

## CHAPTER III THE RAISING OF AN AMERICAN PROPHET

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

*“Nobody can make a slave out of you  
if you don’t think like a slave”<sup>1</sup>*

The public figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. is nothing else than the result and culmination of a series of religious and philosophical theories that have shaped humanity in the past centuries. King was the product of an intense religious and philosophical education that started at home in his early childhood and ended the day of his assassination. He was a man committed to religion, but open to theories that could lead him to find a solution for the race issue, under which he, his family and all African-Americans had suffered since the introduction of the Jim Crow laws.

As a child, King was confronted with the brutality of racial segregation, when, for example, he wasn’t allowed to play with his white neighbours, or when he and his father weren’t served in a shoe store, while they were sitting in an area reserved for whites in Atlanta, Georgia. On both occasions, his father assured him that one day the situation was going to change, and encouraged him to be part of this change. Unfortunately, those and some other experiences marked King’s childhood and perception of whites. He couldn’t understand how his parents could talk about human dignity and accept such humiliations. The place where he spent much of his childhood was at his father’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he learned to overcome initial hatred to whites through the religious concepts of love and forgiveness.

As member of a Southern middle-class black family, King had access to much more wealth than the rest of the black community. He was sent to the best black schools in order to improve his educational level. When he was sent to several summer working camps in the North, he came into contact with more liberal whites, who taught him that *“racism wasn’t primarily*

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<sup>1</sup> King, Sr. cited in Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America : A Dream or a Nightmare*, 24.

*personal but structural and thus linked to the political economy of capitalism,*”<sup>2</sup> as James Cone commented. There, he experienced for the first time the real meaning of freedom and equality as read at school in the writings of the Founding Fathers. This event transformed his life and awakened in him the necessity to undertake some real measures in order to achieve this freedom and equality for all Southern blacks.

From this experience and after his first college year, King felt an inner calling to serve humanity and decided to enter the ministry. For him, religion became the only possible weapon to make white supremacists acknowledge their wrongdoing and redeem themselves by giving blacks their equality and freedom. In order to become a new model of leader, King went to Croezer Theological Seminary and, later on, to Boston College, where he got not only the education that DuBois had wanted for black leaders, but a *double culture*, too, according to which “*one becomes a marginal person who knows and understands the way of life of the minority and the majority or the dominant and subdominant power groups.*” Along with that double culture came a *double consciousness* that “*could eventually lead to reconciliation between the former oppressed and the former oppressor.*”<sup>3</sup>

As King was finishing his doctoral studies, the segregationist system suffered a great defeat, as the Supreme Court decided that the decision made in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* was mistaken and ordered the end of segregation. The NAACP has won a great victory within the judiciary system, but black ministers were so fascinated by Gandhian methods, that they confirmed the necessity of the emergence of a Black Church leader for their struggle against segregation. “*The sooner some black Gandhi comes with a reform program dedicated to revising our standards to conform to our economic opportunity,*” stated Gordon Hancock, a celebrated educator, clergyman, and journalist in the *Norfolk Journal Guide* of mid-March 1931 “*the better it is going to be for the Negro race. A tolerable existence does not necessarily mean abundance and luxury as we now suppose in too many cases. Life has a spiritual content that an oppressed and circumscribed people would do well to seek after! An abundant life does not mean material*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 26

<sup>3</sup> Loundon Wainwright, “Martyr of the Sit-Ins” *The Negro History Bulletin* Vol. XXIV No. 7 (undated): 149.

*abundance, and the Negro race needs some Black Reformers to drive that powerful truth! Wanted: A Black Reformer!”<sup>4</sup>*

Newly wed, King accepted the ministry of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, instead of moving to New York or Massachusetts, where he was also sought as pastor, because he believed that change had to be initiated in the South, where the greatest damage was incurred, and spread to the rest of the country. King was a successful student and now he only had to wait for his chance to prove that his philosophy of non-violence was the only way to reach a real and just integration of African-Americans into America’s mainstream. The moment had come, as Rosa Parks refused to stand up in a bus and started the Black Revolution, in which one almost inexperienced pastor emerged as the black leader, the apostle of non-violence, and the black prophet who could change the world. His name could never be forgotten again: Martin Luther King, Jr.

In this chapter, we will look more deeply into the sources that led and inspired King to commit to non-violence and to social democracy, as well to oppose injustice not only in the United States, but all over the world, with a philosophy based on Christian love. Only one man with such a great faith, religious commitment, and educational background could lead a country to a the Second American Revolution, one of values, in which America had the opportunity to be, for the first time, really and entirely faithful to the principles on which it was based. As Martin Buber affirmed, “*freedom movements are a kind of liberation which can’t be brought about by anyone who grew up as a slave, nor yet by anyone who is not connected with the slaves, but only by one of the latter who has been brought up in the midst of the aliens and has received an education equipping him with all their wisdom and power, and thereafter goes forth to his people and observes their burdens.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet: The African - American Encounter with Gandhi* (NY: Beacon Press, 1992), 51

<sup>5</sup> Wainwright, “Martyr of the Sit-Ins”, 141.

### 3.2 KING'S PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY

King's religious and educational background enabled the creation of his theory of militant non-violent direct action. His profound analysis of great philosophers and theologians led him to conclude that the problem of racial segregation could not be truly overcome only by legal means. Rather, a total revolution of philosophical, political, social and religious values had to be undertaken in order for the blacks to attain their rights, using as their sword a non-violent protest system and as their shield Christian love, and for the whites to embrace justice and to accept blacks' humanity, dignity and equality. For King, the transformation could only be possible through the influence of the redeeming and endless power of God's love. King's three main sources of influence were Christianity, Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. Both religion and American political thought play a very important role in the American Civil Religion and American culture. Therefore, King was able to become part of the American myth because his life and actions were influenced and guided by religion and political thought.

In the case of Christianity, King believed in a personal, man-and-justice-loving God, who gave all men a sense of dignity despite their race or beliefs. King's strong Christian faith made him even stronger in the moments of great decisions, because he knew that God was never going to abandon him and his people. A further point of his commitment was the protest and faith presented by the teachings of Moses's life, who showed him both, that there was no greater enemy than one's own lack of faith, and that every enemy could be overcome even in the most desperate situations, if one decides to submit to the God-given higher laws. King encouraged America to renew itself through love: "*we have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization, for love might be the salvation of our civilization.*"<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, King embraced the idea of individual and collective moral duty in the search of prosperity. He understood that no man could really be satisfied unless all men are able to share prosperity. King promoted this ideal among blacks and whites, with the deep conviction that integration and not separatism was the means to blacks' achievement of equality and whites'

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<sup>6</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writing and Speeches that Changed the World*, 21.

redemption. Unless both parts worked together, no real progress could be reached. King insisted on the fact that “*the mission of the black man was to introduce a new moral standard in American life and to teach the white man the capacity to love.*”<sup>7</sup> This collaboration despite differences in race and belief could only be founded on man’s redemption through Christian love: “*our redemption, therefore, is that supreme love of Christ shown to us by his passion, which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but acquires for us true liberty of the sons of God... so that kindled by so great benefit of divine grace, charity should not be afraid to endure anything for his sake.*”<sup>8</sup>

Religion seemed to be the only way to achieve real acceptance and integration. Thereafter, religion was understood by King as “*the bridge over the gap between what is and what ought to be, for religion gives man wisdom which is power and control.*”<sup>9</sup> God was the only one King really could rely on, every time he abandoned himself to doubt and frustration. Christ was the model to be followed, even if that demanded from him total commitment to sacrifice and martyrdom for the sake of America; and the Cross was King’s constant reminder of God’s redemptive love on behalf of the realization of his dream: the one of a beloved community.

Unfortunately, religion wasn’t enough to get people committed to a movement, and King was fully aware of the necessity of a more secular symbol within the socio-economic environment in order to get black and white masses to cooperate against an evil system. This symbol was to be found in India’s independence hero and spiritual leader, Mohandas Gandhi. King wasn’t the first American black reformer to discover Gandhi, but he was the one able to transfer this Indian philosophy into the domain of the Southern Black Church, as he became the “*bridge between Gandhi-inspired activists and church-centered followers of Jesus.*”<sup>10</sup>

The last person who influenced King’s philosophy and gave him the political approach he needed was Henry David Thoreau, who had such a reliance on real democracy that he criticized the American government for *its lack of democracy*.<sup>11</sup> Thoreau believed that even in a democracy

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<sup>7</sup> Waltson, *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Clayborne Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Vol. I: Called to Serve (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 266.

<sup>9</sup> Waltson, *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet: The African - American Encounter with Gandhi*, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Sherman, *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 119.

ruled by the majority, there could be lack of justice. In order to defeat injustice, Thoreau invited Americans to break the law, because they didn't have to obey an unjust government. According to him, any man was a superior power than government. Therefore, he had the right to exercise his independent power over the government in order to maximize its purposes and results. In his essay "The Power of Non-violence" King encouraged blacks to adopt Thoreau's belief, by writing, "*but if moderation means slowing up in the move for justice and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of the deadening status quo, then moderation is a tragic vice which all men of good will must condemn.*"<sup>12</sup>

It is unquestionable that all three approaches opposed the collective evil in society and appealed to those men who weren't going to give up their conscience, heart, human dignity and convictions for the sake of injustice. None of the three visions predicted the maintenance of virtue among social groups, but they suggested that a revolution could be started by a virtuous minority willing to change the world, one that is truly faithful to its convictions, beliefs, and consciences. All three philosophies are applied to an oppressed group and an oppressor, employ a central symbol and a good goal for their struggle. Gandhi's oppressor was the British Empire and the oppressed group was the Indian people. His symbol was truth and his goal was India's independence. Thoreau's oppressor was the corrupted government of New England and the oppressed were the people opposing several decisions of the state and federal government. His symbol was democracy and his goal was to establish an individual criterion of what is right and wrong. King's oppressed group was the Southern African – American minority, who were degraded to second-class citizens, and the oppressors were the Southern white supremacist, supported by the state and federal government. The symbol was Christian love and the American Creed. His goal was the creation of the beloved community.

In summary, according to James A. Colaiaco, "*King's philosophy of non-violence was a synthesis of the teachings of Jesus and Gandhi. While the Sermon on the Mount provided the motivating ideal of love, Gandhi provided the method of mass non-violent direct action and Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience made him call for a stronger leadership in the federal government.*"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Non-violence*, 25.

