

CONCLUSIONS

The XXth century has been defined as a century of great controversies that have determined personal, economic and political relations at all levels. America, the world leader, is in danger of fragmentation due to several controversies in the legal and political system, such as her incapacity to improve race relations and to shorten the gap between poor and rich, as well as her questionable role as world police, making the world free for democracy. In the historic context of misinterpretation of the American Civil Religion and of a misguided national identity, a Southern black preacher emerged as a catalytic factor for America's redemption and redefinition. During the almost 13 years that King dedicated his life to the civil rights struggle, he contributed to many great political and legal achievements in favour of African-Americans and the most unprivileged in the richest country of the world.

After his participation in the Montgomery bus boycott, King became a central focus in the media, which covered each single movement he made throughout his successful career. National and international press and television captured the events that portrayed the sickness of the American mind, as well as informed the public about the cure for the severely damaged conscience and spirit of America: non-violence. Along with King as the central figure in the civil rights struggle, the media also captured representative characters of the best and worst of American society who have become figures of the American collective mind. Examples of those figures are Rosa Parks, James Farmer, Ella Baker, Thurgood Marshall, the members of the US Supreme Court, the freedom fighters, but also Bull Connor and his policemen, among many others. According to Michael Eric Dyson, their actions were part of "*a sense of divine destiny that works even as humans work their hardest to bring about change.*"¹

Furthermore, King's controversial relation to the media can be defined as a bargaining one. On the one hand, King got his nonviolent techniques introduced to the entire American society and Southern segregation exposed to the world. On the other hand, American press and television profited the most from King's becoming the public figure of the era. First, he was portrayed as the ultimate American symbol and later as the greatest American traitor. King became daily news not only for his political and legal achievements, but also for his scandalous

¹ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 309.

extramarital life and his possible connection to Communism. American readers adopted King's life as part of their collective experience and were able to feel committed to his teachings or to crucify him for his personal shortcomings. But, in the aftermath of his death, his way to martyrdom revindicated King's place in the American collective mind as an important part of American Civil Religion, for King has become an all-American hero.

King's goals and achievements made him universal symbol of justice, democracy, equality and hope, for he personified both the *Zeitgeist* and the *Weltschmerz* of the controversial XXth century. King's emergence took place when humanity had just survived the Second World War and the world community was sunk into a competitive and dangerous bipolar political and economic system. As for America, the nation was captured by a turmoil of devastating controversies that required a great but controversial leader in order to be resolved. King was among the most controversial leaders the nation has ever known, for not only his techniques, his radical faith, his political conviction, but also his personal life were targets of severe criticism.

King was nothing else than the product of modern America. He was a man living in the myth of the machine in the garden, for economic progress and wealth gave him a life of comfort and quality education, while the African-Americans' heritage of suffering made him deeply aware of and committed to the ideals of the nation. Unfortunately, the moment King made his first public appearance, America was an almost fragmented nation, one unable to live according to her fundamentals and to promote her undeniable principles. Furthermore, King's demand for equality was a universal demand that exposed the *Weltschmerz* of modern times, portrayed by the suffering and discrimination of African-Americans and the increasing economic gap between First and Third World countries.

America has been defined by the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine. The first one portrays America as the virgin land of the Founding Fathers, while the second one determines the incursion of America into the age of modernism and industrialism. The ultimate combination of both myths gave birth to a modern nation living according to the principles of freedom, democracy and equality. Unfortunately, only a minority has been able to profit from the benefits of that combination. King's contribution to American history has merited him a place in the American mythology. His acceptance enables Americans to make the myth of the machine in

the garden not only an unreachable, surrealistic myth in the American mind, but a reality for all Americans.

Thereafter, King's teachings and his legacy tend to maintain both myths alive in order to reach the reconciliation of American principles and capitalist dogmas. The moment all Americans, regardless of race and social status, are able to share both improved myths, equality and progress will finally work together for the benefit of a renewed America. King as a modern American myth should be comprehended as the unifying bridge between the garden and the machine, equality and progress, illusion and reality, but mainly between a homogeneous damaged national identity and a heterogeneous, renewed one.

