American Prophet: Martin Luther King, Jr.

By

Sakuma Semba

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_______________________________
Dr. Ira Chernus

_______________________________
Dr. Greg Johnson

_______________________________
Dr. Deborah Whitehead

Date  _______________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
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In August 2011, after more than two decades of planning, fund-raising and construction, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial—a four-acre tract south of the Mall featuring a granite statue of King—has opened to the public. King is officially enshrined in granite in the National Mall. A black preacher became a monument, a monument represents America. King is the prophet of American Civil Religion. This paper examines Martin Luther King, Jr. as the prophet of America and in the context of American Civil Religion. To begin, I will explore the concepts and definitions of the prophet, the civil religion, and the American Creed by analyzing Max Weber, Robert Bellah, Martin Marty, and Richard Hughes’s works. King’s thoughts, words and acts in the light of prophetic traditions and the Civil Religion will be further discussed. The concept of the Beloved Community will be the main clue in order to interpret King’s commitment to his social actions. King’s outlook on American Civil Religion will be sketched by analyzing the center concept of Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Vietnam War Campaign, as well as Poor People Campaign. Lastly, I will explore how King is recognized in the United States today by examining the establishment of King National Memorial in Washington D.C. and the speech of the president delivered at the dedication ceremony. Further, the link between King’s idea/actions and the Occupy movement in 2011, which is referred even by the president, will be discussed.
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I, Introduction

In August 2011, after more than two decades of planning, fund-raising and construction, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial—a four-acre tract south of the Mall featuring a granite statue of King—opened to the public. King is officially enshrined in granite in the National Mall. A black preacher became a monument, a monument represents America.

In 1967, Robert N Bellah\(^1\) released his monumental work “Civil Religion in America.” Ever since then, the issue of civil religion has been prevalently and frequently discussed. Without exception, scholars constantly refer to the presidents of the United States as the key players of American Civil Religion, and they are often visualized as the prophet or the priest of this religious dimension. Even though there are many interpretations and definitions of American Civil Religion, the role the Presidents play in this religious dimension are inevitably crucial and prominent. Probing closely on this issue, surprisingly I found that scholars barely focused on Martin Luther King, Jr. in the context of American Civil Religion; regardless, he dedicated his life and fought for what he called the American Dream. King obviously embodied, represented, and preached a sense of American values, which had been developed since the American Revolutionary era. It is crucial to recognize King as a prophet of American Civil Religion in terms of his life, thought, words, and acts. King is the advocate and the prophet of American Civil Religion. This paper examines Martin Luther King, Jr. as a prophet of America and in the context of American Civil Religion. To begin, I will explore the concepts and definitions of the prophet, the Civil Religion, and the American Creed by analyzing Max Weber, Robert Bellah, Martin Marty, and Richard Hughes’ works. King’s thoughts, words and acts in the light of prophetic traditions and the Civil Religion will be further discussed. The concept of the Beloved Community will be the main clue in order to

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\(^1\) Bellah, Robert N (1927 - ), an American sociologist, is best known for his work “Civil Religion America.” Bellah was a student of Talcott Parsons at Harvard. He has been Ford Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley since 1967.
interpret King’s commitment to his social actions. King’s outlook on American Civil Religion will be sketched by analyzing the center concepts of Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Vietnam War Campaign, as well as Poor People’s Campaign. Lastly, I will explore how King is recognized in the United States today by examining the establishment of King National Memorial in Washington D.C. and President Barack Obama’s speech delivered at the dedication ceremony. Moreover, the link between King’s ideas/actions and the Occupy movement in 2011, which is referred even by the president, will be discussed.

As Vincent Harding once described King as the “inconvenient hero,” King was not wholly understood and accepted by American society in his final years. Almost 50 years past after his assassination, King is finally enshrined and honored by many Americans today. A man became a monument, and a monument represents American Civil Religion. King is undoubtedly a prophetic icon of American Civil Religion.
II, Prophetic Civil Religion

a. Prophet

Before examining King as the American Prophet in the next chapter, the definitions of the prophet, Civil Religion in America, and the American Creed have to be examined. These definitions and backgrounds help us to interpret King as an American Prophet. To begin, it is inevitable to start with Max Weber’s definition of a prophet. Weber\(^2\) defines the prophet in contrast with the priest. According to Weber’s sociological concept, the prophet’s claim is based on personal revelation and charisma\(^3\) while the priest claims to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition. In other words, the prophet always emerges as a “founder of religion,” or a “renewer of religion,”\(^4\) which is deeply dependent upon his/her individual bearing of charisma. According to Weber, all prophets rarely have come from the priesthood. A case in point, the Indian teachers of salvation were not Brahmins, nor were the Israelite prophets priests. Zoroaster's case is exceptional in that there exists a possibility that he might have descended from the priestly nobility. The priest, in clear contrast, dispenses salvational goods by his office. Even in cases in which personal charisma may be attached to a priest, he remains as a member of the priestly enterprise of salvation, which legitimizes his office. Furthermore, Weber demonstrates the prophet’s close linking to the lawgiver and the teacher of ethics. The lawgiver is generally called to their office when social tensions are in evidence. They always receive “divine approval, at least subsequently.” In a sense, Moses can be classified functionally as a\(^\text{aisymnete}\), which “resolve the conflicts between classes and to produce a new sacred law of eternal validity, for which he had secure divine approbation.”

\(^2\) Max Weber (1864-1920), a German Sociologist, is also known as a principal architect of modern social science along with Karl Marx and Emil Durkheim.

\(^3\) Weber, Max. 1968. *Economy and Society*: 241. According to Weber’s definition, charisma is “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as ‘leader’ ”.

The lawgiver, Moses, and the later prophets of Israel were concerned with social reforms. On the other hand, the teacher of (social) ethics, full of new or renewed ancient wisdom, gathers disciples about him, counsels private individuals in personal matters, and advises nobles on public affairs and possibly tries to help to establish a new ethical order. However, there are crucial differences between such figures and prophets. Weber writes that the teacher of ethics often lacks “vital emotional preaching,” whereas that aspect is distinctive of the prophet. The characters of the prophet are in a sense similar to the “popular operator” or “political publicist.” In addition, Weber describes two kinds of prophets: the ethical prophet and the exemplary prophet. The former is represented by Zoroaster and Muhammad and the other is represented most clearly by Buddha. The ethical prophet lays claim as a medium for the proclamation of a god and his will regardless of a concrete or an abstract norm. On the other hand, the prophet may be an exemplary person who, by his personal example, demonstrates to others the way to religious salvation, as in the case of the Buddha (the exemplary prophet). The preaching of this mode of prophet says nothing about a divine mission or an ethical duty of obedience. However, rather than directing itself to the self-interest of those who need salvation, it suggests them to follow the same path as the prophet himself walked. To conclude the characteristics of the prophet based on Weber’s definition, the prophet, depending on personal revelation and his/her charismatic figure, usually emerges as a “founder of religion,” or a “renewer of religion.” It does not come from authoritative backgrounds and often contains similar characters as legislators whose concerns are with social reforms and receive “divine approval” from future generations, and share the characteristics of teachers of ethics. The founder or the renewer with vital emotional preaching leads public affairs and possibly tries to establish a new ethical order that is often like a popular operator or a political publicist – ethical and exemplary. In addition, Weber points out that a prophet always will be controversial: a prophet always