### 3.2.1 CHRISTIANITY

Coming from a Christian background, King felt the strong necessity to use his faith as the inspiring element that led his religious fellowmen out of the darkness of oppression and segregation into the dream of a promised land, which he defined as the beloved community in which his “*four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*”<sup>14</sup>

King’s strong commitment to religion increased during his student years at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston College, where he read the writings of the most important theologians of his time. His father and grandfather, both ministers at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, transmitted to King the Black Church’s conviction of the strength of love and faith in order to repress evil, as well as the integrationist values of protest, accommodation and self-help. King’s personal relationship with and great admiration for his college professors Harold DeWolf and Edgar Brightman made him embrace the Theory of Personalism, in the belief that God was never going to leave him alone, regardless of what may come. His former teacher Mordecai Johnson brought him closer to Gandhian methods of non-violence, and Walter Rauschenbusch’s writings about the Social Gospel and the missionary social work of the Christian Church, supported by the ideas Reinhold Niebuhr about collective evil and Richard Gregg’s conviction about non-violence, prompted King to start a campaign in order to redeem not only men and the political structures, but also the Christian Church itself.

Finally, the tradition of love and forgiveness, especially in the teachings of Christ, gave King another impulse for his embracing of religion as his sword in the war against segregation. Christ had different meanings for King at different times of his life. Early, King saw Christ as one of the most inspiring sources of man’s capacity to love and the embodiment of God’s unconditional love for men. Later, he saw Christ as a real revolutionary. Finally, Christ became the leading figure in King’s spiritual journey. King was amazed by the emergence of a different Jew under the same conditions as the rest of the Jewish people, one whose “*uniqueness in his*

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<sup>14</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 105.

*spiritual life has led Christians to see him not only as a human being, but as a human being surrounded with divinity,”*<sup>15</sup> as he mentioned in his essay “The Divinity of Christ.”

Christ couldn't be fully understood without a real comprehension of his love for mankind. In Greek philosophy there was a great distinction between three different classes of love. First, *Eros* referred to the romantic or aesthetic love; second, *Philia* meant the love among friends; and third, *Agape* was defined as the comprehensive, creative and redeeming good will toward all men. Much of Christ's preaching about love was based on the third concept, as when he said, “*love your enemies*”. For Christ, *Agape* represented much more than affection for someone, because you have to love everyone, even the ones who have hurt you, because “*God loves them*.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Christ opened God's heart and compassion even to sinners. His kind of love was marked by a divine spontaneity: to love just for the sake of giving and not expecting something in exchange. This changed the whole perception of God, because it implied that in order to be in contact with God, there is no need of a system of values. The ones who love on the premise of *Agape* become redeemed and saved by God's love. Like Gandhi, Christ referred to the concept of non-violence. By loving the enemy people were embracing this ideal.

For King, the cross represented the greatness of God, as well as the redemptive power of Christ. Not only Christ, but also the cross played a decisive role in King's perception of God and mankind. Christ suffered to pay the penalty for sin and thus enabled forgiveness and redemption, as well as the foundation of a new concept of love for the ones who hurt us. For King the cross was “*the eternal love of God seeking to attract men into fellowship with the divine. The chief source of the inspiring and redeeming power of the cross is the revelation of the divine love and righteousness.*”<sup>17</sup> Love among men can only be experienced if men are constantly reminded by the cross of the suffering of Christ and the existence of God.

According to James Cone, King's theological conviction about the cross and the suffering of Christ was the source of his absolute commitment to non-violence.<sup>18</sup> King's devotion to Christ was confirmed in one of his writings, when he said “*the appearance of such a person,*

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<sup>15</sup> Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Vol I: Called to Serve, 261.

<sup>16</sup> John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente* (Mexico D.F.: Publigráficos, S.A., 1985), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Vol. I: Called to Serve, 266.

<sup>18</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 128.



more divine and more human than any other, and standing in the closest unity at once with God and man, is the most significant and hopeful event in human history.<sup>19</sup> And Walter G. Mulder, Dean of the Theology School at Boston College, told King once that “*the Christian Cross is the best symbol of the fact that altruist compassion and forgiveness are the greatest achievements of a person within a community, as well as, the greatest revelation of the character of God,*”<sup>20</sup> what could have had great impact on King’s philosophical theory, due to his admiration for Christ.

King spent great part of his first years at Crozer Theological Seminary dealing with the concept of Christ and his legacy for mankind. In his essay “What did Christ Achieve through His Life and Death” King defined God’s love through the life and suffering of Christ. According to King, Christ’s life was revealing of the character of God and the character of men. God worked and loved through Christ’s body and Jesus, being a man, was the best example of what God expected men to become:

...he was the Logos, the Word of God, God’s expression, the forth giving of the Eternal, revealing himself in one life....At one and the same time, Christ shows us what we are and what we ought to be. Here is a life that revealed both God and men<sup>21</sup>

King relied much on the Old and New Testament for the structure of his political philosophy. First, King was fascinated by *Exodus*, because it represented the oppressed Jewish people who fled from Egypt, led by Moses and their religious faith, into the desert. This part of the Bible gave him confidence and reliance that African-Americans could be freed at last. In his own personal religious education within the Black Church, King was familiar with the stories of the heroes of the Old Testament and the arrival in the Promised Land. For him, as for all black church goers, freedom was a world deeply related to the Bible and Christian faith. Second, it was the Gospel song, which in the Black Church’s tradition expressed the deep suffering and hope of African-Americans, that inspired King most for the structure of his Gospel speeches. As Mahalia Jackson affirmed, “*blues are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope.*”<sup>22</sup> King’s speeches and writings were full of hope as well as devotion and commitment. Third, he also relied on the *Sermon on the Mount*’s injunctions to love enemies and not to resist evil by

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<sup>19</sup> Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*; Vol. I: Call to Serve, 262.

<sup>20</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Vol. I: Call to Serve, 247-48.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 174.

violent means.<sup>23</sup> A great part of this commitment to a religious crusade for freedom was based on the *Sermon on the Mount* and the resistance and martyrdom of the first Christians to the Roman Empire. For King, the Sermon on the Mount was a collection of higher laws to which men must submit. He also felt a close connection to Moses, as he was becoming the black Moses that led his oppressed people to his beloved community.

### 3.2.1.1 THE BLACK CHURCH

*“Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows of death from the Bosses...”<sup>24</sup>*

Most blacks weren't converted when they arrived in the new colonies, and most masters didn't want their conversion, because Christian beliefs mandated that a baptized Christian couldn't be held as a slave. But after several debates, both the Church and secular legislation agreed that despite conversion and baptism slaves couldn't be freed. As the slaves had lost all relationship with their historical background and identity, they had no other alternative than to acquire a motive for living under American culture or die. Therefore, they embraced the Christian religion in their search for spiritual identity. Myrdal proposed in his *American Dilemma* that “*the primary motive of conversion was that the Christian religion suited the masters' interests in keeping the slaves humble, meek and obedient,*”<sup>25</sup> while Frazier insisted that “*the black slave found in Christianity a meaning for existence and a solace for his sorrows, even if this religion, imposed by the white man, forced the Negro to accept his position as a slave and established the prestige of the white race.*”<sup>26</sup>

During slavery, blacks hadn't access to all passages of the Bible, especially those in the Old Testament questioning the slavery in Egypt, and the meaning of humanity. Only blacks who could read and had access to the Bible could understand the meaning of those words, which were

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Bock, *The Mahatma and Mother India: Essays on Gandhi's Non-Violence and Nationalism* (Ahmedabad: Narvajinan Publishing House, 1983), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* Vol II., 936.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, 93.

used as the shield in the crusade against slavery. During the first decades of Christian missionary work, slaves were allowed to attend the same churches as the white masters, while they remained in a separate room, listening to the preaching of a white minister, until the insurrection led by Nat Turner, which forced white masters to have separate services.

The black Baptist<sup>27</sup> Church has its origins in the oppressive Southern system, while the African Methodist<sup>28</sup> Church and the African Methodist Zion Church were founded in the North around the end of the XVIIIth century. On the one hand, the first goal of the Baptist churches wasn't to question slavery, but to give black slaves a hope and a religious space where they could define their lives and recover their identity. On the other hand, Northern black churches got involved with the abolitionist cause and helped several fugitive blacks to find a new life in the North. Unfortunately, the insurrection led by religious Nat Turner in 1831 increased the rage of white supremacists, who took away the little independence black Southern churches had in order to avoid further religious revolts. During the Reconstruction Era several Baptist and Methodist churches were founded all over the American territory. Jim Crow laws forced churches to be separated, which was a much easier process for the Baptist church, due to autonomy of each church, than for the Methodist church. Despite the different approaches to the race issue taken by various black churches from the slavery system up to the civil rights movement, all black churches based all their hopes in one single word, *freedom*, which gained an increasing symbolic importance as the centuries passed and some major battles were won. First, it meant to be free from slavery; second, it turned into the right for education, employment and free movement; finally, it cried out for the necessity for social, political and economic justice. The concept of freedom is understood by whites as an individualistic experience in order to pursue one's destiny, but for blacks freedom is perceived as a collective experience, because of their lack of individuality and self-consciousness, as stated by Myrdal.

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<sup>27</sup> The Baptist movement was initiated in England, but a group of Puritans sought for refuge in Holland as the result of the persecution in England. They founded the first English Baptist Church in 1609 and were spread to England and the new colonies. In the XVIIIth century its orientation became much more Calvinistic, but the Great Awakening led to a division into two main churches: the new Baptists, who become even more influenced by the Calvinistic philosophy, and the regular Baptists, who were more moderate and traditional.

<sup>28</sup> The original Methodist movement, so named for its distinctive methods of organization and its spiritual disciplines, began as a "Holy club" of students at Christ Church College in Oxford University in the mid 1720s.

