

CHAPTER IV

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR, THE ALL-AMERICAN SYMBOL

4.1 INTRODUCTION

*“In a nation tenaciously racist, a black man sensitized its conscience;
in a nation sick with violence, a black man preached love;
in a world embroiled in three wars in twenty years,
a man preached peace.”
Harry Belafonte¹*

Throughout the world the concept of America is associated with the principles of freedom, equality and democracy, its founding goals that were inspired by the ideals and hopes of the Enlightenment. These principles became sacred fundamentals of the American Creed that had led the nation ever since. They are part of the best achievements in political philosophy that mankind has to offer, but they have been betrayed and almost displaced by corrupted ideas that poisoned the hearts and minds of Americans. Almost 150 years after the foundation of America, a Southern black preacher stood up and told the sick nation that “*we must leave our most strident beliefs behind in order to move forward.*”²

Martin Luther King Jr. challenged the nation to return to the ideals of the pilgrims and the Founding Fathers. He stood in the shadow of racial segregation that was devastating the soul of America, but he became the latest color-blind, all-American symbol of democracy and providence. Like the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine, King’s rethoric portrayed the nation’s political achievements and flaws, its commitment to democracy and unjust causes, the spirit and hopes of an era, and America’s redemption. King became the symbol of his generation - one of great spiritual and political changes - reminding Americans, first, of the evil and the good that exist in constant struggle within each person; and secondly, of the way America ought to be.

¹ Cited in -----; “A Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.” *Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts*, January 1971, 1b

² Dyson, *I May not Get there with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, x.

In this chapter, I will first portray the importance of King as a the symbol of the American myth for his generation, of the redefinition of America and her American Dream. He was loyal to the American values of freedom, democracy and equality, but he was also committed to the struggle for equal distribution of wealth, so that each human being could reach his personal version of the American Dream. King's fierce involvement in this struggle, first within American boundaries and later worldwide, made him the best American ambassador of the real concept of democracy. King symbolized not only the America of the Founding Fathers, but also mankind's dream of human equality. He devoted his life to America's redefinition as a nation and in the world community, for King *"was a man who knew his own destiny, he understood his grand place in the history of the South, the United States, and the black people of the world."*³

King was also an intensely religious man who devoted his life to fulfil what he considered God's will on earth. *"King isn't another Negro fighting for his rights;"* wrote one editorialist, *"he is a minister of God, a disciple of the prince of peace and of Gandhi."*⁴ King's life was full of contradictory feelings from total despair to the greatest hope. It was his deep belief in Christian love that led him to sacrifice himself for the sake of his American people. He believed that the basis for any social change had to be initiated not in the minds but in the hearts of men, because through the latter they get closer to God, who is the greatest source of inspiration, and whose light would guide even the most corrupted man out of hell. Inspired by Christ and Gandhi, King felt called by God to martyrdom in order to save all Americans from the darkness in which they had been living. He embraced suffering and death as part of his contribution to the creation of a better America, the promised land of his dreams, because *"we who love America must criticize her because we love her."*⁵

4.2 THE WAY TO MARTYRDOM

Martin Luther King is not only the product of America itself, or of his intensive studies of political philosophy, but much more he is the embodiment of a sense of divine love. Ever since

³ Tom Teepen, "U.S. Suffers Renewal of Racism?" *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 12 October 1985, without page.

⁴ James P. Brown, "Another Opinion: Dr. King's Moral Stand" *The New York Times*, 23 April 1967, without page.

⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter to Reverend James A. Pike" (original source)

his early years, he was in constant contact with the word of God, for both his father and grandfather were Baptist preachers in Atlanta. He attended the best schools, where he was introduced to the writings of the most liberal and radical theologians, who defined his belief in a personalist God. But it was his unlimited devotion to the gospel of Christ that committed him to suffering and sacrifice and that presaged his martyrdom, as his ultimate expression of love to his country.

Almost everything was taken away from African-Americans, except for their religious strength and devotion to the gospel. It was within the fundamentals of the Black Church that the new black leader was raised, because “*people were willing to follow him due to his deep connection with God and because he was a preacher, a kind of Messiah.*”⁶ The waiting ended as Martin Luther King became the symbol of the black struggle in Montgomery. The moment King launched a campaign of Christian love and non-violence, based on Christian moral principles and Gandhian thought, the course of the protest was changed and King became a living symbol of racial justice. The non-violent struggle, he said, would use “*the weapon of love.*”⁷

King’s commitment to Christianity showed the power of religion in the quest for political justice. Following the American tradition of including religion in politics, King reinforced the role of religion as a bridge between what America was and what she should have become. His deep devotion to the religious concepts of justice, Christian love, salvation and redemption changed the course of American history, and he considered them the only possible answer to mankind’s problems. King promoted Christian love as the cure to the poisoned minds who proclaimed “*segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,*”⁸ because legislation could only influence their conduct, but love could change their minds.

King also wanted religion to be re-examined and committed to bettering man’s social condition, for “*religion calls upon people to be of strong convictions, and not of conformity; of moral belief, and not of social respectability; of answering ethical principles, and not of relativism and inefficiency.*”⁹ King insisted on the necessity of faith, because God was a

⁶ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 101.

⁷ Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Non-violence*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid*, 55.

⁹ Waltson, *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 47.

supernatural force that cared for mankind and still was working wonders in history, such as the exaltation of justice in moments of despair. Only with a greater degree of morality and faith within the American collective mind would people be able to recognize the difference between a just and an unjust law, for “*a just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law of God, while an unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.*”¹⁰

King’s confidence in God made him the American symbol of irrevocable faith. He invited Americans to re-evaluate their relationship with God, which had been terribly damaged by a misguided preaching of the gospel and of the teachings of the Bible, as well as by a callous misuse of prayer. Those factors made liberal critics see the American church as a place where “*there is more racial segregation between 11 am and noon on Sunday than at any other hour of the week.*”¹¹ King was convinced that the moment people became aware of their vast possibilities to change their condition, the good in their human nature, supported by God’s grace, would be liberated.

King’s writings and speeches demonstrated a faith in the power of Christian love not only to increase the human dignity of the demander, but also to redeem the sins of the offender. Having been taught by the best American theologians, who shaped his vision of the human nature, this black preacher became a symbol of Christian redemption, for “*if Christianity is saving the Negro, so is he saving Christianity.*”¹² King reminded America constantly of Christianity’s need to return to the beliefs and principles of the first Christians and the puritan pilgrims with their opposition to injustice. All Americans were invited to participate in such a pilgrimage, but mainly America’s clergymen, because “*the church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.*”¹³

King was quite confident that many black and white Americans were going to permit themselves be transformed by the power of love, but he knew that some more challenging measures had to be undertaken in order to transform the entire nation, and especially the

¹⁰ Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Apostle of Non-violence*, 87.

¹¹ Margaret Long, “The Unity of the Rifting Negro Movement” *The Progressive* Vol 28, No.2, February 1964, 10.

¹² Golden, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes*, 26.

¹³ Ronald V. Dellums, “Martin Luther King’s Legacy In 1983” *Fellowship* Vol 49, No. ½, January/February 1983, 15.