As mentioned before, the essence of American culture and American identity has been culled into several works of American literature. The creation of national figures aimed to give to the American collective imagination a homogeneous collective experience in order to define the nation's identity. The moment figures such as the yeoman farmer, the frontiersman, the engineer, the locomotive, among others, were introduced into American literature, the American audience felt deeply related to and adopted them as part of their cultural heritage. With such a common experience, Americans were able to have an unifying view of their history, to commit to the fundamentals of their nation and to increase a sense of patriotism by embracing the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Those figures were representative of the myth of the garden and the myth of the machine and became justifying symbols of America's need of and dependence on an homogeneous national identity. Most figures came out of a writer's imagination with the purpose of portraying American life and the spirit of the time, or they were national heroes represented as deities. Unfortunately, both contributed to a misinterpretation and false perception of the American Civil Religion, for their symbolic meaning is related to past centuries and not always suitable to modern times. The moment King became part of the American collective mind, he turned into a symbolic figure of his era: a black preacher improving the perception of the American Civil Religion. Just as the yeoman farmer was the representative figure of the myth of the garden and the engineer of the myth of the machine, King became the figure of a modern, justice-seeking, multicultural America, one of the myth of the machine in the garden.

As a part of the American mythology, King was introduced not only as a black or liberal hero, but as an all-American symbol. King went beyond racism and economic inequality in order to become the public figure that defines the new start of a multiracial nation and favours a better comprehension of the American Civil Religion. As a symbolic figure of mid XXth – century America, King not only contributed to changing the American collective experience, but also to changing the way Americans address to topics such as democracy, racism, equality and freedom. King revindicated the principles of the yeoman farmer and gave the necessary power to the engineer's pursuit of progress in order to melt them into a more egalitarian American society.

Former figures of the American collective mind need to be kept alive, because they are part of the American heritage. Just as American Civil Religion and the yeoman farmer were shaped by the *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment, several other figures were shaped by the *Zeitgeist* of industrialism. King's position within the American collective mind is a very challenging one, because his symbolism aims to introduce the American Civil Religion into the *Zeitgeist* of modern America, for it has to be readapted and integrated into a new American society. By revindicating the principles and fundamentals of America, King remains the defining figure of his generation, one of spiritual and intellectual redefinition.

But even King's symbolism has been challenged too, for American society is in constant change. Modern American symbols also demand constant renewal if they are still to have some impact on society. Just as King pursued the actualization and integration of American Civil Religion in a renewed American collective mind, his own symbolism needs constant adaptation, translation and reinterpretation in order to keep challenging new American generations. Only if the American collective mind is able to reshape and readapt King's memory constantly, his legacy might have the great opportunity to influence or even define future generations of Americans' individuality, collectivity and national identity.

As a result of King's inclusion into American Civil Religion, his greatness as a civil rights leader was honored with a national holiday. Many supported this legal decision, while others attacked King's memory and tried to destroy his legacy. Despite all criticism, King deserved a national holiday for his achievements, for his contribution to America's redemption,

or perhaps for his challenging of America's perception of and commitment to her fundamentals and principles.

Even if King's national holiday might be considered as the nation's reconciliation with African-Americans, it has a deeper mission as well: by celebrating King's national holiday, his teachings keep prompting Americans to make their great heroes more human and to keep their legacies actively involved in America's destiny. King was a fervent believer in the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation, as well as a great admirer of Jefferson and Lincoln. On the one hand, King reinforced the nation's commitment to the American creed, and on the other, he made Jefferson, Lincoln and even himself living mediators between America's past and present, between African-Americans and white America, and between all men and their rights and duties within society.

As already mentioned, King is, perhaps, one of the few Americans to be honored abroad. King's international recognition as a great defender of civil rights could be used as a way to export the American creed to the rest of the world - this time around, not as the misused Manifest Destiny, but as a symphony of democratic and egalitarian principles. Just as King's life achievements contributed to America's redemption and the revitalization of American Civil Religion, his legacy can contribute to reconcile America's image and role in world politics with the international community. King hasn't only provoked a new relation between Americans and their creed, principles and fundamentals, but the impact of his teachings on world politics has enabled the internationalization of American heroes, turning their achievements into mankind's treasure.

Furthermore, King was a civilian who symbolizes the combination between religion and politics. This combination makes him the ideal symbol of modern America, because his life, his achievements, his legacy are constantly reshaping the myth of America as the chosen land of the Founding Fathers. The fundamentals of America not only established a new political and legal system, but determined the American mind, shaped by the concepts of freedom, democracy, equality and faith in God's will. King might have had great political and legal victories, but his greatest achievement was his challenging of the American collective mind in order to experience the true meaning of the American creed and to live according to it. According to King, the

moment you were able to change a person's heart, you have already changed his mind. Thereafter, he realized that only if the American collective mind was renewed, could real improvements in politics and the legal system take place.