Northern white Baptist churches, which opposed racial segregation, gave great support to black Baptist churches throughout the South; but it didn't last long, because black clergymen sought for an independent denomination due to their increasing black consciousness. The church became a spiritual refuge for all Southern blacks who were reduced to second class citizens, as Southern legislation legalized the disenfranchisement of African-Americans between 1890 and 1910, and as Southern society intensified repression. Despite the conditions blacks were living under during the second half of the XIXth century, Southern blacks enjoyed a little period of political involvement and participation. Even some preachers became engaged in politics during the Reconstruction Era, but after the introduction of Jim Crow laws, they were forced to return to their churches. Myrdal affirmed that the role of the Southern Black Church underwent real change only during the Reconstruction Era, because in the time prior to the Civil War and in the era of segregation, "*the Black Church sublimated the Negro's frustrations into emotionalism, and Negro hopes were fixed on the after-world.*"<sup>29</sup>

Becoming free of white surveillance and being able to preach all chapters of both the Old and the New Testament, black preachers became not only religious but also political leaders, with great influence on the community's emotionalism during the services.<sup>30</sup> Emotionalism was nothing else than an exaggeration of emotions, oriented to lower class blacks, who needed emotional support in order to survive degradation and frustration. At that time, the preacher was a kind of interpreter between the white man's wishes and the black man's pleas. Many preachers disagreed with that role, but if they had opposed it, they would have been punished physically or even exiled. The most devastating punishment was the desintegration of their congregation, which represented not only a personal but a communal spiritual loss of hope. To assure the survival of the church was the unspoken duty of every preacher, because it was the only political act undertaken by blacks to protest against segregation. As was later pointed out, "*the mere fact of black survival in a total system of dehumanization and exclusion is by itself a significant political act.*"<sup>31</sup> For many, the political behaviour of Southern white churches made them "*the primary instrument for the perpetuation of segregated life and the myth of white supremacy.*"<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* Vol II, 861.

<sup>30</sup> Emotionalism is represented by the gestures employed by the preacher, intonation of the voice, sobbing, and words calculated to arouse emotion.

<sup>31</sup> C. Erin Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African - American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 201.

<sup>32</sup> Wesley Schrader, "Segregation in the Churches" *Esquire*, May 1958, 1.

One example of political submission was the fact that black preachers were told who their communities had to vote for, because “*the influence of the Black Church was such that various factions sought to influence the black vote through its leadership on the theory that the church functioned substantially as a political organization.*”<sup>33</sup>

In hopes of a better and more just society, in the beginning of the XXth century, black preachers promoted integration and support between their congregations’ members, as well as tried to bargain with the ruling class, in order to get much more support from the local or even state government. While the Southern black churches were accused of assimilation and isolation for subordinating their congregations to the white supremacy, Northern churches, led by a spirit of resistance, were able to keep a greater independence, both financially and, principally, in their preaching methods, which made the church the centre of social work within black communities. During the first decades of the XXth century, church membership increased once again among Southern blacks, mostly because they considered the church as the institution that could “*buoy up the hopes of its members in the face of adversity and to give them a sense of community.*”<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps there is no country with greater attachment to religious values than the United States. Among Protestants, Southern blacks are considered to be the most religious US citizens, just behind Catholics. Church membership goes beyond religiosity; it gives Americans a sense of belonging, acceptance and respectability, often not found in any other association. Negro churches have undergone a great theological assimilation of the white Protestant tradition. There are no great formal differences between both branches, except for black focus on the race issue, which has become since segregation one of the most important aspects of the Black Church. In James Cone’s opinion, the Black Church created a way to resist white supremacy on three levels “*by using the American democratic and Christian traditions of freedom as a way of appealing to the conscience of whites*”<sup>35</sup>: 1) *protest*, which emphasized the right of blacks to share America’s benefits on the same level as whites; 2) *accommodation*, which preached that the struggle for equality should always remain non-violent; and 3) *self-support*, which reinforced the urgency of economic, educational, and moral development of the black community. Perhaps these three

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<sup>33</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African - American Experience*, 205.

<sup>34</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* Vol II, 877.

<sup>35</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 21.

levels of church work enabled the great contribution of several church leaders to the race issue; they definitely supported much of King's philosophy.

The importance of the Black Church in the life of African-Americans is central, because "it is the oldest and – in membership – by far the strongest of all Negro organizations," as well as "an expression of the Negro community itself."<sup>36</sup> There is no doubt about the power of the Black Church within black society, due to its capacity to lead masses in order to reach specific goals a give them a sense of dignity. On the one hand, the ministry still is the chief outlet for Negro ambition, for the minister is the spokesman of the group's interests;<sup>37</sup> and on the other hand, the liberation tradition of the Black Church also included radical revolutionary activity<sup>38</sup>, which more than once supported violence to achieve freedom and justice.

The Old Testament's *Exodus*, the prophets, and the New Testament's *Apocalypse* became signals for the Black Church members of "God's concern for their freedom."<sup>39</sup> For most church members, the tales of the Old Testament were the inspiration they were looking for, picturing a God who was avenging, conquering and liberating, and providing the biblical testimony of human personality and human equality among all of God's children. For James Cone, black ministers promoted not only protest on behalf of "Old Testament theme of justice, a theme that is found especially in the prophets and that is dominant in songs and sermons of the black church"; but also accommodation, which "was closely related to the New Testament idea of love", and self-help by the premise that "God help those who help themselves."<sup>40</sup> Being convinced of God's interest in the race issue, many liberal black clergymen moved to the North, where they could struggle effectively for an end to segregation. Some major black ministers supported W.E. B. DuBois's Niagara Movement - which later turned into the NAACP<sup>41</sup>- whose main goal was to advocate black rights in the political arena.

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<sup>36</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*; Vol II, 873.

<sup>37</sup> The black church leader must have extraordinary bureaucratic and leadership skills as well as political ability, and he was expected to speak out about the pressing issues of the day, especially about the problems of racial discrimination.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps one of the most radical political voices was the one of Bishop Henry McNeil Turner from Georgia and his black nationalist liberation theology which was based on the premise that "God is Negro" and later on supported the emigration movement back to Africa.

<sup>39</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African - American Experience*, 203.

<sup>40</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 21.

<sup>41</sup> According to Gayraud Wilmore, the joint work between the Black Church and NAACP was so important for the black community that the former was considered "the Black Church was the NAACP on its knees."

Despite the Great Depression's effects on American society, especially on the marginalized black communities, the Black Church kept collaborating in much political work; and even in the segregated South, some ministers, such as Martin Luther King, Sr., encouraged black community members to register to vote and turned their churches into the springboards of several black organizations. Until the emergence of Martin Luther King, Jr., most black ministers opposed the segregationist system from within the wall of their churches, and there were very few, mostly in the North, who led civil rights protests in the streets. One of those more radical ministers was Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.<sup>42</sup> from Harlem, who in 1944 was elected to the House of Representatives, becoming the first black politician from an Eastern state to serve in Congress and the most important black politician since the Reconstruction Era. Powell was elected eleven consecutive terms for Congress and “*also credited Marcus Garvey with having shaped much of his thinking.*”<sup>43</sup>

Having a fellow black man in Congress, and later obtaining the desegregation of the US armed forces under president Truman, increased the black community's hopes and expectations on the race issue; but the fact that enabled the end of white supremacy in the South was the Supreme Court's decision on the case *Brown vs. Board of School Topeka*, which was initiated by a Rev. Oliver Leon Brown<sup>44</sup> of the St. Mark's American Methodist Church in Topeka, Kansas and supported by the NAACP's Legal Defence Fund. The NAACP's first victories gave the Black Church an increasing confidence to act. Boug Mcadam confirmed that “*two years after the Brown decision, the NAACP's hegemony over the movement was broken with the introduction and rapid spread of a second protest technique pioneered by church-based groups in various Southern communities*”,<sup>45</sup> such as the introduction of the students' participation in the sit-ins.

Finally, as the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision had become “*a higher law and became part of the sermons of that time,*”<sup>46</sup> the power of the Black Church became the engine of the civil rights movement with the emergence of Rev. Martin Luther King and his leading

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<sup>42</sup> During his time in Congress, he became the chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labour.

<sup>43</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Reverend Brown sued the Board of Education on behalf of his 9-year-old daughter Linda Brown and other black children injured by segregation in public schools.

<sup>45</sup> Mcadam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgence, 1930-1970*, 134.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis, *The Impossible Revolution?: Black Power and the American Dream*, 50.

participation during the one-year-long bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. King was the leading man, but the black church women of the Women's Political Council in Montgomery were the ones "who provided the network of organizations and support."<sup>47</sup> The zenith of the Black Church's participation and power was the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under King, because it coordinated the involvement of all black churches in the civil rights movement. For Aldon D. Morris, the participation of black ministers in the struggle was increasing constantly, because they soon realized that "they held most of the institutional power of the black community."<sup>48</sup> The symbolism of the Black Church<sup>49</sup> within black society enabled the former to promote mass movements and demonstrations, as well as encouraged congregations to support SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP and to commit to King's philosophy of non-violence. It seemed as if most church members were, at that point, willing to participate and felt divinely inspired, because, for the first time, their pleas seemed to have been heard, and they had found a prophet in King, who was willing to take them to the Promised Land.

### **3.2.1.2 THE PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL APPROACH**

While attending Morehouse College, King was able to get a liberal education and philosophical formation. Writings by important theologians influenced King's conviction of non-violence, as well as fortified his commitment to religious-oriented protest and a revolution not only of political but also of spiritual values. The variety of philosophical positions in discussion at the time enabled King's philosophical theory to become more universal, either in its approach or in its implementation.

In John Ansbro's opinion, Paul Tillich's *Love, Power and Justice* made King recover his hope in using 'the power of love' as a conflict-solving factor, and reject Nietzsche's affirmation

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<sup>47</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African - American Experience*, 211.

<sup>48</sup> Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing to Change* (NY: Free Press, 1986), 179.

<sup>49</sup> In this case the symbolism of the Black Church should be understood as its longlasting struggle for freedom and democracy, as well as the maintenance of hope and submission to God's will.



that the Christian love was only a glorification of weakness.<sup>50</sup> According to Tillich, “*Nietzsche misinterpreted the meaning of Christian love, because he defined it as the opposite to the will of power and the dynamic self-affirmation of life.*”<sup>51</sup> Contrary to Nietzsche, Tillich was convinced that love should be considered by all men as the pillar of power, which worked together with political power to destroy any kind of attempt that would put Christian love in jeopardy. Tillich was a firm believer in the trinity created by love, power and justice, and these three pillars of man’s life should work in a balance, because in the absence of one, the other two couldn’t be put into practice. Based on Tillich’s teachings, King searched to make people understand, on the one hand, that any kind of power that wasn’t based in love was frightening and abusive; and on the other hand, that love which hasn’t got power is only sentimental and useless. King’s admiration for Tillich’s writings and beliefs was so great, that in his doctoral thesis, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Weiman”, he affirmed that “*justice depends on love; it is a conforming part of the activity of love.*”<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, King also embraced Tillich’s belief that *Agape* was marked by one’s willingness to suffer. In his doctoral thesis project, he praised but also severely criticized Tillich’s thought. King welcomed Tillich’s affirmation about man’s freedom, but he rejected Tillich’s belief in God as an impersonal being. In his thesis, he not only criticized Tillich, but also Henry Nelson Weiman’s affirmation that God couldn’t have a closer relation to man because of his impersonal nature. For Weiman, God was an accumulation of events, or rather a behaviour system. King rejected both positions, because he considered them contradictory to his personalist approach to God, as he implemented it in his philosophy.