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5 Ibid: 49-51
6 Ibid: 52
7 Ibid: 53
8 Ibid: 55
receives strong support from a particular group of people, whereas a prophet receives severe attack
from others at the same time.

b. Civil Religion and Prophetic Tradition in America

Robert Bellah distinguished himself in the sixties by his monumental essay, “Civil Religion in America”
in 1966. This short essay had a tremendous impact on the whole field of academia. As Bellah wrote two
decades later, “I had no idea that it would stimulate the controversy and elaboration that subsequently
developed.” Bellah is not the first scholar to observe the religious dimension in the nation and its role. Many will agree that Bellah popularized the discussion of American Civil Religion in academia of liberal arts. Although there are various potential interpretations of this religious dimension, we cannot them
discuss without Bellah’s concept of civil religion. Bellah states that “while some have argued that
Christianity is the national faith...few have realized that there actually exists alongside...the churches an
elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America.” Bellah tried to demonstrate that
Americans embrace a common religious dimension with certain fundamental beliefs, values, holidays,
and rituals. To my understanding, for Bellah, the president of the United States is the most crucial
player of American Civil Religion, who often incarnates and represents this religious dimension. Here, I
would like to focus on the importance of the president in Bellah’s Civil Religion. Bellah mentions
Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson in his short
essay. He spends the first section of the essay on Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. Bellah points out
Kennedy’s references to God and “similar references to God are almost invariably to be found in
pronouncement of American presidents on solemn occasions.” He also points out the importance of

American Civil Religion?”, Sociological Analysis 50: 147.
10 Chernus, Ira. “American Civil Religion” Chernus demonstrates Alexis de Tocqueville, John Dewey, Will Herberg,
and Sidney Mead as predecessors of this issue.
11 Bellah, 1967. “Civil Religion in America”
12 Ibid: 169
sacrifice for civil religion, and he locates Lincoln, “who certainly represents civil religion at its best”\textsuperscript{13}. By pointing out the importance of the Declaration of Independence as “sacred scripture” of civil religion, Bellah indicated that Lincoln and the Civil War raised the “deepest question of national meaning... The man who not only formulated but in his own person embodied its meaning for Americans was Abraham Lincoln.”\textsuperscript{14} According to Bellah, the symbolic equation of Lincoln with Jesus was made relatively early. Bellah demonstrates that Lincoln is understood as “our martyred president,” who gave “the last full measure of devotion” for the country, by American and its civil religion. Bellah does not explore enough the concept of the prophet, but he mentions Lincoln as “a man of prophetic statue.”\textsuperscript{15} Bellah cites William J, Wolfe’s writings, which refer to Lincoln as a prophet; “Lincoln is one of the greatest theologians of America - not in the technical meaning of producing a system of doctrine, certainly not as a defender of some one denomination, but in the sense of seeing the hand of God intimately in the affairs of nations. Just so the prophets of Israel criticized the events of their day from the perspective of the God who is concerned for history, and who reveals His will within it. Lincoln now stands among God's latter day prophets.”\textsuperscript{16} In addition, he says “prophetic voices have never been lacking” in American Civil Religion, in which he implies the leaders of the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War, in addition to Lincoln. Bellah shows his concern about Vietnam, and he believes the nation needs to be judged. He says that a prophet “calls this nation to its judgment” by citing J, William Fulbright’s speech in 1966.\textsuperscript{17} Ira Chernus writes that Bellah “called for prophetic voices to evoke a reformation” of

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid: 180
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid: 177
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid: 185
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid: 185. Locating Fulbright as a prophet. Fulbright’s speech: When a nation is very powerful but lacking in self-confidence, it is likely to behave in a manner that is dangerous both to itself and to others. Gradually but unmistakably, America is succumbing to that arrogance of power which has afflicted, weakened and in some cases destroyed great nations in the past. If the war goes on and expands, if that fatal process continues to accelerate until America becomes what it is not now and never has been, a seeker after unlimited power and empire, then Vietnam will have had a mighty and tragic fallout indeed. I do not believe that will happen. I am very apprehensive but I still remain hopeful, and even confident, that America, with its humane and democratic traditions, will find the wisdom to match its power.
Civil Religion in America. Again, the presidents of the United States are key players of Bellah’s concept of Civil Religion in America. However, among the issues Americans faced at this time, which Bellah refers to as “the third time of trial,” he did not exclude the leaders of the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War campaign from being the potential “prophetic voices.” So to speak, Bellah implies that not only the president is possible to be a prophet of civil religion, but also leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and anti-Vietnam War campaign can bring prophetic voices for American Civil Religion.

Similar to Martin E. Marty, scholars of American Civil Religion frequently focus and discuss two typologies of American Civil Religion: the Prophetic type and the Priestly type (Marty, Wuthnow, Pierard & Linder, etc.). As Marty defines, the “priestly will normally be celebrative, affirmative, culture-building... the prophetic will tend to be dialectical about civil religion, but predisposition toward the judgmental.” In light of Russell Richey and Donald Jones’ five modes of civil religion, the “priestly” is the same as what they call “folk religion”, based on which the nation and the social bond of all people in the nation is considered sacred. It means "folk religion" affirms that the nation and its way of life as they exist now are sacred, so they do not expect change. Will Herberg’s “American Way of Life” can be counted in this mode as well. On the other hand, the “prophetic” shares some characteristics of what Richey and Jones call “Protestant civic piety”, which emphasizes Protestant moralism, individualism, activism, the work ethics, and the grand motif of missionizing the world. This mode stresses the importance of self-images like the “New Israel” and the “Promised Land,” and so forth. Although Richey and Jones’ “Protestant civic piety” mode is in a way less comprehensive characterization of civil religion, at least, at a certain point, this mode of civil religion contains a firm sense of mission that is similar to Marty’s concept of Prophetic type. Marty also introduces another way of dividing Civil Religion into two types.
categories. One kind of the civil religion interprets the nation as “under God”; therefore, the spirit of it is responsible to God. The other type of the civil religion stresses nation as “self-transcendence”, which the nation itself assumes transcendence in the absence of definitive reference to God. To sum up, the nation “under god” type explicitly refers to “God” as guiding America or making demands on America, etc. whereas the nation “self-transcendence” type does not explicitly use the term “God.” Moreover, according to Marty, these two kinds of civil religion both establish the priest and the prophet. Marty states the priest of the nation “under God” is represented by Eisenhower, and the prophet is represented by Lincoln. Contrarily, the nation as “self-transcendent” priest is represented by Nixon, and its prophet is by Sidney Mead.