In my personal opinion, King is by far the greatest American of the XXth century not only for his achievements, but also for his strength of character. Living in a time of national ideological sickness and racial prejudice, King managed to cross the lines of race and social status in order to become the nation's voice that cried out for freedom, democracy and equality. Definitely, King is the truest bellwether of America's moral possibilities, because "*without his spirit, we can't comprehend our national destiny. Without his voice, the tainted glories of citizenship rust into burdensome routine. And without his love, we might perish from lack of noble striving.*"²

King could have spent his life, as was usual among members of the Southern black bourgeoisie, condemned to the *Doppelgaenger syndrome*,³ but it was the familiar tradition of protest against racism and his quality education that made him forgive and love white America. In his long quest for spiritual improvement, King realized that both white America and African-Americans had to be cured as an integrated nation in order to become what the nation's spiritual and political leaders always wanted it to turn into: an earthly paradise in which all men were equal, enjoyed freedom, shared prosperity and committed to God's will. His unbreakable faith and unquenchable thirst for justice made him initiate a long pilgrimage to a renewed America, in which all Americans should put an end to the ignorance and fear that has kept them from, and not with, each other.

Unlike any other great American, King had such blind faith in the principles of America and his personalist God that he was willing to risk everything he was – a preacher, a leader, a husband, a father, a son, a brother, a black man – to challenge America. By sacrificing everything, King gained not only the trust of his people and the respect of many white Americans, but he gave each person a second chance for evaluation of personal and collective rights and duties. If Americans still want a chance to end the American Dilemma, they had to

² Ibid, 306.

³ According to the *Doppelgaenger syndrome* wealthy African-Americans live in constant race denial, because they live as if they were whites but within a black community.

start believing in the power of faith as a catalytic factor towards racial reconciliation and integration, for “*in the end black and white extremism would fail, but Martin Luther King’s idealism would prevail.*”⁴

A further aspect of my deep admiration for King was his humility, because he wasn’t only a leader, but a follower. He never put himself, but rather his followers and enemies, in the center of the movement. He didn’t consider himself a deity, but divinely inspired. It was his uncommon *Selbstlosigkeit*⁵ that made people consider him the Messiah they were waiting for. King never dared to proclaim himself a Messiah, but considered himself only a servant of God, who wanted to be heard, and perhaps followed, for he only wished to serve his nation the best he could. He personified the American spiritual leader the nation was waiting for: on the one hand, he used “*the power of persuasion and the influence of his position to involve black Americans in realizing that they were somebody and that they could overcome an oppressive system,*”⁶ while on the other hand, he forgave racist white America and offered her a way to redemption and reconciliation with her past. As a Baptist preacher, King was deeply interested in reedeming the nation’s spirit before legal changes could have a real chance outside the legal courts and within the people’s hearts.

Perhaps King’s decisions that I admire the most are his constant opposition to the Vietnam War and his proposal of social democracy as *Leitmotiv* of American politics. I am convinced that King was a man totally ahead of his time, able to foresee the urgency of a fairer social system in America, as well as the necessity of a redefinition of America’s role in world politics. By talking about social democracy, King went beyond racism and tried to reconcile socialistic and capitalistic dogmas in favour of better living conditions for the poor and unprivileged in America. He was severely criticized for such an intervention in the American political economy, but he was just doing what a real preacher would have done – preaching Jesus’s social gospel.

⁴ Archer, *They Had A Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle*, 182.

⁵ A person experiences *Selbstlosigkeit* when she is able to put personal interest aside for the well being of the community.

⁶ Washington, *I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World*, ix.

King's demand for social democracy wasn't that far away from the yeoman farmer's illusion of equality. The moment King was introduced to the situation of most Northern blacks living in ghettos and of poor whites, he concluded that a revision of American institutions was required in order to offer socio-economic equality to all citizens. A civil rights leader would have reached his goal the moment the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were passed, but King was never a conventional leader. I deeply embrace his commitment to the integration of poor America into the American mainstream. Like few world leaders, King wanted freedom, equality and democracy for everyone, regardless of race, social status and gender. His commitment to those principles became the central aspect of the last years of his acclaimed career and perhaps one of the causes of his assassination. According to Michael Eric Dyson, King's pursuit of socioeconomic equality might have caused his death:

The tension between following God – into the ghetto, into sanitation strikes, into military mishap, into rural Mississippi poverty, into the barrio, into riots, into racial miasma, and into class conflict – while refusing to follow conventional political logic, led King to radicalism, and perhaps to his death.⁷

If radicalism caused his death, I do believe that it was a life worth living and dying, because he achieved more political and legal changes than any politician of his time in a country ruled by collective amnesia and racial prejudice. If death was the price for speaking the truth for the sake of economic justice, then King would have sacrificed his life as many times as America needed in order to establish communication between her principles and her duties.