A second important theological influence on King’s philosophical theory was the Swedish theologian and Bishop Anders Nygren, who got King closer to the concept of *Agape*. Despite King’s preference for the Personalist Theory, he accepted some concepts of Nygren’s theology. While conducting some research at Boston College, King delved more deeply into the

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<sup>50</sup> In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche affirmed that Jews and Christians, led by their hatred and resentment against the wealthy and powerful, had developed an “ethic of slaves”, which has to be understood as increasing of love, compassion with the weak and the ill. This ethic was aimed to combat power, self-affirmation, wealth and beauty.

<sup>51</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Comparison of the Concepts of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1955), 147.

definition of Eros and Agape by Nygren, who defined the latter “*as something purely generous and spontaneous, which flew from God to human beings in order to make them understand their state of sin and forgive and love their enemies.*”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, God’s love should be understood as the union with mankind, who reaches salvation through God’s forgiveness.

For Nygren, the union between God and mankind is only the basis for the union among men, for love of your neighbor should be spontaneous, unconditional and eternal and never calculated. He also criticized Christianity for recognizing self-love as a legitimate form of love, because “*real Christian love should stand up against this kind of love and promote the love for the neighbor.*”<sup>54</sup> King approved totally of Nygren’s definition of Agape, defining it as “*God’s love in the heart of men.*”<sup>55</sup> He also shared Nygren’s conviction of the importance of forgiveness as an essential part of *Agape*. Like Nygren, King also considered Christ’s sacrifice as the ultimate expression of *Agape*. Finally, according to John Ansbro, Nygren formed King’s belief that Agape is a non-interested love, which demands a great deal of will to sacrifice on behalf of the well-being of the neighbor.

One of King’s mentors at Crozer Theological Seminary was Professor George Davis, whose shared belief with Nygren of the importance of altruism as an essential part of Christian life marked King’s vision of the duty of black communities. During King’s years at Crozer Theological Seminary, Davis defined his belief in the duty of each Christian to develop a real preoccupation for the well-being of others. Davis also insisted on the necessity of a Gospel, which had to be much more oriented toward the educational, social, political and economic improvement of mankind.

In Davis’s opinion, altruism must be motivated “*not only by the wish to imitate God, but also should be promoted by the worth of the human personality which it serves.*”<sup>56</sup> Unlike Nygren, who gave no importance to the worthiness of human beings, Davis believed in the improvement of community by altruism, which was the closest man could come to real

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<sup>53</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente*, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969), 131.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (NY: Harpers and Row Publishers, 1958), 104.

<sup>56</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente*, 18.

solidarity. Davis wasn't as devoted to the idea of sacrifice as Nygren was, but King read in his article "Liberalism and a Theology of Depth" that "*probably, there is no one among us, who doesn't feel the necessity of such cooperation and who wouldn't cheerfully sacrifice his own life for the sake of this purpose.*"<sup>57</sup>

A further great influence on King was L. Harold DeWolf, who supported Nygren's concept of sacrifice on behalf of the community and Davis's notion of the worthiness of the people. He went even further and defined the role played by every Christian in the creation of the community. King's admiration for DeWolf and his writings on the Theory of Personalism<sup>58</sup> encouraged King to move to Boston in order to be taught by DeWolf and Brightman, according to King's wife, Coretta King.<sup>59</sup> For King, Personalism became the final approach to a personal God and mankind's dignity. King's admiration for DeWolf and his brilliant participation in DeWolf's seminaries resulted in DeWolf's becoming King's advisor on his doctoral thesis project. DeWolf proposed the creation of human beings according to God's own image. He rejected Jewish and Catholic beliefs in a superior, sacred and unreachable God, and he not only concentrated on human sins but on the efforts to redeem them. DeWolf transferred to King the belief that while men can do evil, they can also acknowledge their sins, be converted and become members of the beloved community. Another important factor in Personalism is the recognition of men's kindness, which former theologians saw only as a characteristic of God. He based this idea on the fact that the Bible presents both sides of human nature, its worst and best elements.

According to DeWolf, there are four qualities, that define mankind and put him closer to God: First, man has a spiritual nature, confirmed by his capacity of thinking, feeling and wishing, while he is fully aware of his exercising of his will. Second, despite the difference between God's sense of justice and the uncertain struggles of men to understand it, man has the power to make moral distinctions, even if they can be mistaken, due to the different interpretations of justice by diverse individuals and cultures. Third, man seems innately to be a fervent religious believer who

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<sup>57</sup> George Davis, "Liberalism and a Theology of Depth" *The Crozer Quarterly*; Vol. 28 No. 3 (July 1951): 204.

<sup>58</sup> According to Brightman, Personalism is a philosophical system which considers universe as a system of interacting human beings. According to this statement, each human experience is related to the others, while a person is considered as a unity of complex consciousness able to develop rational thoughts and ideal values.

<sup>59</sup> Coretta King Scott, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), 88.

will always maintain his bond to God. Fourth, man's ultimate aspiration is good and he condemns evil constantly. According to John Ansbro, King's opposition to segregation was also reinforced by DeWolf's confirmation of mankind's sacred dignity.

Another crucial aspect of DeWolf's assumptions that might have affected King was his conviction of the existence of God, as he affirmed in his book *A Theology of the Living Church*. In it, he states that God established the essence and meaning of the moral law, and men are subordinated to it, not being able to change it. DeWolf developed the concept of the "absolute being" of God in order to prove God's characteristics. Based on this concept, God is the only truly free being without any possible dependence on or limitation by any other being, as well as the one who gives a true meaning to reality.

God is the source of all existence and power. Therefore, he is the only one who can satisfy men's hopes and expectations of security, mutual comprehension and peace. The role of Christ was also of central importance for DeWolf. For him, the suffering and death of Christ symbolized God's suffering for the sake of humankind. Finally, he concluded that "*we can only be faithful to ourselves if we are faithful to God.*"<sup>60</sup> In John Ansbro's opinion, King, led by DeWolf, portrayed God as both benevolent and powerful. He relied totally on God's guidance and help in order to defeat the forces of evil. He went beyond DeWolf and defined God's love as unconditional.

King's encounter with another personalist theologian at Boston College encouraged him to embrace this theology as an integral part of his own philosophy. Like Davis and DeWolf, theology professor Edgar Brightman placed great emphasis on his students' understanding and embracing of the possible necessity of sacrifice for the sake of mankind's dignity. King, having experienced since childhood the abuses of segregation, didn't need the theory of Personalism to convince him of the wrongs of such a racial system, but he examined this theory in order to formulate the principles of his attack against it in *Moral Laws*, Brightman established a well-defined distinction between the moral law and the social codes. According to him, "*the moral*

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<sup>60</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King: El desarrollo de una mente*, 51.

*law is a universal principle subordinated to the will, while the social codes are a series of principles established by society in order to guide everyman's decisions.*"<sup>61</sup>

Brightman proposed three moral laws: First, *the logical law*, which encouraged people to do their will on logical grounds. Second, *the law of autonomy*, which gave people the autonomy to make their own decisions, according to their ideals. Third, *the axiological law*, which advised people to choose supportive and harmonious values. Thanks to Brightman's law, King came to the following conclusions: First, the moment people get convinced of the sacred value of human personality, they would undertake everything possible to protect it against degradation and injustice. Second, any just law was one which elevated human dignity, while an unjust law was one which degraded it. Third, the duty of harmony and coherence required him to stand up for his moral position.

It is possible that King's perception of human love may have been influenced by Paul Ramsey and Howard Thurman. Ramsey's *Basic Christian Ethics* might have been read by King at Crozer Theological Seminary. In this book, Ramsey described Agape as "*a disinterested love to the neighbor*," based on the Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. He affirmed that "*Christian love is the ultimate kind of love*."<sup>62</sup> King was, apparently, very fond of Ramsey's affirmations and he also used the parable of the Good Samaritan to underline the importance of the love to the neighbor. According to Ramsey, "*only the real preoccupation for the other establishes by itself the community among men*."<sup>63</sup> In addition to Ramsey's approaches to Christian love, King read Howard Thurman's *Christ and the Disinherited*, while in jail in Birmingham.<sup>64</sup> This second approach to Christian love reinforced King's belief in the importance of Christ's sacrifice for the sake of humanity, as well as Christ's preaching about love for others. Thurman warned men not to fall into greed. Perhaps Thurman's most important contribution was his great emphasis on the love of enemies for the sake of the beloved community.

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<sup>61</sup> Edward Brightman, *Moral Laws* (NY: Abingdon Press, 1933), 45.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 92.

<sup>63</sup> Smith and Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Ansbrosio, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente*, 62.

Richard Gregg's<sup>65</sup> book *The Power of Non-violence* may have reinforced King's conviction that Gandhian non-violence could play a role in his philosophy. Perhaps the most striking affirmation for King was the loss of the aggressor's moral support when the victim doesn't give any violent resistance to his attack. The aggressor gets confronted with a new world of values, such as the acceptance of suffering and self-sacrifice. Furthermore, the victim's kindness and amiability toward the aggressor makes the latter lose his moral balance, while the rage that he experiences only consumes his physical and mental strength. Being physically and emotionally weakened, the aggressor realizes that his violent action is exaggerated, brutal and lacking dignity, while the victim attains a position of balance and power.