Southern segregationists. Inspired by the teachings of Christ and his own faith in God's will, King felt called to suffering and sacrifice for the sake not only of the civil rights struggle, but for the redemption of America's and the salvation of mankind. "*If physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from permanent life of psychological death*" he wrote, "*then nothing could be more honourable.*"¹⁴

Encouraged by King's spiritual leadership, there was an increasing belief that America needed to be redefined, because "*the sin of white America has reached such a proportion that it may call down a dreadful judgement, perhaps total destruction of the whole country, unless atonement is made.*"¹⁵ Perhaps for the first time in American history, a black leader wasn't just struggling for the achievement of equality, but for a fragmented nation that he loved. This kind of unconditional love has the premise of forgiveness, despite all the racist experiences located deep in African-Americans' collective mind. If a person was willing to become a real Christian, he had to be able to love and forgive his enemies, because God loved them, even if they were sinners, offering them the possibility of redemption.

Guided by the teachings of Christ, King followed the steps of his spiritual leader and put his life in the hands of God. America had found then "*the suffering servant, the pure moral leader, the innocent lamb led to the slaughter,*"¹⁶ who, just as Christ did, was going to follow God's will and confront death for the sake of America's and Christianity's redemption. It seemed as if King, through sacrifice, was offering "*the white man a message of salvation*" but that "*the white man is so blinded that he doesn't recognize the peril in which he puts himself by ignoring the offer.*"¹⁷ At that point, many supporters believed that King wasn't just making history, he was regaining America's place as the chosen land and offering all Americans to enter with him into a providential reciprocity willed for the United States by God, who had given America a second chance, before violence, hate and even a possible civil war took over. For them, King wasn't just a prophet of peace or an apostle of non-violence; he was now the new Messiah, who had come to

¹⁴ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that changed the World*, 26.

¹⁵ Merton, "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal", 16.

¹⁶ G. Bryan Mcleod, "The Urge to Hate: A Comparison of James Baldwin And Martin Luther King, Jr. from their Writings" *Foundations* Vol. VII (April 1964): 147.

¹⁷ Merton, "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal", 21.

share with mankind the love and compassion of God. King was a common American, following his providential call, the one the rest of the nation hadn't been willing to listen and to commit to.

King's message of brotherhood and human redemption wasn't going to be easily accepted in a nation divided by a capitalistic system of caste and racial segregation. Therefore, the introduction of the idea of "*a multiracial nation where all groups are dependent on each other*"¹⁸ was predestined, from the very first moment, to find strong resistance, due to Americans' great abuse of their freedom, for it was in their human nature's evil "*to divide, to separate, and to negate*."¹⁹ King was never afraid of the confrontation with other positions within the American political framework. Actually, he was a man of a tremendous moral rectitude who preferred to stand alone against injustice rather than to betray his constant search for truth. He knew that by standing alone, he was going to be judged as a misunderstood prophet or even a dangerous revolutionary, but he wasn't cowed by any criticism. As Ossie Sykes wrote, "*Christian martyrdom becomes the answer in combating the enemies*."²⁰

A racism deeply rooted in the American collective mind, supported by the incapacity of the federal government to overcome it by legal means and the Christian Church's disinterest in preaching the real gospel, became a greater enemy than King had first imagined. Many blacks and whites committed to his call for Christian love, but the majority wasn't yet prepared for such an invitation by a black man, whose commitment to a total collaboration of both races for the sake of the American soul made him the symbol of racial integration. He not only wanted blacks to forgive and love the white supremacist, but he insisted on developing their spiritual capacities to redeem and enlighten him, "*so as not only to save his soul from perdition but also to awaken his mind and his conscience, and stir him to initiate the reform and renewal which may still be capable of saving our society*."²¹

¹⁸ Ethel Shapiro-Bertolini, "I never Died, He Said" *Los Angeles Democratic Socialists of America*, 1984, 17.

¹⁹ Frederick Sontag and John K. Roth; "Martin Luther King and the American Dream" in *The American Religious Experience* (1972): 246.

²⁰ Ossie Sykes, "The Dream World of Rev. King" *The Liberator*, March 1965, 14.

²¹ Merton, "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal", 16.

King's life among blacks and whites made him, like Moses and Gandhi,²² a marginal man, who knew the best virtues and emotions and the worst thoughts and convictions of both races. Such knowledge made it easier for him to expound the greatness of blacks and to attack the advantages of whites in order to create a collaborating and supportive multiracial environment as the basis of a redefined and more democratic America. Racial integration in the American collective mind, and not only in the federal courts, was King's *Leitmotiv*. In his struggle for the spiritual improvement of America, his weaponry was based not only on democratic principles, but on a religious reform, the word of God and the sacrifice of Christ. As a matter of fact, he never really abandoned the basic role of a minister, for all of his speeches were accepted by the audience as a gospel of hope, coming out of the heart of a noble man, "*the symbol of Christianity's latest redemption.*"²³

King embraced the idea of reconstructing the entire American society, not only for the sake of the black oppressed, but also of the white oppressor, because one rotten part could have poisoned the whole society and condemned it to destruction. Until his death, King was obsessed with finding the perfect way by which he could "*press the nation toward its best possibilities, toward its next birth of freedom and justice.*"²⁴ As time passed and the United States entered the Vietnam War, King realized that the only possible way was his personal sacrifice, for as he said, "*a man must conquer the fear of death, otherwise he is already lost.*"²⁵ First, he sacrificed his place in the American collective mind, as he was temporarily displaced from an important symbol of the American Creed to that of a traitor.

It seems as if King offered his life as the symbol of moral force that America needed in the crucial hour. He was a symbol of the highest patriotism, for he implored America to listen to him and to confess her sins in order to reach redemption and to embrace his theory of social liberation and civic virtue. King encouraged Americans to commit to a real patriotism, one that

²² On the one hand, Moses, born of Hebrew parents, was raised by the Pharaoh's sister. His education, as well as his socialization in the two cultures, enabled him a greater understanding of the Egyptian and the Hebrew societies and their problems. On the other hand, Gandhi, born into a wealthy upper class Indian family, received an English education that encouraged him to defend the Indian people from the British Empire, a struggle made more effective by his knowing of the English culture, identity and consciousness.

²³ Jon M. Temme, "Jesus as Trailblazer: The Christology of Martin Luther King, Jr." *The Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 1985): 136.

²⁴ Vincent Gordon Harding, "Beyond Amnesia: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Future of America" *The Journal of American History* Vol. 74, No. 2 (September 1987): 476.

²⁵ Gordon Parks, "A Man who Tried to Love Somebody" *Life*, Vol. 64, No. 16, 19 April 1968, 31.

*“motivated citizens to work for social change through analyzing the shortcomings of our society and working to strengthen the nation’s moral and political life.”*²⁶ As we can see, King’s commitment to the word of God and the life of Jesus wasn’t so far away from his admiration for the American Creed, because in the end both were elementary parts of American Civil Religion. He also showed Americans that Christian love wasn’t entirely different from the love of a nation, because both demanded suffering from the believers in order to defend the principles of justice, freedom and equality.

Despite America’s increasing denial of King in the Vietnam era, he continued loving his country. His unending love and unconditional faith allowed him *“to carry the cross of being his people’s leader with grace and humility.”*²⁷ He apparently knew that he was going to be sacrificed for America’s redemption. The night prior to his assassination, King delivered the most prophetic of his speeches in front of an overcrowded audience, in which he foresaw his death, as well as the culmination of his lifetime commitment to reach the Promised Land. In this final sermon, King was ready for God’s will, for he had spent his entire life preparing himself for such commitment. As he used to say, *“every man should have something to die for, because a man who will not die for something is not fit to live.”*²⁸ He was willing to sacrifice his life for the happiness of his family, the freedom of his people, the redemption of America and peace in a more just world.