c. The American Creed

We cannot explore the religious dimension in America without referring to the American Creed. I would like to summarize Richard Hughes’s definition on the American Creed. Hughes points to the American Creed as the essence of the civil religion in America, as well as American Myths as components of the civil religion in America. The American Creed is explicitly demonstrated in The Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” According to Hughes, the term myth is a “story that speaks of meaning and purpose, and for that reason it speaks truth to those who take it seriously.” Hughes demonstrates five American myths: 1) the myth of chosen people, 2) the myth of Nature’s Nation, 3) the myth of the Christian Nation, 4) the myth of the Millennial Nation, 5) the myth of the Innocent Nation. The Declaration of Independence rises to the level of American Myth as well, but Hughes argues that Jefferson’s words are “American Creed” because these words are fundamental and unchallengeable.

which provide the “primal meaning of the nation.” So the level of creed is even a higher level than the myths. It goes without saying that The Declaration of Independence was not targeted for women, African-Americans, and native Americas. Thus, Jefferson meant all white men of property when he stated “all men.” Although it took quite some time, American has developed and enlarged the meaning of that story to include not only white men of property but also women as well as people of every race. The American Creed was the crystal of hard labor originating from the time of the founding fathers. When Americans encountered a challenging period, particularly in the Civil War and 1960’s, they constantly questioned and claimed the American Creed. “All men are created equal”, thus, all men are endowed with “certain unalienable rights.” The American Creed clearly contains and indicates the importance of individual rights and its freedom, which Martin Luther King, Jr. claimed when he propelled the Civil Rights Movement and other social actions. He constantly referred to the Declaration of Independence including in the “I have a Dream” speech. The American Creed is the essential idea of what King called the American Dream.

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25 Ibid: 2
III. King’s View of Civil Religion and His Prophetic Social Reformation

Thirty-four years ago, the man whose life we celebrate today spoke to us down there, at the other end of this Mall, in words that moved the conscience of a nation. Like a prophet of old, he told of his dream that one day America would rise up and treat all its citizens as equals before the law and in the heart. Martin Luther King’s dream was the American Dream. His quest is our quest: the ceaseless striving to live out our true creed. Our history has been built on such dreams and labors. And by our dreams and labors we will redeem the promise of America in the 21st century. (Second Inauguration of Bill Clinton, 1997).

This chapter explores the fundamental ideas and actions of Martin Luther King, Jr., who is referred to as “like a prophet of old,” and his dream is counted equal to the “American Dream,” in the Second Inauguration Address of Bill Clinton. In light of the concept of civil religion, King’s views on America and his commitment to society are discussed here based on his speeches, sermons, and writings on the Civil Rights Movement; moreover, his other social actions (anti-Vietnam war, Poor People Campaign) are examined here as well.

a. Beloved Community

For King, the purpose of the Montgomery bus boycott was “reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community.”26 The concept of the Beloved Community is the fundamental idea that supports his actions and commitments to America (King’s speeches, Smith & Zepp, Chernus, etc.). King does not provide us with an exact definition of the Beloved Community, whereas his writings and movements provide clues for us to define and narrow down his vision of the Beloved Community. King began his career as a black Christian leader who fought for freedom and justice for African Americans: the Civil Rights Movement. King, beyond doubt, used the language of religion (Christianity) throughout his career. Although King’s idea always relied on his religious beliefs,

26 King, 1963. “The Ethical Demands of Integration”
his vision of the Beloved Community transcended and applied to all human beings of all races, social classes, ethnicities, and religions. To understand the Beloved Community, we need to examine his references to the Promised Land, agape, American Dream, freedom, and equality. I believe King expresses the eschatological vision of the march towards the Beloved Community of all humanity in peace. And, interestingly enough, he called himself the drum major of that march. “I was a drum major for justice...I was a drum major for peace...I was a drum major for righteousness.”27 He never called himself a prophet, but he did not hesitate to be a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness leading the march toward the Beloved Community. Establishing the Beloved Community was King’s goal, and was the goal for America, and was the goal for all humankind. The Beloved Community is fundamental in terms of interpreting King’s language and involvement to his actions. This vision led him to commit and dedicate his life to America and the world.

**Promised Land**

Throughout his career, King constantly used the term “Promised Land.” It goes without saying that the idea derived from the Exodus. Using the rhetoric of the emancipation of slaves in the context of Jewish and Christian history (or story), King tried to interpret and put Black experiences into the frame of the Exodus. In other words, King interpreted the Civil Rights Movement as a parallel story to the Exodus. Keith Miller writes, King’s “equation of black America and the Hebrew people revised and updated the slaves’ powerful identification with the Israelites suffering under the yoke of the Pharaoh ... his interpretation of the Exodus as an archetypal event expressed the distinctive worldview of those who longed for a new Moses to emancipate them from an American Egypt.”28 As Ira Chernus mentions, the “Exodus story spoke directly to the hope of resolving the tension” in America, and its rhetoric is

familiar to all Americans.\textsuperscript{29} King used the term Promised Land as the goal of the Civil Rights Movement. In January 1957, King and Black citizens in Montgomery were under the circumstance of bombing terror. King addressed: “tell Montgomery that they can keep shooting and I’m going to stand up to them; tell Montgomery they can keep bombing and I’m going to stand up to them. If I had to die tomorrow morning I would die happy because I’ve been to Mountaintop and I’ve seen the Promised Land, and it’s going to be here in Montgomery.”\textsuperscript{30} In the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963), King states, “the United States Negro is moving toward a sense of great urgency toward the Promised Land of racial justice.” He thought leading Black people to the “Promised Land” was his mission and it was the ultimate goal of the Civil Rights Movement. Needless to say, the prophet Moses took people to the Promised Land. In a sense, from his writings, we are able to see King’s awareness of the American prophet or Moses. King writes, “Any discussion of the role of the Christian minister today must ultimately emphasize the need for prophecy. Not every minister can be a prophet, but some must be prepared for the ordeals of this high calling and be willing to suffer courageously for righteousness.”\textsuperscript{31} In these lines, he is asserting the need for prophecy. Perhaps, he is implying himself as a prophetic leader for righteousness. He called himself the “drum major” in his final years, but in regard to his awareness of the prophecy, we may conclude the “drum major” is a sort of modest way to call himself the “prophet.” For King, to win Civil Rights story equal to landing in the Promised Land. In fact, whether King was consciously acting as Moses for American Blacks, he in fact played the role of Moses for American Blacks. Ironically, his life ended like Moses, who died within the sight of the Promised Land. In his last speech, he says, “I’ve been to the mountaintop… I just want to do God’s will… I’ve seen the Promised Land…

\textsuperscript{29} Ira Chernus, Martin Luther King, Jr.
\textsuperscript{30} Stephen Oates, 1982. \textit{Let the Trumpet Sound}: 111
\textsuperscript{31} King, 1958. \textit{Stride Toward Freedom}: 210
may not get there with you... But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

His last speech and his life ending made him much closer to a prophet.