In Gregg's opinion, the reasons for the victim's superiority are the following: 1) the victim's future actions can't be anticipated by the aggressor, because he is used to violence; 2) the victim has control over the situation; 3) the victim has control over herself, and her commitment to non-violence gives her greater strength; 4) the victim's acceptance of suffering gives her a greater sense of strength in comparison to the aggressor; 5) in the spirit of non-violence the victim respects the aggressor's personality; 6) the victim gains the support of the public due to her behaviour; 7) after having lost support of the public, the aggressor is forced to realize that he is the one in the disadvantageous situation in the conflict; 8) thanks to the victim's positive feelings, the aggressor experiences reduced anger and fear and so diminishes his cruelty; and 9) the aggressor is then able to abandon divisive emotions, such as pride, humiliation and anxiety.<sup>66</sup>

Another theologian who might have influenced King's perception of social change was Reinhold Niebuhr. In contrast to the Protestant liberalism,<sup>67</sup> Niebuhr admitted man's great capacity for individual as well as collective evil. Niebuhr's *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* gave King the basis to believe both that the economic power had turned into the main source of injustice, and that philanthropy couldn't be accepted as a substitute for real justice. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* Niebuhr defined the individual as having a

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<sup>65</sup> Gregg was a great admirer of Gandhi's writing, and even moved to India to spend more time with Gandhi's followers.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Gregg, *The Power of Non-violence* (NY: Schocken Books, 1971), 49.

<sup>67</sup> Prior to King's encounter with Niebuhr's writings, King was very fond of liberalism and even believed in man's kindness.

conscience and some altruistic impulses. He even considered that education could improve man's sense of justice and free him from egoistic elements. Despite man's improvement at the individual level, there could always be problems at the social level, because the individual and the collective morality could stand, sometimes, in "*contradictory positions.*" Niebuhr also maintained that "*the non-violence of Gandhi had a strategic value for a desperate minority group*"<sup>68</sup> such as African-Americans. Both Niebuhr and King pictured a dualism within the individual, finding him both loving and realistic. As individual, everyone should submit to the ethics of Agape, but as member of society, one must take the second best choice: justice. Finally, Niebuhr also contributed to King's sense of the urgency of a more participatory role for the government, commenting that the government should redeem the sins of the individual.

According to John Ansbro, Walter Rauschenbusch's *Theology of the Social Gospel* was used by King in order to support his claims for a more participatory role of the Christian Church in the transformation of obsolete and corrupt structures. Drawing Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, King asserted that the church's ultimate goal wasn't only to guide the individuals on their journey to personal salvation, but to promote a missionary social reform. Much of Rauschenbusch's proposal was used by King to condemn clergymen in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In Rauschenbusch's opinion, "*Christ wanted to establish a society based on love, service and equality*" but "*he considered it necessary to prevent the deep spiritual danger in the search for wealth, because it is difficult to obtain wealth with justice, keep it with equality and spend it with love.*"<sup>69</sup> Christ was seen by Rauschenbusch as a great revolutionary, because despite his commitment to peace, he was willing to use the sword on behalf of man's redemption. In conclusion, it seems as if King believed that Rauschenbusch had deeply contributed to the restructuring of the church's search not only for the spiritual and physical, but also for the economical well-being of the individual. Churches must remain committed to their social mission and as revolutionary as Christ was for the sake of the community.

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<sup>68</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 252.

<sup>69</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente*, 178.

### 3.2.2 GANDHI

*“My love for non-violence is superior to every other thing mundane or supramundane. It is equalled only by my love for truth, which is to me synonymous with non-violence through which and which alone I can see and reach truth (XLII, 484)  
Mohandas Gandhi<sup>70</sup>*

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi started one revolution that deeply influenced the way minority groups were going to fight against any kind of oppression, as he led Indians in South Africa to a better legal situation, and later his country, India, to independence from the British Empire. Gandhi had a great impact on many great black religious leaders since his involvement in South Africa, but it was not until Martin Luther King’s encounter with Gandhian thought that his teaching affected the African – American cause.

During his college years in England, Gandhi didn’t only become a great lawyer, but also got more and more involved with the idea of returning love for hatred, and good for evil. While living in South Africa, he got in touch with Quakers, who got him closer to the Christian teachings. Quakers are best known “*not only for their consistent testimony against war, but for a commitment to a total way of life which is the invariable accompaniment of genuine non-violence...*”<sup>71</sup> The peaceful way of living of the Quakers had a great influence on Gandhi. Later on, he was also introduced to the Islam by Carlyle’s *Hero Worship*. His interest on Islam increased as he read the life of the Prophet Mohammed, whose poverty and humility made him stronger. After having read as many books as possible on Christianity and Islam, Gandhi decided to go back to his own Hinduistic religious roots.

It wasn’t only Hinduistic teachings that enabled the creation of his philosophy. Western political thought, as well as Christianity and Islam, contributed to it. Christianity’s *Sermon on the Mount* got him closer to the idea “*to love enemies and not to resist evil by violent means*”,<sup>72</sup> while Islam encouraged him to become a humble person who should resist any kind of humiliation. There had been many Western philophers who got Gandhi’s attention, but both

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<sup>70</sup> Cited in Bock, *The Mahatma and Mother India: Essays on Gandhi’s Non-Violence and Nationalism*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> William Nelson Stuart, “The Tradition of Non-violence and Its Underlying Forces” *The Journal of Religious Thought* (undated): 129.

<sup>72</sup> Bock, *The Mahatma and Mother India: Essays on Gandhi’s Non-Violence and Nationalism*, 7.



Ruskin<sup>73</sup> and Emerson introduced him to the concepts of military heroism and discipline for peaceful goals, by using creative and not destructive weapons. Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience reinforced his beliefs, even if he read it after having started his campaign in South Africa. Tolstoy's *Kingdom of God is within You*<sup>74</sup> was the most important Western work to influence Gandhi's philosophy. Gandhi's fervent admiration for Tolstoy turned into a great friendship with a constant letter exchange on political topics. According to George Woodcock, Gandhi became the softened implementation of Tolstoy's philosophy, because Gandhi tried to transform the world by *the spirit of love* and not by *a passion of hatred*.<sup>75</sup>

*Satyagraha* shouldn't be only considered passive resistance, but also a conflict solving theory with great success, because it is a collective achievement of practical objectives. The two main types of *Satyagraha* are non-cooperation and civil disobedience. First, *non-cooperation* doesn't break any law, but encourages people to manifest their dissatisfaction with a state or a private group in the community by the implementation of different means of protest, such as sit-ins, strikes and boycotts. Second, *civil disobedience* means the breaking of an unjust law on behalf of a higher law which expresses truth. In order to achieve real success and unconditional support of the followers, the movement needs to find a symbol that is common and clear to all. The movement also encourages people to accept suffering as means for change and improvement. Despite the simplicity of this technique, the level of spiritual sacrifice was too high and many followers tended to lose their conviction after some time. Gandhi truly believed in the success of *Satyagraha*, later known as passive resistance, but he always emphasized that passive resistance should never be used without a real and just cause. Gandhi's philosophical theory became not only the pillar for India's independence struggle, but also for King's civil rights movement, because King like Gandhi believed that "*Satyagraha could generate sufficient spiritual force to transform the world.*"<sup>76</sup> Gandhi was also a committed multicultural pacifist, whose ideas may have had also a great impact on King's notion of a beloved community.

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<sup>73</sup> Ruskin's mail proposals were: 1) individual well-being comes along with common well-being; 2) the work of a lawyer has the same value and relevance as the work of a barber, because both win their living with their hard working; and 3) the artisan's and farmer's life is worth of be lived as a real life.

<sup>74</sup> In this book, Tolstoy condemned Christian Churches of all denominations for perverting the true teaching of Christ to maintain their power over the masses, and had drawn pointed attention to the contradiction between Christ's teachings and the daily life of Christians.

<sup>75</sup> George Woodcock, *Gandhi* (Barcelona: Ediciones Grijalbo, 1973), 39.

<sup>76</sup> Bock, *The Mahatma and Mother India: Essays on Gandhi's Non-Violence and Nationalism*, 12.

Even if King was the most important African–American who promoted the full application of Gandhi’s teachings of non-violence and non- co-operation, many other black American religious leaders had become aware of Gandhi’s techniques and success in India, prior to King’s movement. Searching for a response to the race issue in the United States, some black religious leaders approached Gandhi through Christianity, considering him a Hindu who followed the way of Christ. His method was truly admired by both religious leaders and Marcus Garvey whose nationalistic tendency got him closer to Gandhi’s struggle for India’s independence.

One of the first black intellectuals to introduce Gandhi to the black American audience was DuBois, whose newspaper reported constantly about Gandhi’s philosophy, methods and application during India’s independence struggle. For many blacks, Gandhi became a living symbol of the end of tyranny. DuBois called for the emergence of a Black Gandhi: “... *if we had a Gandhi, the Negroes of the US could learn a great lesson from the emaciated, quiet but resolute Gandhi,*” and later stated “... *that his message of love and peace and struggle based on non-violent no cooperation offered a way and a hope.*”<sup>77</sup> Ever since the early 1940s, some NAACP’s leaders, especially A. Phillips Randolph, proposed the implementation of Gandhian philosophy for the struggle, but without great acceptance. Convinced that “*Gandhian methods were suitable to all countries and all eras*”,<sup>78</sup> Randolph supported the application of *Satyagraha*.

Suddenly, as King attended a lecture by Mordecai Johnson, he felt deeply encouraged by Johnson’s fervent admiration for Gandhi:

As he listened to Mordecai Johnson, he found his scepticism melting before an oratorical onslaught. Why was Gandhi a great man? asked Johnson. On five counts. He had liberated India. He did it without firing a shot. He embraced the Untouchables as children of God and made a place for them in a society that had excluded them, segregated them. For his exemplary and saintly personal life alone, he was a great man, But the capstone of it all, said Johnson, was this: he had shown how to harness the redemptive power of love to social issues, and through it, change had come. He had even, like Christ, died a redemptive death which abated the fearful strife between Hindus and Muslims that had raged after independence.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Kapur, *Raising a Prophet: The African - American Encounter with Gandhi*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> Woodcock, *Gandhi*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> Kapur, *Raising a Prophet: The African - American Encounter with Gandhi*, 147.