Furthermore, I perceive King's opposition to the Vietnam War as a great patriotic action, for he wanted to prevent further terrible war crimes on the side of America, the presumed world promoter of democracy. I also admire how courageously he decided to break with other civil rights leaders as a gesture of moral independence. It must have taken great self-confidence and self-determination to sacrifice his public image, his acclaimed awards, the praise for his achievements, and his relation to other leaders in order to follow his moral convictions. Only few men are able to make a pilgrimage towards militant pacifism for the sake of the nation's spiritual peace and regenerated international role, as King did. In a country where Communism was the highest act of treason, King didn't doubt to sacrifice everything he was and represented in favor of the most unprivileged. America's deep fear of Communism didn't allow her to realize that

⁷ Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 84.

King's proposal had more of a divine than a Communist influence. But even if he had been influenced by Soviet Marxism, Americans still must learn that equality is deeply related to social democracy. It is true that he wasn't the only one to oppose the war, but King "*raised his voice against Vietnam long before such criticism was fashionable among liberals and long before it was viewed as a reasonable position that a true patriot might adopt.*"⁸ Definitely, his voice wasn't the only one, but it was the most prominent and perhaps the only one that America's deaf ears were ready to listen to.

Beyond his political achievements, I do admire the man, with all his flaws and shortcomings. King belonged to a group of great universal men, but still remained a common man. He never pretended to be anyone other than a black man committed to his cause, but who could also experience anger, fear and disillusion. He never hid or denied his shortcomings; instead, he tried desperately to improve them with his unending faith in his God. He was criticized for his controversial life, but isn't controversy the nature of human condition? Despite all his flaws, King managed to prove to common Americans that no immaculate heroes are needed in order to change someone's heart or even the world. Part of his legacy is the transcendence of his human condition in the American collective mind, because his spirit illuminates America's heart and makes everyone believe that they can shorten the gap between promise and fulfillment, ideal and reality, and commitment and performance.

America has always turned great American heroes into immaculate figures, but King remains after his death an uneasy hero who wants to be accepted for what he was: a Southern black preacher who wanted to love his people, redeem the entire American society and redefine his nation's destiny. Up to the present, King is a timely and timeless universal hero whose human condition awakens in each person the necessity to contribute to his legacy. He was as human as everyone else, but his achievements are as unique as his life. As long as people still remember him, there will be faith in America, in her people and in the improvement of the quality of her institutions and legal processes.

In conclusion, King was considered during his lifetime the symbol of the civil rights struggle, the symbol of freedom and equality, the symbol of racial integration, the symbol of the

⁸ Ibid, 54.

American Dream, the symbol of a reborn America, the symbol of Christian love, the symbol of the social gospel, the symbol of universal peace, among many others. His tragic assassination made him the symbol of America's redemption, the symbol of Christianity's renewal, as well as the symbol of humanity's salvation. His legacy has made him the symbol of true American patriotism and the symbol of real democracy. Above all, he has become the ongoing symbol of faith, for that is what makes people stand up for their rights against the most dangerous enemies. Faith is thirsty for freedom, equality and peace. Freedom is the most precious possession each person has, but only very few are really free, while most remain slaves of some ideology, custom or belief. King was as free as a man of faith could be; he wanted America to share, promote and protect such a level of freedom.

Definitely, King was a controversial man who challenged his nation and tried to "*confront America's national sickness with her own health chart: the US Constitution.*"⁹ King's life may have been controversial, but his legacy remains the most striking declaration of love to America. King is already gone, but his spirit should live in each American as a constant reminder of America's real mission as the self-proclaimed chosen land. The day Americans will be able to live beyond race and intolerance, King will stop bearing the cross he has embraced for the love of mankind. The moment all men are able to live in true brotherhood, King will finally rest in a long-deserved peace.

King was a common man who once had a dream. His dream is not only deeply rooted in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, but it has also been defined by the suffering of African-Americans. King belongs to the selective group of great Americans who have defined the principles of America and the spirit of her people. His greatness is unquestionable and his uniqueness lies in the fact that he was a black segregated man who stood up against injustice and initiated a revolution that was going to change not only the course of American history, but the one of humanity forever.

King shared his dream with America 50 years ago. Today, his dream can become a universal reality, if each person is able to commit to it. King's legacy remains a reminder and constant challenger of humanity, just it reaffirms that King was one of those great men that

⁹ McGill, "White Slaves Killed a Free Black Man", 1.

appear once in many years. He was as humble as the poorest man, but his greatness contributed to redefine America's sacred and indestructible bond with her principles, as well as the one between men and God. King was a great American, but he doesn't belong exclusively to America, but to us all. King's dream embodies universal suffering, teachings and hopes that have shaped not only the history of nations, but the character of their inhabitants. The day when his dream has finally become a reality is as close and as far as we want. It is up to each person to find the Martin Luther King, Jr., who lives in our heart. For the sake of mankind's survival, let us all share his dream.