land, to which men could flee in order to create a new social order, based on God's word. Despite the great influence of the puritan gospel, American Civil Religion isn't limited to puritan ideas. It is based on a broad belief in the existence of God and His interest in men's well-being, but it has no greater relation to Christ. This God could belong to any possible religion, and it has to be understood as a supreme force that protects and guides Americans.

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<sup>34</sup> The Enlightenment was a kind of post-Christian Zeitgeist that drew more than it knew on inherited biblical value systems, but also set out to replace them. In America, it was professed by Benjamin Franklin, moderately by George Washington, aggressively by Thomas Jefferson, and in fusion with the older Protestantism by James Madison.

With the Declaration of Independence, the basis of the American Creed was established, due to the equalitarian doctrine, which means “*not that all men possess human attributes in the same degree, but that they possess the same attributes in some degree,*” or in other words that “*all men belong to the same species in the hierarchy of evolution; or all men are created in the same image of God.*”<sup>35</sup> The most striking aspect of democracy and the equalitarian doctrine is their application, because, on the one hand, individuals should demand liberty, equality and tolerance for themselves, but, on the other hand, they have to pursue and protect the same liberty, equality and tolerance for the others. Democracy and religion can perfectly work together because both aim the same goals: respect and truth. Even if democracy can’t be considered as a religion, Americans have learned to worship it, due to its sense of universality. Democracy is the final goal to be reached by mankind, as the basis of individual and collective happiness: a goal to fight for in the past, in the present and in the future.

One of the most important American leaders who had a great influence on King’s commitment to democracy and equality in modern America was Thomas Jefferson, a leading figure of the American Revolution and a national hero, as well as a symbol of American Civil Religion. Jefferson not only wrote the Declaration of Independence, but also promoted education in order to form good citizens. He was one of the American thinkers most influenced by the Enlightenment; he promoted, on the one hand, a greater protection of the inherent and inalienable rights of men, such as liberty, equality, prosperity and the pursuit of happiness; and on the other, he was fully aware of the imperfection of government as a creation of men. Like the Federalists, he considered imperative the creation of a federal system in order to guarantee all states their equal representation, but he also believed in the minimal intervention of government in common life. Fully aware of the dark side of the human nature, but especially of those in power, he wrote in the Declaration of Independence “*that to secure those rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*”<sup>36</sup> He was, as well, one of the first Americans to speak out against slavery, because “*the whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the other part, and degrading submissions on the other.*”<sup>37</sup> The urgency of gaining support of the Southern states, however, forced him to exclude this important issue from the

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<sup>35</sup>Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy*, 552.

<sup>36</sup> Adrienne Koch and William Peden, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (NY: The Modern Library, 1964), 22.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

draft of the Declaration of Independence. Thanks to his political and intellectual contribution, Jefferson is considered not only a political, but also a spiritual and moral father of America. His writings exalted a greater commitment to freedom and equality, as well as to the constant improvement of men's virtues, as a fundamental part of the perfect system of happiness within a justice-invoking nation.

Despite King's personal negative racial experience, he never stopped believing in Jefferson's ideal of democracy and equality. Indeed, he promoted the Declaration of Independence as a shield against Southern segregation, racism and bigotry, as he invited Americans to commit to the principles of the nation and to the teachings of the Founding Fathers. King believed that neither the federal and state government nor a racist association nor a corrupted society could stand against the fundamentals of the nation. He tried to influence the American collective mind to commit to Jefferson's legacy and thereby force Southern states to establish a truly democratic and egalitarian multiracial American society.

While King deeply committed to Jefferson's ideals, he also identified himself with Lincoln's reliance on God's will and his political decisions in order to save and even unify a fragmented nation. Not only King's achievements but also his death have made people compare him to Lincoln as an important symbol within American Civil Religion: a great American martyr. Despite all possible differences between them, it is a fact that both men had a seemingly divine mission to accomplish: to be sacrificed for the sake of national unity and survival. Lincoln was a great representative of the myth of providence and of the United States's being the chosen land with a government that promoted and protected the civil and religious rights of men. He became an American Moses, as he condemned Americans for having betrayed the Founding Fathers' commitment to democratic and moral values. Later on, he became the great saviour of an American nation corrupted by slavery, leading the effort to prevent the dissolution of the Union and arguing in favor of "*a perpetual existence of the Union due to the Constitution and to its history.*"<sup>38</sup> He even was the symbol of American sacrifice and martyrdom for the sake of the American Creed's perpetuation, which he thought shouldn't have accepted slavery as a legal

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 649.

form of prosperity, because “a government couldn’t endure permanently half slave and half free.”<sup>39</sup>

As mentioned before, Lincoln was a deep believer in God who considered that “Americans were the inheritors of the fundamental blessings,”<sup>40</sup> such as civil and religious liberties. He had great confidence in the American people’s judgment of good and evil. Therefore, he believed that they couldn’t fail in making the right decisions. He relied on God’s power to make men act properly, as he said that “our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in the United States, our defense is in the love of liberty, prized liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands everywhere.”<sup>41</sup>