King was part of the decades-old tradition of the African-American search for meaning in the Gandhi-led Indian freedom movement. Gandhi's transference of love and respect from the individual to the collective frame was enthusiastically adopted by King, who saw in this approach a continuation of Martin Buber's Doctrine of Personalism, which contended, "*we must look to personality for the meaning of the universe.*"<sup>80</sup>

King adapted Gandhi's techniques as an instrument for social and collective transformation, which blacks could be taught to use in their struggle against oppression and injustice. According to the black leader, by using non-violence, "*the Negro had to win and vindicate his dignity in order to merit and enjoy his self-esteem, only in that way the superior force of the oppressor will become powerless.*"<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, despite all efforts undertaken by King, Gandhi's methods were accepted by King's followers only for a time during the struggle; they later were replaced by other forms of protest guided by Black Nationalism, such as Black Power and the Black Panthers, influenced by the Black Muslims and Malcolm X. Nevertheless, it is a fact that "*non-violence was the catalyst that compelled the federal government to act and the federal courts to render decisions in support of the civil rights.*"<sup>82</sup>

### 3.2.3 HENRY DAVID THOREAU

*"A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of change, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority."*<sup>83</sup>

Henry David Thoreau, who was born July 12th, 1817, became one of the most important writers of his generation. His transcendentalist writings were to influence some XXth century struggles worldwide. Up to the present day, he is considered by many as "*the closest approximation to a folk hero that America has ever seen,*"<sup>84</sup> as well as one who "*marked better perhaps than any other figure in our social history the distance we have travelled in our progress*

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<sup>80</sup> Waltson, *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 44.

<sup>81</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (NY: Mentor, 1964), 40.

<sup>82</sup> Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Militant Non-violence*, 139.

<sup>83</sup> Cited in Sherman, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, 152.

<sup>84</sup> Richard J. Schneider, *Approaches to Teaching Thoreau's Walden and other Works* (NY: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996), 78.

*from the unity of the one to the unity of the many.*”<sup>85</sup> Early in his life, Thoreau came under Emerson’s influence and became a member of a group of intellectuals<sup>86</sup> who developed a new kind of philosophical vision of life and society, American transcendentalism. He has been defined throughout history in many different ways. For some he was an escapist from civilization, for others an honorable and honest man who would listen to his conscience rather than to a law in order to create a better society and a more trustful political system. Regardless of the perspective, he was an eclectic man “*whose principal achievement was not the creation of a system but the creation of himself, and his principal literary work was, therefore, the presentation of that self in the form of a self-portrait.*”<sup>87</sup>

Transcendentalism has its roots in a German philosophy named Idealism, and it came to the United States through the writing of Carlisle and Coolidge. According to this theory, the main goal of human beings was to live in a divine harmony and in correspondence with divine truth. Transcendentalism encouraged people to live in a greater harmony with nature in order to reach the ultimate knowledge. Its belief in the infinite worthiness of the individual challenged many social convictions of that time, such as the preservation of slavery and the dehumanized treatment of Indians, as well as institutions which enabled, supported and legalized those convictions. Humanity had to seek for the *deeper man*<sup>88</sup> whose constant search enabled man’s own exploration in order to find personal greatness.

Thoreau’s most famous book is *Walden*, in which he described a two-year experience in a small cabin by the Walden Pond. He described this experience as a personal experiment in order to understand the relationship between man and his environment. For many literary critics, *Walden* is Thoreau’s masterpiece, but the essay that had great influence on King’s commitment to civil rights, international politics and universality was the one on civil disobedience. Unlike Rousseau, Thoreau was perhaps an utopist, because he believed in real individual and social change, if the organization of society was able to evolve from corruption. Thoreau’s life was

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<sup>85</sup> Sherman, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, 9.

<sup>86</sup> this group was known as the Concord group of transcendentalist.

<sup>87</sup> Walter Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (NY: New York University Press, 1959), 132.

<sup>88</sup> the deeper man was a kind of single man loyal to his beliefs and conscience.

defined by constant withdrawal - first, from *civilization and materialistic values* in *Walden*, and second, from *a corrupt government*<sup>89</sup> in “Civil Disobedience”.

### 3.2.3.1 CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

King had his first contact with Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience” as a student at Morehouse College. He was amazed and grateful to have found a man willing to refuse to cooperate with a system of wrongdoing. Most of Thoreau’s influence on King was due to his refusal to support the American government, which at that time supported slavery, mistreatments of Native Americans, and the Mexican War. Not willing to obey such a government, Thoreau withdrew from a society that he considered full of vices and abuses, and he invited citizens to confront the actions of the majority, because “*there wasn’t enough virtue in the actions of human masses*”.<sup>90</sup> In Michael Meyer’s characterization, “*Thoreau makes a case for disobeying unjust civil government and also for behaving civilly when engaged in disobedience against the state.*”<sup>91</sup>

Thoreau wanted to reach a transformation of the government by inviting people to break the law if the only purpose of the government was injustice to others. People didn’t have or need to obey an unjust government. Thoreau was convinced that only when a true respect for the individual was reached, had democracy finally concluded its progress. According to Sudarshan Kapur, the importance of Thoreau was defining for King’s movement:

Thoreau remains still the great theorist of this movement, while non-violence was the all-sided sword, and Gandhi was its latest prophet.<sup>92</sup>

Thoreau wasn’t the first philosopher to deal with civil disobedience. Others, such as Socrates, St. Thomas of Aquinas and Saint Augustine, made important contributions to this concept. Socrates supported the idea of disobeying any unjust law, due to his constant quest for true knowledge of the authentic, objective morality. He also said that laws offered people the opportunity to disobey them or to persuade them of the law’s injustice. Second, St. Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio* asserted that an unjust law isn’t a law at all. Augustine wasn’t an advocate of

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<sup>89</sup> Sherman, *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 151.

<sup>90</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: El desarrollo de una mente*, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Schneider, *Approaches to Teaching Thoreau’s Walden and other Works*, 151.

<sup>92</sup> Kapur, *Raising a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi*, 111.

civil disobedience, however, due to his religious conviction that made him believe that the subjects had the moral duty to obey their governors, even tyrants, because of their God-given authority. Civil obedience was not the obligation of the people, unless a human law was against a divine law. In such cases, he legitimized civil disobedience. Third, St Thomas of Aquinas proposed that an unjust law is a human law that is not based on the eternal and natural law. In the case of the existence of such law, he supported civil disobedience in order to destroy it.

Having got the best possible academic formation for a middle class black American and being formed within the religious tradition, King not only used Thoreau's, but also these three representatives' definitions of civil disobedience, as he developed his own philosophical theory. All these contributions are implicitly present in King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail.":

...One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters... They were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values of our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.<sup>93</sup>

King introduced Thoreau's ideas during the bus boycott in Montgomery. He wanted his followers to be loyal to their conscience and to God. People should reject a system that wasn't based on democracy, morality and virtue, but on abuse, overthrowing of real democratic laws and supportive of racist theories. Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" could be considered the philosophical basis of King's movement, but according to John J. Ansbro there are at least three great differences between the two men's applications of civil disobedience. First, Thoreau's speeches made people think more than once that he really intended the destruction of the political system rather than only its improvement, while King's protests never embraced such kind of intention. Second, Thoreau's path to rebellion made him be considered a philosophical anarchist. He was very fond of Kant's moral autonomy and deeply supported the individual's independence within society. In contradiction to Thoreau's individualism, King's theological and philosophical background gave him a strong sense and necessity of community. Thoreau wished the government to be reduced to the least possible, while King wished a more determined participation of federal government in the affairs of its citizens, and he encouraged blacks and whites to become more and more participative in the political decision making process. Third,

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<sup>93</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 100.

Thoreau considered the use of violence as a justifiable way to reach social justice, while King never proposed the use of violence in order to reach his goals, despite all the aggressions and attacks he suffered. According to Thoreau, a man was a superior power to government and thus had the right to exercise his independent power over the government, he had created to protect and not to abuse him. Despite the differences between Thoreau and King, King remained an admirer of Thoreau's philosophy and affirmed in 1962 that "*the teachings of Thoreau still are relevant nowadays; actually, today more than ever before.*"<sup>94</sup>

### 3.3 KING AND AMERICA

*"Men make their own history but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transformed from the past."*  
James H. Cone<sup>95</sup>

Martin Luther King was a man who wanted to end segregation in the South, but he envisioned much more than just legal desegregation. He wanted men of all races and beliefs to become brothers and live in a nation guided by God's laws, full of sharing, respect, equality and love among men. As he accepted a pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama, considered the "cradle of the Confederacy" for its devotion to Southern tradition, and where the most brutal kind of racism could be found, King had major goals to reach and many dreams to fulfil.

Black political and religious leaders became more and more aware of the necessity of a black leader who could speak to and unite all African-Americans, as well as win the white liberals' support, in order to change African-American destiny forever. People had to be willing to follow a man, to embrace his teachings and to fight on his side, like Indians did with Gandhi. As one black minister once commented, "*if we had a Gandhi in this country- or, better yet, if we had the following of a Gandhi in this country - we might liberate ourselves from some of the ills*

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<sup>94</sup> Ansbro, *Martin Luther King Jr.; El desarrollo de una mente*, 121.

<sup>95</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America : A Dream or a Nightmare*, 20.

*of which we complain. The man who would undertake to be a Gandhi in this country would probably be called a fool”*<sup>96</sup>

King had the chance to become that foolish man, when the “cradle of Confederacy” was shaken by one woman’s courage in 1955. The moment Rosa Parks got imprisoned for refusing to stand up in a segregated bus, King’s life jumped out of anonymity. It wasn’t King who began the movement; rather, it was the movement that made 26-year-old King its leader. Great men seem to emerge at the right time in the right place in order to achieve major transformations, not only for a specific group, or a country, but for humanity. No one in Montgomery could even imagine that the movement would give the world a great leader, one of the sort that appeared “*once in a millennium.*”<sup>97</sup> The moment King was chosen as the leader of the movement by the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), he had the opportunity to present the world a “*philosophy of non-violence that was a synthesis of the teachings of Jesus and Gandhi. While the Sermon on the Mount provided the motivating ideal of love, Gandhi provided the method of mass non-violent direct action.*”<sup>98</sup>

Along with other black organizations such as the NAACP, King organized the Black Church and Montgomery’s black community for a bus boycott that lasted 12 months, until the economic effects of the boycott severely affected the bus company, which finally decided to make an arrangement with the black community and end segregation in all of its buses. This economic boycott was one of Gandhi’s proposed methods of opposing injustice, in order to affect the oppressors’ economy directly and force them to accept the demands of the oppressed. King made a ringing call, “*if we are wrong – Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth! If we are wrong – justice is a lie! And we determined here in Montgomery - to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream!*”<sup>99</sup> He was answered by the entire black community, whose members preferred to walk several miles from home to work rather than use public transportation.

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<sup>96</sup> cited in Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi*, 49.

<sup>97</sup> Eddie N. Whithams, “What if Martin Luther King Were Alive Today?” *Focus* Vol 15, No. 2, February 1987, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Militant Non-violence*, 25.