King’s assassination paralyzed a nation, the same as Kennedy’s did, for those two great American leaders were killed in their prime. Both assassinations had a tremendous impact on the entire American society, because *“the murder of King on April 4th, 1968, stands with the assassination of president Kennedy as one of the political tragedies in the 1960s that forever changed America, driving a stake through the heart of a nation’s innocence.”*²⁹ King’s killing can be considered by his followers as an injustice of greater magnitude, and by his opponents as the most wonderful gift; but it is a fact that his commitment to America was a great contribution to a better world.

²⁶ Dyson, *I May not Get there with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 231.

²⁷ Durwood Mcalister, “Martin Luther King, Jr. Lanced Boil of Racism” *The Atlanta Journal*, undated, without page.

²⁸ Ernest Dunbar, “A Negro Leader Talks about the Struggle ahead” *Look*, 12 February 1963, 95.

²⁹ Eric Harrison, “The Killing of Dr. King Revisited” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 1994, without page.

Alive, King was already an American symbol, but his martyrdom elevated him to a greater spiritual and unifying symbol for a renewed American society. People who had never been committed to King's cause started wondering about King's special relation to God, while loyal believers related his death to Christ's crucifixion. Both were misunderstood prophets, coming from a minority group, who proposed a radical revolution of values; but even more, both beared all the suffering, carried the collective pain of their people, and let God sacrifice them for redemption. For many, King became the closest the world had to the son of God, the father of Christianity. In their opinion, King was "*the man God wanted for his own. Before God took him from us, he showed the world that brilliance, genius and integrity were not just a contribution of and for any special race.*"³⁰

In the aftermath of his assassination, most American newspapers dedicated several articles to King's life and struggle. Several columnists acknowledged his greatness and his commitment to civil rights, as well as grieved his assassination. For example, *The Washington Post* stated that "*his humanity and his hope were universal, but first and last, he was a black leader,*" and "*Ebenezer Church is Bethlehem, because is the place where Martin was spiritually born.*"³¹ Furthermore, *The Atlanta Constitution* commented that "*Martin Luther King, Jr., was by far the most respected leader of black America. His loss therefore has at least as much impact on negroes as the death of president Kennedy did on the entire nation as a whole,*"³² and "*King was a committed Christian, a great American, a dedicated servant of all mankind. Wisdom and courage were the hallmarks of this man who occupied a rightful place of leadership in the long and sometimes bitter struggle for racial justice in our land.*"³³ A columnist of *The San Francisco Chronicle* wrote, "*I think that white folks will be missing him more than blacks. He led more whites than blacks. He predicted that April will be an extremely bitter month in America.*"³⁴ Finally, *The Chicago Sun-Times* commented that "*King was too good for this world, at least for*

³⁰ -----; "God Talks To Those Who Believe", *The New Courier*, 12 July 1968, without page.

³¹ Jim Bishop, "Assassin's Bullet Creates a Martyr" *The Washington Post*, 16 January 1972, 18A.

³² Eugene Patterson, "Will his Truth March On?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, 6 April 1968, 4.

³³ Eugene Patterson, "Dr. King's Hand Is Gone now" *The Atlanta Constitution*, 6 April 1968, 5.

³⁴ Donald Bess, "The Murder Grieves and Frightens Californians" *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 April 1968, without page.

this country, and there is going to be one last hope that could answer the racial problem in America: let us be thankful for King's martyrdom."³⁵

Not only national but also regional newspapers focused on King's tragic assassination. *The Milwaukee Courier* expressed that "*the death of King came close to Good Friday, the day our Lord was crucified in a time of strife when the oppressed nation of Israel was struggling to be free. King was assassinated when an oppressed nation of Black Americans was striving to be free. King came in the belief that each man was able to control his own destiny, create his own future, develop his own talent and live his own life.*"³⁶ There were several newspapers that accused white extremists of King's death. For example, *The Hartford Courant* asserted that "*at the moment the trigger man fired, Martin Luther King was the free man. The other was a slave to his own sense of inferiority, slave to hatred, a slave to all the bloody instincts that surge in a brain when a human being decides to become a beast.*" This article also gave comfort to a lost America: "*Dr. King's death may bring about what he sought for himself, his people and country. Out of martyrdom must come the right answer.*"³⁷ Others confronted sick America with her responsibility for King's struggle. *The Minneapolis Tribune* wrote, "*he gave the message which God sent him to give and we got the message. If now we fail to hear that message and act on it, we are close to our own destruction.*"³⁸

Some newspapers and magazines criticized America's incapacity for change. For example, *Newsweek* wrote that "*Leaders die. Their images slip into a pleasant blur, not so for King. His history will be unique. Black militants who see him as an Uncle Tom or whites who see only the Christian element in his doctrine both fail utterly to grasp his full significance.*"³⁹ And the *Akron Beacon Journal* lamented that "*the nation grieves for the man, but not for his cause. That is the curse and tragedy of America.*"⁴⁰ Finally, King's alma mater, Crozer Theological Seminary, defined him in *The Voice, A Bulletin of Crozer Theological Seminary* as "*a prophet, but he wasn't simply a prophet to the nation. He was surely not just a prophet to the nation, nor*

³⁵ George M. Fredrickson, "A Legacy of Conscience" *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 21 April 1968, 17.

³⁶ -----; "Speakers Pay Tribute to Dr. King" *The Milwaukee Courier*, 10 April 1971, 2.

³⁷ Ralph McGill, "White Slaves Killed a Free Black Man" *The Hartford Courant*, 9 April 1968, 1.

³⁸ -----; "Clergymen Speak of Dr. King" *The Minneapolis Tribune*, 8 April 1968, without page.

³⁹ -----; "King Is the Man, Oh Lord" in *Newsweek*, 15 April 1968, 35.

⁴⁰ James Reston, "U.S. Grieves for King, but not for his Cause" *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 April 1968, A17.

to the negroes. His prophetic call was as comprehensive as humanity. He was a prophet of freedom. King's commitment to this prophetic principle was his vital strength."⁴¹

King's death sent America into a period of national soul searching, for which a real answer hasn't been found so far. Many efforts have been undertaken to fill the empty space that he has left, but most of them have been oriented to the creation of a false image of his contribution, by making people believe that a true equality had been reached during his lifetime. King's work was not the end of the decadence into which America was submerged. King showed America the correct way, but it was up to the citizens to follow it. King was a challenger for Americans, a leading man, a champion of truth and justice, and a lamb ready for sacrifice, but he wasn't the one to fulfil this dream, for that was the obligation of mankind as a whole. King was the symbol men needed to be guided by in order to strive for the impossible dream.

King was a preacher committed to his community, a devoted believer in the revolutionary potential of Christianity, a man of his word until the last consequences. King's greatness can be best described in Michael Eric Dyson's words: "*Martin Luther King, Jr. is, arguably, the greatest American ever produced on our native soil, for King helped to redefine our country's destiny as a private citizen in a remarkable career that lasted a mere thirteen years.*"⁴² King's career, despite all his flaws and failures, was "*the most faithful measure of American identity and national citizenship,*"⁴³ due to the strength of his heart and his immense faith.