Loving Your Enemy – *Agape*

Like the “Promised Land,” the idea of “Loving Your Enemy” and “agape” are well known Christian language. By drawing on Paul Tillich in his dissertation, King wrote, “the only basic and adequate symbol for God’s love is *agape*.” King emphasized the importance of “love one another” by citing Saint John when delivering his anti-Vietnam war speech. In his sermon “Loving Your Enemy” (1957), King emphasized how important the idea is for himself and for America. He said, Loving Your Enemy is “basic to me because it is a part of my basic philosophical and theological orientation – the whole idea of love, the whole philosophy of love.” In the sermon, King referred to three different types of love: *eros*, romantic love; *philia*, the reciprocal affection between friends; and *agape*, the highest form of love. He emphasized *agape* as what Jesus means when he says “Loving your enemy.” King explored *agape* in many of his sermons with an eye to well illuminating the concept of Christian love. As Chernus mentions, King believed *agape* acted out in society creates a sense of a loving community. So to speak, *agape* is the central idea of what King called the Beloved Community:

*agape is more than eros; agape is more than philia; agape is something of the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing love; it’s what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of men. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men, not because they are likeable, but because God loves them. You look at

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32 King, 1968. “I’ve been to the Mountaintop”
every man, and you love him because you know God loves him. And he might be the worst person you’ve ever seen.  

Agape is the “love of God working in the lives of men.” God loves all His children. King understands agape just as God loves everyone, people need to treat everyone with agape love. God is agape, He works to create a sense of a loving community. What King called the Beloved Community is the community in which members love each other, just as God loves all His children. For King, the concept of agape stands at the center of both his spiritual belief in a knowable God and his assertion according to which love and nonviolence were essential to rectify America’s race problems. He defined agape as “purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is the love of God operating in the human heart.” Moreover, the idea of agape played a key part in the process of developing the Civil Rights Movement in a nonviolent way. King used agape as a way to explain the use of nonviolence in race relations. King says, “at the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love ... when we rise to love on the agape level,” he continues, “we love men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but we love them because God loves them. Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.”  

So to speak, in the Beloved Community “every person is neighbor to every other; no one can be an enemy.”  

Nonviolence based on the concept of agape is the way to treat people and the way to change society. The concept of Loving Your Enemy/agape love is the vital link between faith and action. For King, it was inseparable spirit and matter, body and soul, or belief and action. King affirmed that “spiritual truth must be acted out in concrete social life.” Agape is a crucial philosophy for King to integrate diversity and build a sense of loving community. Thus, nonviolence based on the concept agape is King’s tactic

36 King, 157. “Loving Your Enemy”
and answer to propel and win Civil Rights. King’s commitment to the anti-Vietnam War campaign and Poor People’s Campaign was based on his belief in *agape* as well. *Agape* tells us how to love your neighbors, help each other, and share with everybody. From this point of view, consequently, King could not allow racism, militarism (the Vietnam War), economic inequality (poverty). We could not explain all King’s social actions without his spiritual beliefs in *agape*.

**American Dream – Freedom and Equality**

When King was convicted of disobeying a police order in 1958, he explained the reason as follows: “I make this decision because of my love for America and sublime principle of liberty and equality upon which she is founded.”\(^{40}\) What King calls the American Dream is supported by the idea of the founding spirit; freedom and equality. The American Dream can be classified in a sense as synonymous with what Richard Hughes calls the American Creed. When King referred to freedom and equality, he always mentioned the Declaration: “We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here.”\(^{41}\) “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 note was a 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.”\(^{42}\) Moreover, by citing the Declaration, King says, “the first saying we notice in this dream is an amazing universalism. It doesn’t say ‘some men’ it says ‘all men’. It doesn’t say ‘all white men,’ it says ‘all men,’ which includes black men. It does not say ‘all Gentiles,’ it says ‘all men,’ which includes Jews. It doesn’t say ‘all Protestants,’ it says

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\(^{41}\) King, 1963. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
\(^{42}\) King, 1963. “I have a Dream”
‘all men,’ which includes Catholics. It doesn’t even say ‘all theists and believers,’ it says ‘all men,’ which includes humanists and agnostics.” From these lines, we could easily tell that he strongly asserted that freedom and equality, which are clearly articulated in the Declaration of Independence, are the fundamental idea of the founding of the nation. What King called the “American Dream” is the universalistic democracy, which aims at the unification in diversity and calls for the integration of the community where all kind of people can live, regardless of ethnicity, religion, and color of skin. Moreover, King believes that human rights are granted not only by the government or the state, but also by the creator. It is the national idea of America that nobody can infringe on. For King, the American Dream is to bring to fruition the Creator’s will and American Democracy. King’s faith in the fusion of the Jewish and Christian traditions and American Democracy is clearly shown as follows: “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 what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.” King brilliantly used the rhetoric of the Jewish and Christian concept and the spirit of the founding which most Americans share as he propelled the Civil Rights Movement.