<sup>99</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*, 141.



King and his closest collaborators took part in frustrating negotiations with the Bus Company and members of local and state government. In the process, they tried to maintain people's hope and increase their courage, so that they would stand up as long as was required. King always comforted his followers with Rosa Park's supportive phrase that became symbolic of the movement: "*my feets is tired, but my soul is rested.*"<sup>100</sup> As time passed and the black community's conviction and resistance increased, established organizations from the bus company up to the federal government had to recognize that it wasn't a game played by foolish black children, but a real protest conducted by 45,000 men and women fed up with injustice. The Supreme Court had again to make an important and urgent decision regarding segregation in public transportation, which had been established in the Jim Crow laws.

During those 12 months, King's collaborators increased constantly and the people cheerfully accepted white threats, bombing and jailing.<sup>101</sup> Meanwhile King himself took part in all the conventions and lectures that he could in order to present and promote the campaign against segregation. The black movement captured the attention of the nation and the rest of the world, as King stood in front of his followers and called for democracy. According to Burns, his efforts were "*also the introduction on a wide scale of a philosophy and form of protest quite new to the American social scene.*"<sup>102</sup> The capitulation of the bus company, and the Supreme Court's decision that segregation on buses was unconstitutional, marked the end of the Montgomery movement and the rise of King as a new American leader, whose uniqueness "*let the others show their real strength and their real charisma and force.*"<sup>103</sup>

Sen. James Eastland, speaking for white segregationists, declared that "*all the people of the South are in favour of segregation... and Supreme Court or no Supreme Court we are going to maintain segregation down in Dixie.*"<sup>104</sup> But despite such opposition, the Montgomery bus boycott was for all black Americans "*a great victory of American democracy and an icon for*

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 149

<sup>101</sup> King and other 89 boycott leaders were once found guilty of violating a 35-year-old statute prohibiting "interference with a business". King was even sentenced to a fine of \$500 or 386 days of hard labour, but as bus segregation was declared unconstitutional, his conviction was nullified.

<sup>102</sup> Burns, *The Voices of American Protest in America*, 41.

<sup>103</sup> Clayborne Carson, "The King Within Us All: Charismatic Label Obscures His True Role and Legacy" *Focus*, February 1984, 7.

<sup>104</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 136.

*pacifist devotions.*”<sup>105</sup> King became the man of the moment, but he didn’t intend for this struggle to end in Montgomery; indeed, he intended to spread this revolutionary feeling and contagious hope throughout American soil. He soon became aware of the key role of the Black Church as a means to this end, and decided to work through the Baptist Convention. King chose his most intimate collaborators very carefully. Among many others, there were James Lawson, a black missionary instructed in Gandhian methods; Bayard Rustin, a Northern upper class black; and Ralph Abernethy, King’s closest friend and right handman.

The Supreme Court’s decision on educational desegregation in 1954 found great resistance in Southern states, mainly in Arkansas, where both citizens and the authorities opposed the assistance of black students to white schools. Thereafter, as the federal government was forced to send federal troops to Little Rock, black leaders realized that it could become a strong ally for their struggle. King, meanwhile, kept preaching his philosophy of non-violence as the only possible way to end a segregation, about which he commented, “*I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism.*”<sup>106</sup> King not only presented his philosophy within the boundary of America, but he also travelled to Africa, where he was invited to celebrate Ghana’s Independence Day.

Dixie segregationist states struck back at the Supreme Court’s decision and signed the Southern Manifesto, opposing the end of segregation, while King invited America to join his philosophy of non-violence. King’s deep belief in the power of Christian love led him to the conviction that justice could be achieved. Unlike other black leaders, King wasn’t only interested in the future of the African-Americans, but of Americans as a whole. King reinforced the black man’s self-esteem and made him understand that “*the right to protest against mistreatment was both a constitutional right and a biblical principle.*”<sup>107</sup>

King didn’t stand still for a single moment, and he wrote several essays and one main book, *Stride to Freedom*, during the last years of the 1950s. His life was even in danger as he was stabbed by a demented woman in Harlem in 1958. The nation was shocked by the notice of

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<sup>105</sup> Robert F. Williams, “Can Negroes Afford to Be Pacifists?” *Liberation* Vol. V, No. 6/7, September 1959, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Essays that Changed the World*, 33.

<sup>107</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, 124.

King's possible death, but he survived with renewed strength to keep his movement alive. For the successful accomplishment of his purpose, he decided to visit India and explore Gandhi's instruction in non-violence by the use of *Satyagraha*. This trip intensified his faith in the power of Christian love and encouraged him to continue fighting, despite the increasing wave of brutal attacks on Southern blacks.

In 1960 King felt forced, due to lack of time, to resign his Montgomery pastorate and moved to Atlanta, where he became the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, whose main aim was to assure a larger participation from all black Baptist ministers in the boycotts that were spreading throughout the South. Despite friendlier relations between the civil rights movement and the federal government, some important politicians and the chief of the FBI considered King as a dangerous Communist, for his policy of social protest demonstrations. According to Jules Archer, one of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's main goals was "*to prevent the rise of a black messiah who could unify and electrify a coalition of militant Black Nationalist groups.*"<sup>108</sup> Up to his death, King was never frightened by Hoover's accusations.

The beginning of the 1960s was marked by the rise of black student organizations, whose members had become impatient in their struggle for equality. Two of the most important organizations were CORE and SNCC, which initiated a campaign of non - violent sit-ins in order to achieve the integration of lunch counters and other public facilities.<sup>109</sup> The use of non-violence by such organizations indicated the impact and influence that King had already won over the American masses. Devoted to Christ teaching of "love your enemy", and inspired by King's words, "we shall overcome", students throughout the South were arrested and imprisoned for sitting in in public facilities that were exclusively for whites. King was the main inspiration for such actions; he made African-Americans understand that finally and despite all past suffering, "*the Negro was then a somebody, he had a sense of somebodiness, and he was impatient to be free.*"<sup>110</sup> Violence increased, as white racist police officers used nightsticks, dogs and high-power fire hoses to brutally win control over the passive demonstrators. Despite the brutality of

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<sup>108</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 137.

<sup>109</sup> Under public facilities it had to be understood: railroad and bus terminals, washrooms, drinking fountains, hotels, parks, beaches and theatres.

<sup>110</sup> King, *Why We Can't Wait?*, 30.

the policy, such actions established continuity with the Montgomery bus boycott, and the resulting national and international media coverage raised King to the level of a living symbol of the American Dream.

King's relation to John F. Kennedy started the moment the latter, still running for president, exerted all possible political pressure to get the former out of jail in Alabama, where he had been accused of falsification of his income taxes. Kennedy's intervention helped him win the presidency through the black vote. But after assuming office, he was pressured by King and the events in the South to establish a more protective and integrationist federal government, despite his fear of losing the support of Southern democrats in Congress. At that point, however, Kennedy wasn't willing to listen to King and "*only spoke the language of gradualism.*"<sup>111</sup> Kennedy never realized that by his own words<sup>112</sup>, he would urge Northern white liberals to join King and the black struggle, giving life to the Freedom Riders,<sup>113</sup> whose trip certainly increased the fire in the burning South. Violence took over at the arrival of the Freedom Riders at each stop in Alabama, revealing to the nation the brutalities of white segregationists not only against black but also white students.

Having gained national and international attention, King decided to strike the fortress of white supremacy, Birmingham, whose police chief, Bull Connor, was soon to be known nationwide for his brutal attacks on black passive protesters. King not only exerted pressure on the local or state level with his continuous mass protests, but he also went to the White House, demanding civil rights for blacks. King's warning was very clear: unless Kennedy was willing to support the civil rights struggle, he was going to confront a bloody revolution spreading from the South to the rest of the nation. Unfortunately, King didn't receive the support he expected from Kennedy who didn't want "*to jeopardize their political support in the South.*"<sup>114</sup> Despite the White House's denial, King and his followers decided to move to Birmingham and start the greatest mass passive resistance movement the United States had ever witnessed.

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<sup>111</sup> Nieman, *Promises to Keep: African-Americans and the Constitutional Order, 1776 to the Present*, 164.

<sup>112</sup> "Ask not what your country can do for you- but what you can do for your country"

<sup>113</sup> The Freedom Riders were a group formed by white and black students who intended to travel across the segregated Southern states in order to the lunch counter and bathrooms at any terminal where they stopped.

<sup>114</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing to Change*, 233.

The transformation of Birmingham into “*the centre of antidiscrimination activity in the nation*”<sup>115</sup> was undertaken with varied tactics. A black boycott of all stores was launched, followed by daily demonstration marches. Bull Connor’s reaction, as Chief of the Birmingham Police, was one of the most brutal ever seen, and hundreds of black protesters were imprisoned during the first week of the movement. People were willing to follow King to prison or even to the last consequences. It seemed as if they felt that God was on their side and leading them to freedom in the person of King. Despite the brutality of the local police, the Kennedy administration wasn’t willing to get involved in the conflict, not even after King and Abernathy got arrested and thrown into solitary confinement. During his imprisonment, King had the opportunity to write a letter intended to change the position toward the movement of both the federal government and the Christian Church. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” expressed his discontent with the position assumed by the Kennedy administration, as well as the lack of support of the Christian Church for the human dignity and the civil rights of millions of African-Americans. In this letter, he justified his commitment to passive resistance and, responding to charges of extremism, made reference to Jesus and the most sacred American heroes in order to argue the urgency of a radical change. “*Wasn’t Jesus an extremist in love,*” he wrote; “*wasn’t Amos an extremist for justice...; wasn’t Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ...; wasn’t Martin Luther an extremist...; wasn’t John Bunyan an extremist...; wasn’t Abraham Lincoln an extremist...; wasn’t Thomas Jefferson an extremist.....; so the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist we will be. Will we be extremists of hate or will we be extremists of love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice – or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?*”<sup>116</sup>

As almost \$50,000 were raised to free the Birmingham prisoners, King saw a dramatic expansion of the movement outside the South. The scenes, broadcasted to all American homes and abroad, of Bull Connor’s unleashed dogs attacking children and his armed officers beating protesters shocked the nation, increased worldwide criticism against segregation in the land that defeated Hitler’s national socialism, made King a real martyr and Connor the human personification of evil, and made Americans demand more federal action from a president

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<sup>115</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 150.

<sup>116</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 94.