King was a great martyr, because he confronted his internal demons, addressed his flaws, renewed constantly his faith in God and in mankind, maintained his love for a corrupted America, preached Christian love for his enemies, and devoted his life to America's redemption. It seems as if King sacrificed his life, as Christ did, because he knew that he could make a difference between good and evil, but mainly because he knew that God loved him and was never going to leave him alone, not even in his last hour. According to Garrow, author of the

⁴¹ Jesse Brown and Mark Langford, "A Dream that Could not Die" *The Voice, A Bulletin of Crozer Theological Seminary*, October 1968, 14.

⁴² Dyson, *I May not Get there with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 8.

acclaimed *Bearing the Cross*, it was the “mountaintop experience”⁴⁴ that gave King “*the courage to follow his calling, despite his self-confessed sins and personal shortcomings.*”⁴⁵

4.3 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., THE SYMBOL OF AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Born into the Southern black middle-class, King had a lot of privileges that neither most blacks nor poor whites could ever dream of, such as “*a classical and career-oriented education.*”⁴⁶ He was able to attend the best schools in order to get an education that introduced him to the philosophical and theological world. His educational background not only gave him the deep conviction that America’s democracy hadn’t been totally loyal to the principles of freedom and equality, but also became the weapon in his struggle for the fulfillment of the American Dream in a color-blind America. King was not only a man who challenged American society in order to re-establish national ideals, but he was also a realistic dreamer who had a more socio-democratic vision of the American Dream. That vision ultimately made him “*a mythical symbol of the democratic and egalitarian character of American life.*”⁴⁷

King’s transformation into the ultimate symbol of the American Civil Religion is represented by his writings and speeches. Three of them, in particular, helped make him “*the mythical symbol of the consensual and egalitarian nature of American life.*”⁴⁸ They not only challenged the entire political structure of the United States, but also accused the nation of the highest betrayal of its most sacred principles. By confronting Americans with the nightmare of segregation, King forced Americans to realize that the pursuit of equality was “*a moral issue which reflected not only the failure of American society to live up to its democratic principles,*

⁴⁴ The mountaintop experience is comprehended as one vision King in which he had seen the promised land and had redefined how unbreakable his commitment to God’s will was.

⁴⁵ David Brion Davis, “Pride And Prejudice” *The New Republic*, 5 and 12 January 1987, 35.

⁴⁶ Bryon W. Daynes, “The Politics of Public Holidays: King’s Day of Celebration” *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1986): 93.

⁴⁷ Shapiro-Bertolini, “I never Died, He said” *Los Angeles Democratic Socialists of America*, 11.

⁴⁸ Don Robertson, “My Hands Are not Innocent” *The Cleveland Press*, 8 April 1968, without page .

but the failure of men to apply Christian ideals to their daily lives.”⁴⁹ For the first time since the Civil War, America was forced to redefine not only her basic commitment, but her identity and existence.

When King was imprisoned in Birmingham in 1963 for having participated in protest demonstrations, he went through a deep spiritual search that enabled the writing of “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” In this public letter, he not only justified his participation in Birmingham’s non-violent protest demonstrations, but also confronted the federal government for its weak participation in a struggle based on principles of the American Constitution, and the clergymen for not assuming a more radical position in the civil rights struggle. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” portrayed his deepest commitment to Christianity, which made many Americans⁵⁰ look at him as a symbol of God’s will or as “*an instrument, an earthen vessel used mightily by God.*”⁵¹ He portrayed himself as a man called to fight for equality, but the common opinion started looking at him as a prophet: “I am in Birmingham” he wrote,

because injustice is here. Just as the eight-century prophets left their little villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.⁵²

His commitment to the struggle was of such an indescribable strength that it made millions of people believe that not only African-Americans, but America herself, was waiting for him as the American prophet of the XXth century.

King presented his doctrine of non-violence as a Christian method of protest and strove to convince people that the struggle for civil rights was “*a spiritual struggle.*”⁵³ Beyond that, he also turned the struggle into a revival of the spirit of freedom that led the Founding Fathers to

⁴⁹ James A. Miller, “Martin Luther King, Jr., The End of an Era” *Black Academy Review* Vol I, No. 3 (Fall 1970): 28.

⁵⁰ It is important to mention that King wasn’t only considered a great leader and even a prophet only by the black community, but also by members of other religious groups and even by white liberals throughout the United States.

⁵¹ Bruce A. Calhoun, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Shaped by God to Be a Peacemaker” *Baptist Peacemaker* Vol VIII, No. 2, April 1968, 2.

⁵² Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 85.

⁵³ Quentin O.P. Barnett, “Another Martin of Charity: Martin Luther King” *Dominican Tertiary* Vol. IV, No. 10 (March 1964): 192.

stand up against the powerful British Empire: “*Socrates, the early Christians, the members of the Boston Tea Party, the abolitionists and those who opposed Hitler’s rise to power all practiced civil disobedience.*”⁵⁴ For the first time since the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln, a great American was able to reach glorification by having unified America’s most sacred fundamentals, religion and democracy, for a struggle on behalf of justice. As he wrote,

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 American dream and the most sacred values in 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.⁵⁵

By defending civil disobedience and promoting Christian love, King was elevated by Americans to the “*symbol of passive resistance*” and “*the voice that was clear and certain like a trumpet to call the people to fight a battle of all liberty.*”⁵⁶ Already at that moment, King was considered by many the living symbol of the best America had fought for and was based on, but it was his speech in Washington in 1963 that placed him in the rotunda of the greatest American heroes.

1963 was the conclusive year in the civil rights struggle. Through national and international media coverage of his March on Washington, King became the prophet of the hour, the symbolic leader of an integrationist struggle, and the symbol of the religious and democratic principles to which Americans felt called, for “*people can’t devote themselves to a great cause without finding someone who becomes the personification of the cause. People can’t become devoted to Christianity until they find Christ, to democracy until they find Lincoln, Jefferson and Roosevelt, to communism until they find Marx, Lenin and Stalin.*”⁵⁷ The moment King delivered his speech “I Have a Dream” before the Lincoln Memorial, he became the great unifier of religious and political theories, promoting a spirit of hope and dignity. King portrayed in his speech the *Zeitgeist* of his people and of mid- XXth century America, shadowed by an unbearable past. For those who earlier had considered him only “*the reigning symbol of Negro*

⁵⁴ Claude Sitton, “Dr. King, Symbol of The Segregation Struggle” *The New York Times Magazine*, 22 January 1961, without page.

⁵⁵ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 100.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

⁵⁷ Miller, “Martin Luther King, Jr., The End of an Era”, 40.

equality”;⁵⁸ he became the symbol of the new frontiersman, a man called to lead “*the ongoing and unfinished revolution*”⁵⁹ that could finally make the American Dream a reality for all Americans.

It was King’s intellectual drama as “*a black Southern middle-class minister who went North and received a liberal, white education*”⁶⁰ that enabled him, unlike other black leaders of his time, to realize that only the creation of a multicultural integrationist nation could save America’s sick society, and that the change had to be undertaken on different fronts: at home, at school, in church and in politics. As King delivered his speech, he wasn’t talking only to African-Americans or white segregationists, but to an unified America. As he said, “*this will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning...*”⁶¹

King’s speech in front of a multicultural and multireligious crowd was in the tradition of the Black Baptist Church, for it had the form of a Baptist sermon and in the tradition of the black religious community, the audience was a participating one. According to Alexandra Alvarez, “*the audience was even able to interpret the sermon because of common background knowledge shared with the speaker.*”⁶² King perfectly knew how to integrate all Americans in this sermon, and he used cultural, political and religious sources of American Civil Religion, such as the Constitution, the National Anthem and even the Bible, in order to gain a greater authority on the issues he was addressing and to create a sense of an unified community. He thus became “*the prophet of America’s lost dream of being a free, democratic, Christian nation.*”⁶³ As a living participant in the American Dream, King knew exactly which sounds and symbols could move a nation. By fusing civil rights with both democratic and patriotic content, he fended “*black demands as reflecting a love for America and the sublime principles of liberty and equality which she is founded on.*”⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Ibidem

⁵⁹ Miller, “The New Frontiersman”, 3.