Compared to the Promised Land and agape, the American Dream does not seem as a Christian-oriented idea. It seems mostly to come from the Republic tradition. However, we cannot deny that what King called the American Dream also includes Jewish and Christian values. Chernus briefly discusses that King always spoke on two levels. King often expressed the same basic idea in two ways, using “God” explicitly and on the other level not mentioning “God” explicitly. At first glance, the concept of agape and the American Dream seem to be two different ideas. However, these two concepts are deeply

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44 King 1963. Letter from a Birmingham Jail
45 Chernus, “Martin Luther King, Jr.”
related to each other. King states that *agape* is “understanding, redeeming good will for all men... It is the love of God working in the lives of men.”\(^{46}\) The basic idea of *agape* is “all men.” In other words, there is the idea of “equality” in both the American Dream and *agape*. The ideas of *agape* and the American Dream are undoubtedly connected for King. As I mentioned in the former chapter, “self-transcendence” means that there is no explicit reference to “God” in guiding America or making demands on America, etc. In other words, the term “God” is not used explicitly, whereas the term God is explicit for the nation “under God” category of Civil Religion. King tends to avoid using the term God when he talks about the American Dream, and when he talks about equality and freedom based on the Declaration. In this sense, King fits Marty’s “self-transcendence” category. However, as in the citation above, King interprets “American Dream” either as an equal or a derivative of the “value of Judeo-Christian heritage,” and it is deeply related to the idea of *agape*. Thus, King can be categorized much more into the nation “under God” category. King’s essential idea undoubtedly comes from Christianity. The notion of the Beloved Community deeply relied on the language of Judaism and Christianity. King sees the nation “under God,” and his concept of the Beloved Community applies to not only the nation but also the world as well as the whole universe. In a sense, the idea of the Beloved Community can be categorized into “world under god.”

**b. King’s Prophetic Social Reformation**

King’s fundamental idea of the Beloved Community sought to justify and give meaning to the Civil Rights Movement (Criticism of Racism/Criticism of White Christianity), the anti-Vietnam War Campaign, and the Poor People’s Campaign. It goes without saying that King constantly criticized the racism in America when he propelled and played a part in the Civil Rights Movement. As time passed, King stepped forward toward more and more radical directions. His faith in the Beloved Community pushed

him inevitably to take actions. In response to being categorized as an “extremist,” King says, “was not Jesus an extremist for love... was not Paul an extremist for Jesus Gospel.” Letters from a Birmingham Jail” contains strong criticism of white Christianity. In “Beyond Vietnam,” King clearly criticized racism (the lack of Civil Rights), economic inequality (poverty), and militarism (imperialism) based on his concept of the Beloved Community. In other words, his idea of the Beloved Community was acted out in the form of criticizing racism and the circumstance of white churches, commitments to anti-Vietnam War Campaign, and the Poor People’s Campaign.

Criticizing Racism – Segregation

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies... cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities... No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

King was the leader who fought against the segregation system in the U.S and led blacks to raise their voice against social injustice. As King emphasized in reference to the Declaration, for King, the segregation principle denies the value of the United States, and equality as well as freedom which are given from the God. Segregation disturbs the construction of American Dream or the Beloved Community. For King, segregation “is blasphemy ... this is against everything that the Christian religion stands for.” Keith Miller notes King’s rhetoric in the “I have a dream” speech. For king, “segregation is wrong because it eviscerates the Emancipation Proclamation, scandalizes Jefferson’s vision, violates Amos’s demand, stymies Isaiah’s longings, and contaminates the freedom celebrated in ‘America.’

47 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”  
49 King, 1963. “I have a dream”  
50 King, Stride toward Freedom: (Paul’s letter to American Christians)
Essentially ‘I have a dream’ contends that segregation is wrong because it prevents the highest
deductive truths of the nation and the Bible from governing human relations. Enacting these deductive
truths means eradicating segregation.”51 In short, King’s construction of the Beloved Community is
interrupted by the segregation system, which denies the founding spirit and God’s will.

Moreover, King says that segregation is a vision which the white segregationists and the silent blacks
both create.52 That is to say, segregation is not all the whites’ fault; it is also the vision that had been
justified by the blacks to tolerate the social discrimination system contrary to justice. The blacks’
obedient attitude makes the whites become conceited. King criticizes not only the white segregationists,
but also blacks silent under such inhumane circumstances. With Montgomery’s movement as a starting
point, throughout the Civil Rights Movement King called black people to stand up against the racism and
asked them to raise their voice.53 King tried to strip off the mindset and dismantle a mistakenly built
social system with a replacement in the Beloved Community.

**Criticizing White Christianity**

King found out that most Christian churches in the U.S are unconcerned and leave the issue of the
segregation system aside. He thought the churches had lost the soul of the self-sacrifice originally
equipped for the purpose of love of neighbors. In his book “Stride toward Freedom (1958),” King shows
his views on the roles of churches, ministers, and their commitment to the nation. This book contains his
views and criticism of churches in the U.S. King suggests the active role of the church as the center of
concern and commit to social issue in the U.S. King states, the “church must also become increasingly
active in social action outside its door... as guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community the

52 King, Strength to Love: 130-131 (“Paul’s Letter to American Christian”)
53 Ibid, 130, King assert, “I must urge you to get rid of every aspect of segregation”
church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils.”\(^{54}\) He continues, churches and ministers have to work “to let the spirit of Christ work toward fashioning a truly great Christian nation.”\(^{55}\) So to speak, King believed that Christianity was a universal value and the Church needs to preach and involve the nation in the idea of Christianity. However, even though King shows his views on the role of Church and its commitment to the nation in “Stride Toward Freedom” in 1958, his strong criticism of the white church is obviously seen in the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in 1963. The tone of this letter is more pessimistic than “Stride toward Freedom.” In the letter, King shows his “disappointment” in most white churches. He writes, “I have been greatly disappointed by the white church and its leadership,”\(^{56}\) and he recalls that he was not supported by most white churches when he led the Montgomery bus boycott.\(^{57}\) He states, “so often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound... so often it is an archdefender of the status quo.”\(^{58}\) On the other hand, although King was pessimistic about the Church in the U.S, King did not seem so disappointed about the future of the nation, because he believed “the goal of America is freedom ... the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demand.”\(^{59}\)

Anti-Vietnam War Campaign

*They seem to forget that before I was a civil rights leader, I answered a call, and when God speaks, who can but prophecy. I answered a call which left the spirit of the Lord upon me and anointed me to preach*

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\(^{54}\) King, 1958, Stride Toward Freedom. 208-211  
\(^{55}\) Ibid, 210-211  
\(^{56}\) King, 1964. Why We can’t Wait. 93  
\(^{57}\) Ibid, 94. King writes, “when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.”  
\(^{58}\) Ibid, 96. King continues, “If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.”  
\(^{59}\) King, “letter from a Birmingham Jail”
the gospel. And during the early days of my ministry, I read the Apostle Paul saying, ‘Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of minds.’ I decided then that I was going to tell the truth as God revealed it to me. No matter how many people disagree with me, I decided that I was going to tell the truth.\(^6^0\)

In the citation above, he seems to be saying that he felt called or compelled to prophecy, that is, to be a prophet. This sounds like he is referring himself as Moses. The citation above shows that King’s commitment to anti-Vietnam War Campaign reflects the Christian basis of his ideas. The Christian basis of all King’s ideas is that we cannot separate his civil religion from his Christianity. Motivated by the Christian idea, King decided to step forward to the anti-Vietnam War Campaign. King’s commitment to the anti-Vietnam War Campaign was a product of his spiritual belief in agape (love one another) and nonviolence; “all my adult life I have deplored violence and war as instruments for achieving solution to mankind’s problem. I am firmly committed to the creative power of nonviolence as force which is capable of winning lasting and meaningful brotherhood and peace.\(^6^1\)