Lincoln recognized that there was “a supreme authority in all affairs of men and nations,”<sup>42</sup> and he created a day for national prayer and humiliation in order to ask God for forgiveness. A nation, the same as a man, had to “depend on God’s power; to recognize the sublime truth; to confess its sins with sorrow and to hope of mercy and pardon.”<sup>43</sup> His perception of the need for an official day of repentance even increased as he became aware of the atrocities of the Civil War. He considered such a day the perfect way to create a united cry for forgiveness and help from the Almighty. He also proclaimed Thanksgiving Day on the last Thursday of November in order to “thank for the watchful providence of the Almighty.”<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, in the abolitionists’ opinion, Lincoln was too passive in his slavery policy. Perhaps much of his passivity came from his deep religious belief. Commenting on the slavery issue, he said, “whatever shall appear to be God’s will, I do.”<sup>45</sup> White Americans had very similar religious origins, but during that time it seemed as if there were two different religions in the North and the South, for “both had the same Bible and prayed to the same God, but each invoked His aid against the other.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 429.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 483.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 752.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 753.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 783.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 729.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 841.

Many of Lincoln's decisions were put in the hands of God. He was even convinced that perhaps God wanted the war to happen in order to destroy the decadence of religious and civil principles within American society. After having destroyed all evil, a nation could be recreated, according to God's will and principles. Prior to the war, the familiar ties, as well as "*the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and union,*"<sup>47</sup> had been destroyed in the United States. According to Lincoln, a better time should come. He didn't blame God for the war, but justified him by saying, "*the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*"<sup>48</sup> Lincoln rescued the Union, but he also redeemed the American Creed, which had already forgotten its fundamentals of freedom and equality.

Definitely, Lincoln was a man of profound convictions, who lived in a time in which they couldn't be fully put into work. He believed that the United States was a chosen land with a magnificent future, thanks to God's will. He was a deep believer who put the nation's existence in the hands of God. He also wanted to maintain a country that he considered exceptional due to the natural rights the government protected and promoted. He believed that Americans were a privileged people who didn't realize how great their country was and who were willing to destroy it because of the rivalries among them. He was afraid of losing the Union, a possibility that he resisted due to his devotion to the American Constitution. In order not to destroy what he considered sacred, he tried first to make some great concessions, which harmed the slaves in the South but reinforced the principle of balance of power between the states and the federal government.

Lincoln was a man of peace who didn't want the war, but he soon realized that it might have been the best solution to the problem, no matter how many people were killed. He regretted their deaths, but he knew that it was God's will to fight for the creation of a better nation, in which all the states had to accept submission to the Constitution, which somehow is for Americans as sacred as the Holy Bible. In order to remember all patriots who died during the Civil War, a series of national cemeteries were established. Today, both the Gettysburg National Cemetery and the Arlington National Cemetery have become "*the most hallowed monument of*

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 784.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 842.

*civil religion.*”<sup>49</sup> The Civil War was the crucifixion of America in order to establish a nation similar to God’s Promised Land; and in the view of American Civil Religion, Lincoln had to be crucified for the redemption of all Americans.

As mentioned before, American Civil Religion is a cluster of symbols that leads the American nation and gives it a national identity, based on religious and political ideals. Puritanism as well as democracy affected the moral consciousness of Americans, encouraging them to defend the American Creed and guide their nation. Both have endlessly promoted individualism, to the point that it has become an American dogma. Thanks to a firm religious education, most Americans have a close relation to the Judeo-Christian tradition, which facilitates their commitment to civil religion, even if in Robert Bellah’s opinion, “*there is no absolute conflict between being a Buddhist, for example, and identifying oneself as an American, one who believes in the purposes and values of what we unabashedly celebrate as the American Dream.*”<sup>50</sup>

The importance of religion within American society is undeniable, and invoking it has even become a ritual within American politics in order to achieve greater credibility. Most American presidents have, more than once, referred to God in their speeches. Thereafter, God has become “*a word which almost all Americans can accept but which means so many different things to so many different people that it is almost an empty sign,*”<sup>51</sup> but one that makes people commit to any possible political decision for the sake of democracy. By referring to God, a closer relation between the divine power, the power of government and the power of men is established, portraying them as in an indestructible universal bond. The use of religion in American politics gives the entire political process a transcendent dimension that constantly reminds Americans of the principles under which this nation was created. The presentation of those principles invokes the highest American tradition, the belief in the fulfillment of God’s will on earth. This assignment is only possible when Americans learn that their real virtue is to behave according to God’s will, for “*the unarticulated wisdom embodied in the actual experience of American life has created forms of justice considerably higher than our more articulate*

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<sup>49</sup> Mcloughlin and Bellah, *Religion in America*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Rouner, “What is an American? Civil Religion, Cultural Diversity and American Civilization”, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Mcloughlin and Bellah, *Religion in America*, 5.