⁶⁰ Robert Terrell, “Discarding the Dream” *Evergreen Review* No. 78, May 1970, 36.

⁶¹ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 105.

⁶² Alexandra Alvarez, “Martin Luther King’s I Have A Dream: The Speech Event As Metaphor” *The Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 18, No. 3 (March 1988): 340.

⁶³ Gayraug S. Wilhore, “Martin Luther King, Jr. – 20th Century Prophet” *Asian and Blacks: Theological Challenges*, 1972, 77.

⁶⁴ Robert Weisbrot, “Celebrating Dr. King’s Birthday” *The New Republic*, 1984, 11.

According to many American critics, this speech was “*the most important American political address of this century*”,⁶⁵ mainly due to its religious and democratic references, including biblical quotations that reminded Americans of their unique sense of providence and call to do God’s will on earth, and invocations of the almost forgotten principles of freedom and equality. King’s words made him the greatest American patriot of his lifetime, willing to fight until the last drop of hope, not only for the American Dream, but mainly for the egalitarian ideal:

when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This not was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁶⁶

King went further in order to integrate not only the present audience, but also the entire American audience by the *use of the common knowledge*,⁶⁷ understood as the reference points of American Civil Religion. He referred to the Constitution of the United States: “*we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal*”; to the Bible: “*...every valley shall be exalted...and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain...and the crooked places will be made straight...and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed...and the flesh shall see it together*”; to a patriotic anthem: “*my country ‘tis of thee...sweet land of liberty of thee I sing....Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim’s pride.....from every mountainside....let freedom ring*”; to a Negro spiritual: “*free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last*”; and to Shakespeare (from Richard III): “*this sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent*”⁶⁸

King aimed towards the integration of the audience and of the nation by using such symbolic values as part of his political message. A sermon is given as a guide for man’s moral and religious conduct, but King used this sermon to provoke not only a spiritual and social change, but his political goal of transforming the legal system. Once again, he stressed the

⁶⁵ -----; “A Comment on Martin Luther King Borrows a Revolution” *College English* Vol. 49, No. 4 (April 1987): 479.

⁶⁶ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 102.

⁶⁷ Alvarez, “Martin Luther King’s I Have A Dream: The Speech Event As Metaphor”, 341.

⁶⁸ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 102-106.

necessity to revitalize the real meaning of America “*a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and all creeds can live together as brothers.*”⁶⁹

King’s masterly blending of religious, moral and democratic values was epitomized in the delivery of the speech in the form of a sermon, lending a sacredness to the African-Americans’ demand for equality. With his sermonic style King sanctified his context, elevating the Lincoln Memorial to the holiness of a church and Abraham Lincoln to the greatness of a saint. In short, King was such a believer in American Civil Religion as a weapon against discrimination that he used all possible related symbols to make Americans realize that the American Dream shouldn’t remain just a myth, but had to become a reality for African-Americans:

I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.⁷⁰

For many Americans who heard this speech full of hope, hatred was overcome by a brotherly feeling. King articulated their inner convictions; they finally found in him what they always wanted to see in themselves. Like Mark Twain, who created an “*indelible image of black and white as American brothers*”⁷¹ in the persons of Jim and Huck, King gave his countryman, black and white, an image of brotherhood as part of a dream. But King also provided the means to make this shared dream come true. The “*I Have a Dream*” speech transformed the way people should look at King forever. Before, he was mainly seen as a leader in a black struggle, but after that day he became “*an interpreter, inspirer, the prophet who saw the significance, the larger meaning of what was happening in the immediate moment.*”⁷² King magnificently introduced all main symbols of American Civil Religion in his speech, and by doing so, he became himself a symbol of it. In other words, King became the symbol of his generation, because he was the best expression of America’s urgent need for redemption at all levels of human relations.

King proposed a better America, in which men of all religions and ethnic groups could live together in perfect harmony. I am convinced that his infinite admiration for the America of his dreams, the America of the myth of the garden, the America of the Founding Fathers, urged

⁶⁹ Hayase, “A Rhetorical Criticism Of Martin Luther King, Jr’s I Have A Dream”, 81.

⁷⁰ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 104.

⁷¹ Hayase, “A Rhetorical Criticism Of Martin Luther King, Jr’s I Have A Dream”, 78.

⁷² Namorato, *Have We Overcome?: Race Relations since Brown*, 43.

him to remind Americans that brotherhood wasn't only a dream, but a reachable reality. He felt compelled to present both the corruption of the legal system and the severely damaged national unity in order to force Americans to confront the reality of their American Dream, one that had been constantly betrayed and almost destroyed:

it is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.⁷³

King wasn't only a great black leader who could present the urgency of African-Americans' need for civil rights; he was a great leader who became the voice of America. Every word was placed exactly to create a new American gospel, redefining the one of the Founding Fathers and adjusting it to the new American reality. King made Americans realize that there was an urgent need to re-examine America and her principles. He knew that those principles should remain indestructible but had to be adapted to a changing world in order to achieve a new mission, the acceptance of multicultural America. King's speech was the greatest declaration of love the American nation has ever experienced. He wanted Americans to see the mistaken path that they had taken, but he also presented them with the potential greatness of the country, making reference not only to the Southern states, but also to the rest of the nation. This sermon wasn't given exclusively for Southern whites and blacks, but for any one who felt American, because, in the end, it was not only a political but a religious and moral invitation to formulate a new American identity, one free of racism, segregation and hatred, but full of Christian love.

King became the symbol of a new America and gained his place in the American myth. His sermon was a redefinition of America, and he was the latest prophet, seemingly sent by God to change the American political and spiritual beliefs. Being awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize made King not only the pride of America, but also turned him into a universal symbol of democracy and economic justice. He became an international icon and affected people worldwide with his uncommon talent for articulating the aspiration of the oppressed. Thereafter, he moved toward his new goal, the introduction of his concept of social equality to the principles of American democracy. His social philosophy was "*a synthesis between capitalism and communism; a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and*

⁷³ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 102-103.

collectivism.”⁷⁴ Following the Christian tradition of equality and a sharing brotherhood, King opposed the commonly accepted economic inequality in the richest country of the world, and he started considering racism as “*an instrument of class privilege, a means of dividing the working class by giving whites marginal economic advantages and encouraging their psychological pretensions to superiority.*”⁷⁵ In order to combat such inequality, King opposed the Vietnam War and supported a variety of campaigns, aiming ultimately to create a new world, one “*in which men will live together as brothers; a world in which men will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; a world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes; a world into which all men will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality.*”⁷⁶

The Vietnam War contributed towards making King America’s most precious symbol of universal hope and peace, as he pled for a new vision:

now let us re-dedicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard?Or will there be another message of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cost, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.⁷⁷

Not only the precision of his words, but the greatness of their meaning invites us to submit to King’s genuine leadership, which was aimed to destroy the barriers that prevented Americans from fully participating in his community of brotherhood. He admired America’s prosperity so much that he wanted the world to share it. As a Negro leader, aimed to achieve the total integration of Negroes in all levels of the national life, but as a universal leader, he was able to present the American Dream for mankind.