King’s opposition to the Vietnam War received a tremendous amount of criticism by the American audience, which lifted up his characteristic as a prophet. Day by day, he was being put under more severe pressure from many spheres in the U.S. Four years after President John F. Kennedy sent the first American troops into Vietnam, King issued his first public statement on the war. Answering press questions after addressing a Howard University audience in March 1965, King asserted that the war in Vietnam was “accomplishing nothing” and called for a negotiated settlement. Even though King personally opposed the war, he was concerned that publicly criticizing American foreign policy would damage his relationship with President Lyndon Johnson, who had been instrumental in passing civil rights legislation and who had declared in April 1965 that he was willing to negotiate a diplomatic end to

\(^6^0\) King, edited by Clayborne Carson. 1998. The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.: 337
\(^6^1\) Ibid: 333
the war in Vietnam. Indeed, King was even chastised by other civil rights leaders because they were concerned that King’s standpoints would alienate the Johnson administration in the White House. Some civil rights leaders warned King that “a direct confrontation with Lyndon Johnson would be unwise and costly to the black freedom struggle.”\(^{62}\) However, King publicly delivered his official anti-war speech, “Beyond Vietnam – Time to Break Silence,” exactly a year before his assassination on April 4\(^{th}\), 1968. In the speech, from the viewpoint of the U.S. role in international peace, King severely criticized intensification of American military invention in Vietnam, which King believed spoiled its prestige as a moral leader in the world. King stated that America was spoiled by three evils: racism, extreme materialism, and militarism. His speech and his attitude toward the Vietnam War received many reverberations from people such as students who were inspired by the counter-culture. Simultaneously, however, King received tremendous criticism from the media, politicians, and many of American audience. Todd Gitlin points out that a New York crowd variously assessed at anywhere from 125,000 to 400,000 heard King denounce the war, but not even a single congressman or senator sponsored or spoke up for it.\(^{63}\) President Johnson even uttered when he boiled with rage against King, “Martin Luther King, goddamned nigger preacher.”\(^ {64}\) According to Michael Eric Dyson’s research on American media (including *New York Times, Newsweek, Washington Post, U.S. News*, etc.), the tones of King’s opposition to Vietnam War were absolutely negative. The utterances such as “King should have kept silent,” “black leaders had no business speaking about such matters,” “an opportunist” surged. The *Washington Post* condemned King’s anti-Vietnam War speech as “not a sober and responsible comment on the war, but a reflection on his disappointment at the slow progress of civil rights and the war on poverty.”\(^ {65}\) The *New York Times* decried any combining of the civil right and peace movements, rebuking

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\(^{63}\) Todd Gitlin. 1993. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*: 242

\(^{64}\) Dyson: 61

\(^{65}\) David Garrow. 1986. *Bering the Cross*: 553
King for “recklessly comparing American military methods to those of the Nazis.” These harsh attacks and negative utterances were prevalently found both in editorial and op-ed columns. However, King did not change his stance under such severe pressure. King’s involvement in the anti-Vietnam War Campaign obviously fits Weber’s definition of a prophet, who is always controversial. Despite receiving strong support from a particular group of people, a prophet receives severe attack from others at the same time.

**Poor People’s Campaign**

*I didn’t get my inspiration from Karl Marx; I got it from a man named Jesus, a Galilean saint who said he was anointed to heal the broken-hearted. He was anointed to deal with the problems of the poor. And that is where we get our inspiration. And we go out in a day when we have a message from the world, and we can change this world and we can change this nation.*

*He [Jesus] was concerned about bread; he opened and started Operation Breadbasket a long time ago. He initiated the first sit-in movement. The greatest revolutionary that history has ever known. And when people tell us when we stand up that we got our inspiration from this or that, go back and let them know where we got inspiration.*

As King clearly criticized economic inequality (extreme materialism) in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech, overcoming economic inequality was the next target for bringing the Beloved community to fruition. Like the anti-Vietnam War Movement, the Poor People’s Campaign was based on his fundamental ideas – the Beloved Community. King came to Memphis (where he died) was in support of the strike called by the black sanitary workers with a demand for higher wages and better treatment, which may be deemed as a part of Poor People’s Campaign. King initiated the Poor People’s Campaign at a staff retreat

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66 Ibid: 554
68 Ibid: 351
for the SCLC in November 1967. It was just four months before his death. King planned for an initial group of 2,000 poor people to descend on Washington, D.C., southern states, and northern cities, to meet with government officials to demand jobs, unemployment insurance, a fair minimum wage, and education for poor adults and children. All of these were targeted to improve their self-image and self-esteem. Many civil rights leaders, however, thought King’s campaign was too ambitious, and the demands were too amorphous since the campaign would relate not only to blacks, but also involve several perspectives such as class, other minorities, capitalism etc. That is to say, just as King’s commitment to anti-Vietnam war, he was even opposed by his colleagues for his involvement in the Poor People’s Campaign. For instance, his colleagues James Bevel, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, and Bayard Rustin strongly opposed King on the Poor People’s Campaign. They generally believed that Johnson’s anger and Congress’s resistance would make the campaign a massive failure. In contrast with King’s involvement to anti-Vietnam war campaign, there was no extensive criticism of King’s Poor People’s Campaign by the press during the period from November 1967 to April 1968. Presumably, they had not decided their clear attitude to the campaign or it could be said that the campaign had not flourished (the movement was still in the preparation step, the march or the protest had not started).

However, the press’ tone was by and large negative, especially when the campaign took a place in violent ways. Moreover, the FBI investigated him on suspicion of being a communist, and they actively tried to disrupt the Poor People’s Campaign. Pressure from the government, disagreement from many of colleagues, failure to motivate people in nonviolent way: the Poor People’s Campaign was definitely a

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69 Ibid: 346.
70 Dyson. 2001. I May Not Get There With You: 89
71 David Garrow. 1986. Bering the Cross: 615. The hostile Memphis Commercial Appeal declared that “King’s pose as leader of a nonviolent movement has been shattered” and criticized him for having “fled the melee.” “He wrecked his reputation.” The New York Times, referred to riots, and wrote “powerful embarrassment to Dr. King,” warned in an editorial that King ought to call off the Poor People’s Campaign.
72 Ibid: 611
tough campaign for him. Nevertheless, he did not stop marching toward justice, peace, and righteousness for the American people and establishing the Beloved Community.