*wisdom suggests.*"<sup>52</sup> By living according to the principles of the American Civil Religion and influenced by the belief in the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine, people commit themselves to God's work and accept it as their own. Like Jefferson and Lincoln, King was a fervent believer in religion as a mediator between men and their rights and duties. For King, to commit to God was to commit to humanity and to the sacred principles of the Declaration of Independence.

In William Mcloughlin's opinion, "*America has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols.*"<sup>53</sup> Just as a religion has its holidays and its monuments, so does American Civil Religion. First, Thanksgiving Day serves to integrate the American family into the civil religion, because it teaches children the great faith and strength of their ancestors, while trying to survive in wilderness and establishing a relation with the Indians, considered as friendly beings. Second, Memorial Day is dedicated to all the patriots who sacrificed themselves during the Civil War for the sake of America's redemption and rebirth, and it also an attempt to integrate civil religion into the community. Third, the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln are celebrated in order to remind Americans of the ideals that those presidents portrayed, and defended, such as freedom and democracy. Fourth, the Fourth of July is the ultimate reminder of the creation of the United States, God's chosen land, the promised land of the free. Fifth, Veterans Day reminds Americans of their commitment to justice and freedom as part of their God-given providence. Finally, the birthday of King is celebrated in order to remind new American generations of the deeply rooted mistakes of a racist and exclusive society, but mainly to invite them to share King's dream: the creation of a color-blind, democratic and egalitarian American society.

All rituals and symbols of American Civil Religion aim to reinforce Americans' belief in the most precious ideals of democracy and equality. Nowadays, American Civil Religion's symbols and the legacy of its national heroes are challenged to make Americans commit to an increasing multiculturalism that has emerged in the United States in the last decades. America isn't the land of the puritans any longer. The melting pot isn't exclusively European, Native American and African - American anymore. Today, people from all over the world and with all

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<sup>52</sup> Rouner, "What is an American? Civil Religion, Cultural Diversity and American Civilization", 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 7.

kind of religions form the American nation. There is a great need for a radical change in education in the United States in order not only to maintain the American Civil Religion, but to make it suitable to the new national circumstances, for “*education in the United States has denied not only the existence of its ethnic minorities, but also of its own identity as a member of the New World, a hemisphere of mixed cultures.*”<sup>54</sup>

In order to finally accept ethnic diversity as a real part of the American Creed, a process of construction and deconstruction is necessary, because the American Creed is, unfortunately, also based on certain mythologies that are “*racist, sexist, or in some deep sense immoral,*”<sup>55</sup> and need to be substituted by new mythologies that promote the end of “*the white man’s burden.*”<sup>56</sup> If Americans are able to achieve that, the fundamentals of American Civil Religion might have for the very first time a deeper meaning, not only for white Americans, but for all people born within American boundaries.

In conclusion, American Civil Religion is an established commitment to the fundamentals of America. Despite the religious dialectic that frames civil religion in the United States, it hasn’t been contemplative, theological or even inwardly spiritual at all, because it has tried to adapt itself to the necessities of every new generation, and has been predominantly activist, moralist and social. American Civil Religion isn’t peculiar to one part of American history, even if it has been deeply shaped by the *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment. Each new era has contributed to challenge men by intensifying or weakening the fundamentals of American democracy.

Americans have changed from generation to generation. They have committed to just and unjust causes and they have used American Civil Religion in order to conquer, dominate and even destroy other countries, as well as to intensify their American consciousness, every time the latter was in jeopardy. It is very important to distinguish between the American nation and the American experience, for American Civil Religion is committed to the experience that is in constant growth and keeps defining the nation in the mind of each American, for “*American Civil Religion has made possible the multicultural ideology of freedom that gave Americans their*

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<sup>54</sup> Ibidem

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem

<sup>56</sup> “white” in this sense is always to be understood as an indication of power, or of the struggle for power, or of power’s lack.

*identity and is a major contribution to contemporary world politics.*”<sup>57</sup> It can be said that the American Creed is what still keeps this multicultural country alive and strong.

As the American experience has undergone several changes in the past centuries, new symbols of the American Civil Religion need to be integrated in order to revitalize the deep commitment to the principles of America. New symbols are representative of men’s contemporary necessities and define the way new generations will relate to their national history and identity. Those symbols are the link between the fundamentals of the nation and their future implementation in a multicultural America. Martin Luther King, one of the leading modern symbols, affords a great opportunity, through his legacy, to introduce and adapt the principles of the Declaration of Independence to a new American society, for he is the ultimate symbol of the American Dream coming true.

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<sup>57</sup>Rouner, “What is an American? Civil Religion, Cultural Diversity and American Civilization”, 3.