In conclusion, King was the prophet not only the blacks but the entire nation was waiting for in order to remove dust from the almost forgotten principles of American Civil Religion. He embraced his prophetic mission, because he was the symbol of life, the symbol of hope, the

⁷⁴ Fairclough, “Was Martin Luther King A Marxist?”, 122.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 120.

⁷⁶ Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, 27.

⁷⁷ John C. Bennett, Henry Steele Commager and Abraham Heschel; “Speak on the War in Vietnam” *Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam*, 11 April 1967, 17.

symbol of faith, the symbol of integrity, the symbol of freedom, the symbol of equality, the symbol of democracy, the symbol of racial integration, the symbol of the American Dream, but more, because “*he became the closest this nation has to a saint.*”⁷⁸ Despite all the criticism in the last three years of his life, he was later recognized as the symbol of the impossible dream, one of the unification of suffering groups across lines of race, ethnicity and religion, and of struggle against the causes of the nation’s social misery: racism, militarism and poverty. For both his religious background and his moral commitment to the American Creed, King became the symbol of a redefined America, based on the same old fundamentals, but with a new moral vision and different political challenges.

4.4 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., THE LEGACY

*“Today in the spirit of Martin Luther King, we must protest the sour notes:
the discords of militarism, racism and economic elitism that disrupt
the harmonious efforts to finish the unfinished symphony.”
David Brion Davis (1987)⁷⁹*

It is common knowledge what King meant for the people committed to his cause, who remained loyal to his memory after his death, and even started the struggle for the institutionalization of a national holiday to honor him, believing that “*he would be pleased that through honoring his birthday, the nation will not forget, can not forget, that all people are equal before the law.*”⁸⁰ Those Americans have embraced King’s theory of non-violence and reconciliation, as well as, in many cases, his faith in God. These people have already reached the Promised Land within their hearts. They are beyond racism, white supremacy, segregation, humiliation, assassination, and betrayal. They belong to the redeemed America that King dreamed of. The problem that King’s legacy confronts are those white and black Americans who haven’t been able to cross the bridge between intolerance and integration and remain sunk in their blindness of heart, despair of mind, and lack of faith.

⁷⁸ -----; “God Talks to those who Believe”, 6.

⁷⁹ Davis, “Pride and Prejudice”, 39.

⁸⁰ Mary C. Lewis, “Origins: How the Holiday Was Born?” *American Visions* Vol. I, No. 1, January/February 1986, 49.

Those Southern white segregationists, Northern conservatives, some poorly engaged liberals, and impatient black nationalists weren't able to absorb the King experience. As a result, their vision of the black leader kept changing as his national and international fame kept growing. First, he was viewed as a "*trouble-making, glory-seeking, self-promoting preacher whose racial opportunism was a plague on black-white relations,*" and as "*a Yankee-educated black preacher with highfalutin' words to threaten the segregated social contract of the South.*"⁸¹ That distorted image was completely changed by the appearance of black extremists such as Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, for King was then defined as "*a humble, non-violent messenger of integration.*" During the first years of the 1960s, King's nomination as *Time's* "Man of the Year," his Nobel Prize and the passing of the Civil Rights Act made other opponents acknowledge his path as "*the best route to racial redemption.*" But King's image was almost destroyed by false patriotic feelings, as he radically opposed the Vietnam War and committed to the cause of the poor black masses. He paid too high a price for standing up for truth, because his position was seen as "*an inevitable betrayal of Southern white interests, capitalist ideology, and black bourgeois beliefs.*"⁸² He was damned by his enemies and lost moral and economic support from his allies.

After his death, those same people, who couldn't hide their racist tendency, kept attacking King in order to destroy his image and make his legacy of minimal importance to the nation. While King was attacked at home, he was praised abroad, because "*140 nations of the world are celebrating a day of peace in honor of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.,*"⁸³ before America even imagined to give him the honor of a national holiday. Besides, King's devotion to democracy and Christian love was also recognized by the Pope, who, deeply moved by King's assassination, acknowledged that "*thanks to King's sacrifice a new and more profound intention of pardon, of peace and of reconciliation may take the place of unjust discrimination and the present struggles.*"⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibidem

⁸² Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 7.

⁸³ -----; "The Continuing Struggle for a National King Holiday" *Ebony*, January 1988, 27.

⁸⁴ -----; "Pope Paul Prays for King and for Peace in Vietnam" *The Charleston Evening Post*, 8 April 1968, without page.

At home and shortly after his death, King's followers and his opponents initiated a bitter debate about honoring King with a national holiday, a debate which lasted over a decade. By the 1980s, his followers demanded it as a national duty to honor King's achievements, for "*King symbolizes something important, and that the recognition of Dr. King by means of a national holiday is a useful means to promulgate that symbol and inspire persons to action toward a given cause.*"⁸⁵ His opponents, however, kept attacking his philosophy, arguing that "*King isn't preaching democracy, he is preaching chaos,*"⁸⁶ for "*in plain English, civil disobedience is lawbreaking.*"⁸⁷

The debate continued until the 1980s. In a country politically led by a King opponent,⁸⁸ the Reagan administration kept saying that "*America is now a post-racist society*"⁸⁹ which has overcome the suffering of the American Dilemma, while the liberal opposition declared that "*re-racist would be, uncomfortably, closer to the truth of it.*"⁹⁰ For those Republican conservatives, there was no point in honoring King, for his achievement hadn't had a real impact on America. They argued that "*public holidays in the United States should be, and normally are, reserved for celebrating great traditions in the nation's history and our highest ideals and leaders who have shaped our common destiny.*"⁹¹ For them, it was almost a sin to try to elevate King to the same level as Washington or Lincoln, who seemed to have transformed the nation, but mainly were heroes to white America. Anti-King commentators portrayed him as an immoral man for his well-known extra-marital escapades. Though America has made a great effort to portray great American heroes as flawless deities, King was meant to end this fallacy, for he was a great leader, despite his mistakes.

America has always had a tremendous hunger for great heroes who represented the best of her, and gave Americans an idealized image of their identity. Such American heroes defined

⁸⁵ William J. Starosta, "A National Holiday for Dr. King? Qualitative Content Analysis of Arguments Carried in The Washington Post and New York Post" *The Journal of Black Studies* Vol 18, No. 3 (March 1988): 365.

⁸⁶ Henry J. Taylor, "Dr. King is off Base" *The Baltimore News*, 12 May 1965, without page.

⁸⁷ George B. Bringmann, "Thoreau's Civil Disobedience: A Principle, Not A Technique" *Fragments* Vol III, No. 3, July/September 1965, 4.

⁸⁸ Already as Governor of California, Ronald Reagan was a conservative Republican and an instrument in defeating the bill of creating a King's national holiday in the 1970s.

⁸⁹ -----; "King Soldiers Divided, not Conquered" *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 4 April 1983, without page.

⁹⁰ Ibidem

⁹¹ -----; "Wonder March for Dr. King Draws more than 100,000" *The Florida Star Papers*, 31 January 1981, 6.

American Civil Religion. Definitely, Martin Luther King belongs to such a selective “petit committee,” for he was the great American hero of the XXth century; not due to any military victory nor a great political career; but for his perception of the goodness of human nature as the best means to reach a total transformation of values within an almost devastated society; for his unconditional patriotic love for his nation; for his commitment to mankind; for his faith in a God who loved humanity; but mainly for his commitment to racial integration in order to redefine America’s identity. King was the first black hero who made the racial crossover to become an all-American hero.