*Jesus reminded us in a magnificent parable one day that a man went to hell because he didn’t see the poor... Lazarus who came daily to his (Dives) gate in need of the basic necessities of life and Dives didn’t do anything about it. And he ended up going to hell... America too is going to hell if she doesn’t use her wealth. If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all God’s children to have the basic necessities of life, she too will go to hell.*

The ideas and the goals of the Poor People's Campaign reflected the Beloved Community, which include Christian beliefs (*agape*) and the founding spirits (American Creed). As we can see from the citation above, there were Christian ideas behind King’s involvement in the Poor People’s Campaign. By using Christian rhetoric, King urged, “if America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all God’s children to have the basic necessities of life, she too will go to hell.” These lines undoubtedly reflect his belief in *agape* love. *Agape* is the idea of loving one another, helping one another, as well as sharing with one another. King could not deny extreme economic inequality in America based on the idea of *agape*. For King, the Poor People’s Campaign was a result acted out from his belief in *agape*. Moreover, he could not deny the economic inequality in the United States, because he thought “if that power refused to acknowledge its debt to the poor, it would have failed to live up to its promised to insure ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ to its citizens... to end poverty, to extirpate prejudice, to free a tormented conscience, to make a tomorrow of justice, fair play, and creativity – all these are worthy of the American ideal.”

These lines clearly illustrate that refusing to improve economic inequality indicates disregarding America’s founding spirit. His involvement in the Poor People’s Campaign was based on his fundamental belief in equality, which

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74 Ibid: 350-351
derived from the concept of *agape* and the American Creed. King believed that the American Dream would not come to fruition if American could not improve or eradicate the poverty in the nation.

Since Montgomery in the middle of the 50’s, King had always been in heavy storms. He always encountered and fought social authority/institution. He always pursued and reminded people of what Jesus said. He always tried to “renew” or “reform” the social circumstance in which America involved. He always had “vital emotional preaching” based on his racial background and religious belief. King and his life can easily be categorized in Weber’s definition of the prophet since it holds the characteristics of anti-institution, devotion to change, and charismatic leadership. Furthermore, King was always concerned about America. He always tried to make America better. He strongly believed in the founding spirit. He always worked hard for the American Dream and hoped it would come to fruition. The purpose of King’s Civil Rights Movement, anti-Vietnam war campaign, and the Poor People’s Campaign was to build the Beloved Community, which included biblical traditions, the “Promised land,” “agape,” and the founding spirit of the “American Dream.” In other words, King proposed forming a fair national society, which respects existence of one another by reforming the social, cultural, and economic system in America. He undoubtedly incarnated American values, which contain the founding spirit and biblical tradition. Thus, he was not just a southern Baptist black preacher, but he was also the preacher and the prophet of American Civil Religion.
IV. King Today – Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial

A. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial

King’s Memorial opened to the public on August 2011. The sculpture stands in the northwest corner of the Tidal Basin, across from the Jefferson Memorial and next to the FDR Memorial. It creates a visual “line of leadership” from the Lincoln Memorial to the Jefferson Memorial. King is lined up with the greatest presidents of the United States. King, who was not white, not a president, nor did he go to war, is the first black man honored in the National Mall. As Vincent Harding once described King as the “inconvenient hero,” King was not wholly understood and accepted by American society in his final years. Almost 50 years past after his assassination, King was finally enshrined and honored by many Americans. King became a great icon of American Civil Religion.

The dedication of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial in Washington had been postponed because of Hurricane Irene. Originally it was scheduled on August 28, 2011, the 48th anniversary of the “I have a dream” speech that King delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. It was rescheduled on October 16, 2011.

Vincent Harding, Martin Luther King, Jr. – Inconvenient Hero
The sculpture, named the “Stone of Hope,” derives its name from a line in King’s “I Have a Dream (1963)” speech: “we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” At the entrance of the memorial, two stones stand apart, representing the “Mountain of Despair.” A single wedge is pushed out, and from there King’s form emerges. With this in mind, the visitor approaching the monument is compelled to pass through the Mountain of Despair, which stands like two forbidding sentinels, or at least in my opinion, like two sides of the threatening Red Sea parted by God as Moses led the Hebrew people out of bondage. Each side of the Stone of Hope includes a statement attributed to King. The first, from the “I Have a Dream” speech, is “Out of the Mountain of Despair, a Stone of Hope”—the quotation that serves as the basis for the monument’s design. The words on the other side of the stone read, “I Was a Drum Major for Justice, Peace, and Righteousness,” which is a paraphrased version of a longer quote by King: “If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.”

Interestingly enough, the stone is way bigger than Jefferson and Lincoln statues. The size of the stone implies that King’s icon as important as, or more important than, Jefferson and Lincoln in regard to civil religion.

The Washington Post, August 22, 2011

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77 King, 1968. “Drum Major Instinct”
Right side of the Stone, “Out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope,” President Barack Obama speaks, the stone behind him, abcnews, October 16, 2011.
The Left side of the Stone. “I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteous,” The Washington Post, August 30, 2011

President Barak Obama visited the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial dedication with his family, and delivered a speech on October 16, 2011:

For this day, we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s return to the National Mall. In this place, he will stand for all time, among monuments to those who fathered this nation and those who defended it; a black preacher with no official rank or title who somehow gave voice to our deepest dreams and our most lasting ideals, a man who stirred our conscience and thereby helped make our union more perfect.

Nearly half a century has passed since that historic March on Washington, a day when thousands upon
thousands gathered for jobs and for freedom. That is what our schoolchildren remember best when they think of Dr. King – his booming voice across this Mall, calling on America to make freedom a reality for all of God’s children, prophesizing of a day when the jangling discord of our nation would be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.\textsuperscript{78}

King’s life and work are certainly authorized by enshrining him in granite in the National Mall and by the President’s speech. Like the other former key players of the nation, Obama said, King “will stand for all time, among monuments to those who fathered this nation and those who defended it.” Obama interpreted King as he who “gave voice to our deepest dreams and our most lasting ideals, a man who stirred our conscience and thereby helped make our union more perfect.” King called on “America to make a freedom reality for all of God’s children.” These lines by the president imply and certify the recognition of King as a national figure who embodied and exemplified the American Dream, who dedicated himself for the nation and “all of God’s children.” By the memorial and the president’s speech, the black preacher was beyond all doubt certified as the national icon more than four decades after his death.