“whose image epitomized liberalism and fair play.”<sup>117</sup> For the first time, the civil rights movement had not only a regional, but a national and international impact, forcing the federal government to wake up from its position of *laissez faire* and make civil rights a top priority, “something that no American president since Ulysses Grant had done.”<sup>118</sup>

As the situation became even more unbearable, King expected from his followers an even greater commitment than self-control and suffering. He demanded from them the willingness to die for the cause. During the subsequent marches King’s followers were inducted with a higher degree of moral force in order to resist the fear of death. People marched side by side, inspired by their religious faith and their impatience for equality, singing motivating old Gospel songs of freedom. Unfortunately, some newcomers weren’t able to resist the pressure and responded violently to the attacks. Several cars and white-owned shops were sent on fire. The tragic situation turned into “a vivid demonstration of how suppressed black anger at white opposition could flare into violence.”<sup>119</sup> Finally, Kennedy was forced by such events and international pressure to interfere for the civil rights struggle, despite the possible loss of Southern congressional support. Thanks to Birmingham, the disappointment with which African-Americans had regarded Kennedy vanished, and today he is considered as a president who fought for the civil rights. The truth, however, is that he was forced to do so.

Kennedy’s intervention was a further step taken by federal government against Jim Crow laws after Eisenhower’s sending troops to Little Rock. Even if King decided to trust Kennedy’s promise of support, he kept participating in several marches in neighbouring states while Kennedy pressured Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act.<sup>120</sup> At this moment, King had proven that Christian love can provide moral force and demand for human dignity; that individuals can protest against wrong-doing and achieve some major results; that non-violence is a suitable method for any kind of struggle involving an oppressed minority; and that patriotism could prompt Americans to stand up for their democratic convictions. In Birmingham, King had already become a symbol of American democracy, but it was in his culminating March on

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<sup>117</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing to Change*, 271.

<sup>118</sup> Nieman, *Promises to keep: African-Americans and the Constitutional Order, 1776 to the Present*, 169.

<sup>119</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 155.

<sup>120</sup> The Civil Rights Act was passed by Congress in order to assure all Americans equal rights, equal opportunities, equal protection, the end of discrimination and the right to vote, despite their race and beliefs.

Washington that King became part of the American myth. This march had two main purposes: first, to symbolize the entire struggle by the presence of thousands of people; and second, to secure action.<sup>121</sup>

Despite the little support that the March on Washington got from the Kennedys, who were afraid of black radicals' participation in it, and despite Hoover's fear of King's "communism", the march took place in front of almost 250,000 people in 1963. The multiracial crowd of all religious backgrounds left an unforgettable image on America; and King delivered his most important and profound speech, which proclaimed the rebirth of America, based on the grounds that the Founding Fathers proposed, but transformed by redeemed Americans, all sharing from God's love and willing to spread this greatness to the rest of the world. King's speech, which had the form of a black Gospel sermon, came direct from his heart, and was mostly impromptu. This sermon was aimed not only to black and white Americans, but to all mankind, the beloved community. For the first time, it was really clear that "*Negro problem is really a white problem.*"<sup>122</sup> The moment King finished his speech became the moment of his glorification and sanctification.

Segregationists knew that King may have not won the war yet, but he had conquered the heart of millions of Americans, who finally realized that it was high time to renew American principles and apply them to African-Americans. In reaction, several attacks and bombings took place in Southern states. After Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, a Southerner came into office. Despite his origins, Johnson urged Congress to pass the Civil Rights Bill. King's rising prestige put him on the cover of *Time Magazine*, which had chosen him "Man of the Year 1964". King had always been an extremely humble man, who acknowledged and was grateful for the work of the others and recognized their importance in the movement. He stated "*I would like to think that my selection wasn't a personal tribute, but a tribute to the whole freedom movement.*"<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Mitsuaki Hayase, "A Rhetorical Criticism of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream'" *The Review of Inquiry and Research*, No. 50 (July 1989): 76.

<sup>122</sup> Thomas Merton, "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal" *Ramparts* Vol 2, No. 3, Christmas 1963, 17.

<sup>123</sup> Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 161.

1964 was King's year. The Civil Rights Bill was passed, ending segregation; he was called "Man of the Year" by *Time Magazine*; and he even was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. At the ceremony in Oslo, King remarked that the prize honored not him, but the justice that had defeated evil, and stated that "*I accept this prize on behalf of all men who love peace and brotherhood.*"<sup>124</sup> It seemed like the culmination of his search, but King was a man committed to Christian love and the social gospel. With the Nobel Prize, King felt himself "*commissioned as a spokesperson for world peace and justice for the oppressed – especially the people of Vietnam.*"<sup>125</sup> Therefore, he stood up not only for his race, but for all men who were oppressed or economically exploited. Further marches, including the largest that occurred during the King years, from Selma to Montgomery, led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By now, all such marches were protected by federal troops, due to in part fear of an attempt to murder King by the Ku Klux Klan.

King's dream of legal integration and enfranchisement was reached after the March from Selma, but there still was a great number of Americans who weren't able to become part of the American Dream. King's conviction of equality applied not only to the black cause, but to all unprivileged Americans. There could not be real satisfaction until all men enjoyed legal, religious, social and economic equality. After Selma, King decided to take a more active role in the search for social and economic equality for all. This new struggle brought him closer to the universal vision of social democracy, but further away from the federal government and American public opinion. According to John J. Cone, there were three factors that formed the context for Martin King's idea of the American Dream: *1) the images of the North and the South in the consciousness of black and white Americans during the 1950s and 1960s; 2) the emergence of a resistance movement among the Southern black masses; and 3) the resurgence of black nationalism in the North, especially as defined by the Black Muslims and Malcolm X.*<sup>126</sup>

Both King and the federal government started a campaign to combat poverty, but the latter soon abandoned the cause, as the United States entered the Vietnam War; and the former launched his campaign in the Northern ghettos, where he found a completely different kind of

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<sup>124</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 111.

<sup>125</sup> Michael V. Namorato, *Have We Overcome?: Race Relations since Brown* (Mississippi: Jackson University Press of Mississippi, 1979), 63.

<sup>126</sup> Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America : A Dream or a Nightmare*, 120.



angry African-American, not willing to adopt his philosophy of non-violence. Blacks in the North had not suffered under Jim Crow laws, but the kind of social and economic segregation that existed there forced them to live under the worst socio-economic conditions. Northern blacks had also a greater self-esteem than Southern blacks, due in part to the influence of black nationalism extending back to Marcus Garvey. Their methods of protest were much more aggressive, influenced by militants like Malcolm X, Bobby Seale and Stokely Carmichael. King wasn't their man of the moment, and he even had to recognize that his leadership got lost, as impatient Northern young blacks started a wave of riots throughout Northern cities. Even King-inspired organizations such as CORE and SNCC were plagued with nationalistic ideas, which in the end caused their followers to abandon non-violence.

Due to his opposition to the Vietnam War – he considered it immoral - King lost the support of the federal government and public opinion, which was blinded by America's patriotic commitment to Manifest Destiny. He also lost the support of many to whom he had been close and who wanted him to stay in the terrain of civil rights. They failed to understand that by opposing such a war King was only defending universal civil rights. He didn't see the US involvement in Vietnam “ *as an isolated aberration, but as part of a wider pattern of suppression that embraced Africa and Latin America in addition to Southeast Asia.*”<sup>127</sup> Even if there was an increasing disillusion with King's words, America was much more frightened of the riots that had shaken the nation in the summer of 1967 in cities like Detroit, Chicago and Newark. These black militants represented a new version of Black Nationalism -Black Power within the context of the Negro Revolution, “*a revolution of rising expectations and the repetition of the experience of many other ethnic groups whose assimilation to America has included the conscious mobilization of their political power.*”<sup>128</sup> They weren't like King's followers who would turn the other cheek. They were brutally aggressive and nurtured a tremendous hatred against whites.

In order to resist the increasing popularity of Black Power, King planned the Poor People's March on Washington, as part of his commitment to the causes of underprivileged Americans, in 1968. During that year, he grew more and more aware that he could get killed for

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<sup>127</sup> Adam Fairclough, “Was Martin Luther King a Marxist?” *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians*, Issue 15 (Spring 1983): 121.

<sup>128</sup> Edmund K. Faltenmeyer, *The Negro and the City* (NY: Time-Life Books, 1968), 28.

his radical vision of the Vietnam War and his social democracy. Shortly prior to his death, in one of his most acclaimed speeches<sup>129</sup>, he seemed to have foreseen his death:

I don't know what will happen to me now.... But I am not concerned about that. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that tonight we as people will get to the Promised Land. So I am happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.<sup>130</sup>

King delivered this last sermon on April 3, 1968, on what turned out to be the eve of his assassination, at Mason Temple, a church in Memphis. It soon elevated him to the level of a prophet for having announced his martyrdom and seen the promised land.

King was perhaps the most misunderstood man of his time. He was the greatest American visionary of the XXth century, one who didn't invent any machine or modern economic system, but who envisioned the best mankind had to offer. He framed that vision first for the American context and set it before the entire world, making people conscious of what they ought to be. He was a man of great convictions who wouldn't stand still, whatever the reaction of others. He was also a man totally committed since childhood to God, for being "*the central truth of man.*"<sup>131</sup> He was also a great patriot who loved America and its democracy, because "*the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right.*"<sup>132</sup> He was also a man who believed in the struggle for just causes, because "*injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*"<sup>133</sup>

The Vietnam War, he believed, was such an injustice, though people started to comprehend his total commitment to peace too late, long after his death and the economic depression into which the war brought the United States. He was a man who loved his fellowmen and who loved his country so much that he had to tell the truth about it, because love demands criticism from the ones who love us. Like Christ, he was a prophet whose life had to be sacrificed for the sake not only of America, but of humankind. He was considered a bad nigger, a

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<sup>129</sup> King was that night in Memphis, Tennessee, to give support to the African - American sanitation workers' strike against unfair labour practices.

<sup>130</sup> Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 203.

<sup>131</sup> Waltson, *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 52.

<sup>132</sup> Nieman, *Promises to Keep: African-Americans and the Constitutional Order, 1776 to the Present*, 150.

<sup>133</sup> Richard Foster, "A Gentle Man of Eloquence" *The Chicago Sun Times*, 21 April 1968, 6.

fool, a utopian, a dreamer, a Communist, and much more..., but King is, indeed, an important part of the best America had to offer in the XXth century.