At this point we might ask, what really does make a great leader? Is it his military skills, his political vision, his physical strength, his charisma and oratory skills, his moral rectitude or his spiritual devotion? In my opinion, there is no single great leader who hasn’t lacked at least one of those faculties. Great leaders are vulnerable human beings whose human nature is quite imperfect. Other American heroes were as human as King and made a similar amount of mistakes. Washington, the first American president, was a slave-holding man of high moral rectitude. Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers, might have been one of the most enlightened men of his time, but he had a passionate affair with one of his slaves, who gave him black descendents. Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, tolerated slavery for the sake of the nation’s unity and led thousands of Americans to death in a war that only changed the status of African-Americans from slavery to segregation. These were, indeed, great men and did a much for their country, but they also had their flaws, as does every human being. America’s blindness in terms of moral rectitude has distorted its image of its past, but King changed the way a great American hero has to be considered.

It seems to be such a contradiction within the American Creed to have, on the one hand, this appetite for heroes, who lead Americans to remain loyal to the principles of the nation, and on the other hand, to fall into a collective resistant amnesia⁹² in order not to recognize the truth about American history. Most great American heroes have gained a place in the American

⁹² Resistant amnesia is the forgetting of past and present pain by the offended party. The intent of such amnesia is to relieve the stress and fatigue brought on by the memory of oppression. Resistant amnesia is primarily aimed at survival of the injured party. Tragically, resistant amnesia frees the injured party from responsibility for fighting in the present over the interpretation of the past and, hence, for how it will be used to aid or hinder the liberation efforts of the injured group.

memory as a “safe” symbol of American Civil Religion, for their legacy defined the principles of a nation, but have no greater connection with the actual American society. They are icons of a great and glorious past, far away from the present problems. They have been elevated to the sanctity of “untouchable men”. Their qualities have been maximized, while their mistakes and flaws have been hidden in order to create morally immaculate figures. They seem to have become deities, superior to human nature, but such images create a false picture of what a great American might really be. As a result of such sanctification, King’s legacy has been constantly challenged by American collective amnesia that has tried to “*reduce King to an icon for the status quo or a puppet of civil and social order.*”⁹³

Despite the efforts to make King such a safe Negro national icon, his uniqueness and the power of his spiritual and political philosophy make him a new kind of American hero, not exclusive for a race, and also ready to challenge his American countrymen. King is one of the greatest American heroes, not only for his achievements, but for his contribution to a constant spiritual search within the society. He wasn’t a hero born to be immaculate, but rather to create controversy around his life, his struggle and his faith. Living according to King’s teachings represents the willingness to embrace contradictions as part of growth.

King’s greatness is based on the fact that he never pretended to be something that he couldn’t be, for “*he often spoke of his limitations, of the fallacy of people who believed him greater than he was, and the record of his behaviour is that of an intensely human being.*”⁹⁴ I do believe that his human imperfection was far out measured by his devotion to God, by his commitment to a universal cause and by his moral grandeur, because “*the idea of the ultimate sacrifice comes only with the idea of purity, through fatality.*”⁹⁵ Throughout his life, King applauded creative “maladjusted” nonconformity, and even after his death, he remained a maladjusted symbol, for “*he is the black counterpart to the static, heroic myths that have embalmed George Washington as the father of the country and Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator.*”⁹⁶ Both in life as in death, King will never stop challenging the very fundamentals of

⁹³ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 305.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*

⁹⁶ Clayborne Carson, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 74, No. 2 (September 1987): 448.

American Civil Religion in order to create a better, a more human-oriented, a more democratic, a more integrated, a more tolerant, a more justice-seeking, a more religious and a less racist America.

Despite a significant opposition to his position as an American hero, King's national holiday was finally institutionalized in the early 1980s. The moment King got his national holiday, a further step toward overcoming racism and healing America's open wounds was taken. It seemed as if King's sacrifice hadn't been in vain at all, for he was recognized as a national hero, put on the same level as Washington and Lincoln. A black man was honored for his having expiated the sin of the white man "*through a genuine response to the redemptive love of the Negro for him.*"⁹⁷ The creation of the Martin Luther King, Jr. national holiday should not be considered only as the culmination of a great career, because it represents even more than just 13 years of constant change toward a new generation of Americans, aware of their democratic heritage but conscious of their racist behavior.

A man who had not only challenged Southern white supremacists, his own beloved America and even world politics deserved to be honored in his own country, because "*he was the living embodiment of the highest principles professed in the Declaration of Independence, and he challenged the conscience of America by confronting both Church and state on their political and spiritual immorality of racism and segregation in our society.*"⁹⁸ Abroad there was no doubt about honoring and even elevating King to the hall of the great universal leaders, because "*King is the only American who is widely honored today in third world countries that viewed the Untied States as their chief oppressor.*"⁹⁹ King's opponents were unable to realize that he was not only a national symbol, but a universal symbol who redeemed the way other countries looked at the United States. He changed the international image of America from the greatest capitalist exploiter, hidden behind false democratic principles, to the defender of real democracy.

Only few Americans have reached such a level of national and international interest during their life and in the aftermath of their death, as King has done. The moment King became a public figure, his life wasn't his any longer, for it became complementary part of each

⁹⁷ Merton, "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal", 22.

⁹⁸ Dellums, "Martin Luther King's Legacy in 1983", 3.

⁹⁹ Davis, "Pride and Prejudice", 35.

American's life. Few now dare to deny his being a national figure, for King was the only American who "can go from jail cell to a conference with the president of the United States."¹⁰⁰ Thanks to the technological improvements in communications, the image of King has been portrayed all over the world for the last 50 years, increasing the admiration or the hatred for this great American black preacher. The national media has brought King into each American home, school,¹⁰¹ and church, enabling the audience not only to get moved by his words, but also to get committed to his dream or at least be challenged by his sacrifice.

While he was alive, King managed to be constantly on television and radio news, as well as to have reporters from all major national newspapers running behind his movements. But what defines a really transcendent man is to remain in public view even after death. The memory of King's tragic assassination has kept his image alive, not only in the American homes but all over the world. The magnitude of King's greatness can only be comprehended after one realizes that he remains the most important American hero in the minds of millions of people in the world. His uniqueness made him a universal hero. His martyrdom made his legacy a symbol of hope and a reminder that even our deepest commitments, principles and values need constant reevaluation in order to be realized.

King's legacy remains challenging, not static. He took the best of the static American Civil Religion, as expressed in the writings and actions of American heroes such as Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln, and gave heterogeneity to American identity, broadening it to include these who had been excluded by race and poverty. Besides, he invoked the universality of the legal and civil rights of the US Constitution. King realized that despite the greatness of this document, American society hadn't been able to understand how universal was its application. He criticized America for not having been loyal to her principles, because universality of the natural human rights needs constant reaffirmation.

¹⁰⁰ John M. Ashbrook, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Was nothing but a Racketeer" *The Augusta Courier*, 27 April 1970, 3.

¹⁰¹ In order to introduce King's nonviolent principles to kindergarten and elementary school students, there is a teaching program available from the Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, which has been designed under the guidance and direction of Mrs. Christine King Farris, sister of King and noted educator.

One further potential value of King's legacy is the constant integration of the nation's past into its present in order to make successive American generations remember that only remembrance of the suffering can overcome a painful past and present. King's life awakened American society from its idyllic romance with the betrayed American myth and unmasked the reality in the South; his sacrifice made the abuses of the whites and the suffering of the blacks a relevant national issue; and his legacy can lead Americans to the promised land. By reminding America constantly of her painful past and promoting a better future within a redefined national destiny, King's legacy pretends to "*free the American soul to love its black self and, hence, to love itself wholly and universally.*"¹⁰²

Part of King's misunderstood legacy, up to the present day, is his call for a social democracy as the basis of American economic policy. He foresaw the failure of the integration of African-Americans in the American mainstream, unless they achieved fairer economic distribution. King knew that blacks could only have a real chance in mainstream America if they retained a united front against discrimination and bigotry. In his opinion, only the unification of Southern black religiosity and Northern black self-conscious could make African-Americans a stronger political community within the society. Only real unification would enable the continuation of King's struggle against racism, as part of his legacy. The main problem that African-Americans confront nowadays is a severe ethnic fragmentation as a result of class divisions. While most poor blacks still remain full of self-pity and hatred against white Americans, most rich blacks live in a ethnic, cultural and religious denial, looking up to white Americans. Racial denial and the gap between poor and rich blacks are two of the main problems that the black community must solve in the XXIst century, if they want to become a competitive and politically active part of the nation.

Besides, blacks are not only struggling to reshape their African-American identity, but they have also witnessed the rise of the Latino power, not only in the economic but also in the political field. Latinos as well as Asians haven't had a past of slavery and segregation. This painful experience hasn't affected their self-consciousness, group identity and awareness of their natural rights, all major factors that will determine their success in the pursuit of their American Dream. Despite the actual situation of hatred, violence and self-pity that many blacks

¹⁰² Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 306.

experience, King's legacy remains the most eloquent answer to their call for justice. His dream is going to be alive, as long as blacks are convinced that they deserve a part of a just and multiracial America, for it isn't an impossible dream to unite different races and cultures within the American boundary. A lot of hard work from all sides, based on tolerance and equality, is required. Their demand for equality can finally be heard the moment they commit to America and stop using violent means in order to achieve their goals. Violence only increases hatred and makes rage explosive. Violence should be left in the past, along with hatred, for hope is the symbol of the future.

Along with his pursuit of true equality, as a further part of his proclaimed revolution of values, King emphasized the urgency to redefine the national identity and the country's commitment to the American Dream. American identity still was based on the idea of a land of persecuted European settlers who decided to turn their backs on an oppressing Europe in order to create a democratic society, in which all citizens were able to attain prosperity. This national identity was defined by writings of the XIXth century which lack the concept of America as a multiracial society. In the meantime, African-Americans have passed from slavery to a greater racial equality and new ethnic groups, such as Latinos and Asians, have come to make their American Dream come true. Thereafter, King's legacy remains a reminder of the urgency of constant readjustment of the American identity in order to preserve national integration.

King's warning is the most challenging part of his legacy, for he has become not only the symbol of racial integration, but America's therapist. King was the best communicating bridge between the longstanding suffering of his black people and the ideals of the enlightened whites. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to fulfil his dream of an American society beyond race, but his legacy has the great opportunity to make people aware of the danger of not listening to his pleas. It isn't a utopic dream, but the only possibility for America to remain a nation, and it challenges both black and whites to go beyond their own limitations and fulfil the American Dream for all Americans, regardless of the color of their skin or their religious or political belief.

Just as King was the liberals' liberal for his commitment to a true equality of opportunities and of results in a color-blind society, and the patriots' patriot for his defending of the principle of the Declaration of Independence that all people are equal, he was, in the end, the

Americans' American for his commitment to the American people and its identity. He provoked a collective change in the way Americans looked at their history, at the principles as a nation, at the validity and application of democracy, at their national heroes, at their racial and cultural heterogeneity, at the goals of their government, at their role as a leading nation in the world community, and at the way they want to write their future. He inspired Americans to change at the collective level, but he inspired them even more to achieve a personal change in the way each individual looks at his individuality in juxtaposition to his collective duties, and at his active participation as member of a color-blind, egalitarian society.

King has gone, but his personality is “*felt in such a way that it would be difficult for any man to take his place.*”¹⁰³ There have been many leaders who have misused his legacy in order to win credibility and make people act according to their interests, but none of them has replaced King in the American mind. Nowadays, there is a great need for a King who can lead multiracial America. Part of King's legacy is to show Americans that there is no need of further heroes, because each American is a hero, able to find the Martin Luther King Jr. who lives within in order to commit to the nation. Such a legacy can only be successful the moment Americans accept constant reinterpretation of King's commitment to America and can finally understand where they have been, where they are, and where they could hope to go.

In conclusion, King lived according to the American Creed and was able to fulfil his personal American Dream. Furthermore, he gave Americans the means to redefine their national identity; to recover the principles of the American Creed; to accept integration as the only possible means for national survival; to make their religious institutions commit to the gospel of Jesus and to make their government promote a social democracy based on “*radical redistribution of economic and political power.*”¹⁰⁴ But above all, he showed them the way to a chosen land in which “*America must open her heart to a denied people, by making a massive effort to undo the deep racial injustices of two centuries.*”¹⁰⁵ Sometimes, I am almost convinced that King wasn't fully aware of his greatness, but I am definitely sure that King didn't want to be canonized or

¹⁰³ Renee D. Turner, “The Day King Died... On 20th Anniversary, Notables Remember Tragic Moment” *Ebony*, April 1988, 138.

¹⁰⁴ Davis, “Pride and Prejudice”, 39.

¹⁰⁵ Dan L. Thrapp, “Christian Perspective Sought in King's Death” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 April 1968, without page.

idolized. He only wanted to be listened to and perhaps, with the grace of God, be followed, for he was the man “*called the nation’s conscience.*”¹⁰⁶

The question remains that King might have asked himself: where do we go from here? King died 37 years ago. In these years many legal actions have been taken for the sake of racial integration and equality, and against poverty, but America still is “*far from eliminating prejudice, bigotry and hate.*”¹⁰⁷ King the man is gone, but King the symbol remains in the American collective mind. His presence and his words are still alive; and it is the duty of each American to show new generations the greatness of his struggle, for the future of this nation depends on the capacity of the American youth to commit to America as King did. King became an American symbol because he accomplished everything he was born for: “*to remake, serve the people, serve humanity, and let America be born again*”¹⁰⁸

His legacy is nothing else than faith. Being the patriots’ patriot, King declared to Americans that it was their providence “*to create the possibility that all of us might break beyond our own individual and group interests and catch the vision of a new America,*” and “*to create a vision of a new common good in a new future, which will serve us all.*”¹⁰⁹ King was a man of peace, and there was nothing that could hurt him more than man’s incapacity to solve conflicts without violence. One real challenge for future generations is to be able to find “*a more creative rather than destructive way*”¹¹⁰ in the way humans solve problems, not only at the personal, but also at the national and international level. He walked his way with devotion, conviction and tenacity; now it is our turn to follow his steps.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, “Origins: How the Holiday Was Born?”, 44.

¹⁰⁷ Duane Riner, “King Medal Sought in Congress” *The Atlanta Constitutional*, 27 March 1970, 18-A.

¹⁰⁸ Namorato, *Have We Overcome?: Race Relations since Brown*, 76.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 75.

¹¹⁰ Thrapp, “Christian Perspective Sought in King’s Death”, without page.