In addition, although Obama did not place King as an American prophet or Moses at the dedication in 2011, Obama placed King as a prophetic figure in 2006, at the Martin Luther King Memorial Groundbreaking Ceremony. Obama said, “like Moses before him, he would never live to see the Promised Land. But from the mountain top, he pointed the way for us - a land no longer torn asunder with racial hatred and ethnic strife, a land that measured itself by how it treats the least of these, a land in which strength is defined not simply by the capacity to wage war but by the determination to forge peace - a land in which all of God's children might come together in a spirit of brotherhood.”\textsuperscript{79} These

\textsuperscript{79} Barack Obama. 2006. The Martin Luther king, Jr. Memorial Groundbreaking Ceremony
lines show that Obama sees King as a prophetic figure. Ever since then, Obama has compared King to Moses - a visionary leader who did not live long enough to see the Promised Land. In 2010, Obama spoke about King at the Vermont Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., describing himself as a member of the Joshua generation, “the great inheritors of progress paid for with sweat and blood, and sometimes life itself.” Obama equates King as Moses, and Obama himself as a member of Joshua generation. The president defines King as an American Moses, who brought a huge progress to America and led Americans to the Promised Land. At this point, Obama clearly presents King as the prophet. However, I also need to regard that Obama turned King into a routinized icon of Civil Religion according to the speech in 2011. Obama presents King’s goal as the national goal, King’s Dream as the national dream, and said King’s monument “will stand for all time, among monuments to those who fathered this nation and those who defended it.”

b. The Routinization

King’s language and life are officially honored by the head of authority, the president of the United States, and authorized by enshrining him in granite in the National Mall. However, the two different views of King expressed in Obama’s words – King as prophet and King as icon of civil religion – represent the transformation of King’s status in American Civil Religion. This transformation is something to be expected with certain prophetic figures, according to Weber. As I mentioned in the first chapter, the prophet holds characteristics of anti-authority and anti-institution. According to Weber’s definition, charismatic authority is one of three authorities; the other two are traditional authority and rational-legal authority. Traditional authority claims “virtue of the sanctity of age-old rules and powers.” When the power passes from one generation to another, then it is known as traditional authority. Rational

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(legal) authority claims legitimacy, such as order, a system, and a status. Moreover, this authority sets law as the foundation. The power of the rational legal authority is generally mentioned in the constitution. Charismatic authority typically emerges in the form of a prophet, a military hero, a king, and a political publicist. Weber writes, charismatic authority is “sharply opposed both to rational, and the particularly bureaucratic, authority, and to traditional authority... both rational and traditional authority are specifically forms of everyday routine control of action.” Undoubtedly, King’s life fits characteristics of Weber’s definition of the prophet who deeply relies on personal charisma. However, taking account of the memorial, we could say King is absolutely authorized or institutionalized. So to speak, as time passed, King’s figure and life received a sort of national consensus; he is not only accepted and admired by a particular group of people (blacks), but also by the majority of people in America (including whites). Weber analyzes this process, which he calls the “routinization of charisma.” Charismatic authority evolves in the context of boundaries set by traditional or rational authority. Its nature tends to challenge this authority and is thus often seen as revolutionary. However, the constant challenge that charismatic authority presents to a particular society will eventually be incorporated into the society. Weber writes, charismatic authority “cannot remain stable, but became either traditionalized or rationalized, or combination of both.” For example, Muhammad, who had charismatic authority as “the prophet” among his followers, was succeeded by the traditional authority and structure of Islam, a clear example of the routinization. As in the example of Christianity, a religion, which evolves its own priesthood and establishes a set of laws and rules, is likely to lose its charismatic character and moves towards another type of authority upon the removal of that leader. So King, who had charismatic authority as a “renewer” or proclaimer of American Creed, or the prophet of American Civil Religion, was succeeded by the traditional and the rational authority. King was put into or

84 Weber, Economy and Society: 246
understood in the context of American spiritual tradition (the founding spirit) and legal history (the Declaration of Independence). King, the icon of American Civil Religion, the most pious follower of American Creed, is traditionalized and institutionalized gradually by successors (civil rights leaders, politicians, etc.) of his belief. For example, the process of Legalization of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, celebrating the anniversary of the assassination of King, can be counted into the process of “routinization” of the prophet. Ronald Reagan signed Martin Luther King, Jr. Day into a law in 1983, and it was first observed on January 20, 1986. At first, some states resisted observing the holiday as such, giving it alternative names or combining it with other holidays. It was officially observed in all 50 states for the first time in 2000. The 40th anniversary of the assassination was nation-wide recognized in 2008. So to speak, proceeding step by step, institutionalization or what Weber calls “routinizing” of King’s prophecy is undoubtedly reached the peak its in 2011; the monument in the National Mall indicates the completion of traditionalization and rationalization of the prophet of American Civil Religion. The King Memorial is the ritual which enshrines the prophet as an American figure, and the ritual is conducted and given authority by the remarks of the highest priest, the president of United States. However, the prophetic side of King has never been forgotten, even by those who turn him into an institutionalized icon. The White House Issued Rep. John Lewis’ essay titled “A Symbol of the Best in America” on October 16, 2011. “Martin Luther King Jr. represents the very best in America… He must be looked upon as one of the founders of the New America. He must be looked upon as one of the founders of a nation more prepared to meet its highest destiny. And that is why the image of this humble Baptist minister from Atlanta, Georgia, a man who was never elected to any public office, can be seen today standing on

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87 The 40th anniversary of the assassination of 1968 was in 2008, when the whole nation got into the swing of the United States presidential election. No matter the candidates thought of the election or not, the anniversary was largely celebrated in United States.
the National Mall between the monuments to two great presidents—Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson.”

c. Poor People’s Campaign to Occupy Wall Street.

In 1967, King declared that “the time has come if we can’t get anything done otherwise to camp right here in Washington... just camp here and stay here by the thousands and thousands until the Congress of our nation and the federal government will do something to deal with the problem [of poverty].” In 2011, the country was seething with frustration as a result of the economic downturn. Interestingly enough, the “Occupy Wall Street” demonstration (or movement) occurred in the middle of September. More than four decades past after King’s commitment to the Poor People’s Campaign, King’s dreams had not seemed fulfilled yet. America still seems to be struggling with same type of issue as it was in 1968. The press frequently refers to the Occupy movement and economic inequality in the context of King’s voice. For example, a well-known liberal speaker, Arianna Huffington writes;

the tension between hope and despair is fitting, given the unfulfilled nature of so many of King’s hopes and dreams for America. Most people forget -- or never knew -- that his historic "Dream" speech was delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom -- and that his main message was not one of racial but of economic equality... With our political leaders obsessed with deficits, and jobs still on the policy backburner, another March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is desperately needed.

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87 Drew Hansen, 2005. The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the speech that inspired a nation: 197
88 Occupy Wall Street. The protest took place in the middle of September. The protest has been frequently criticized for its lack of clear policy demands. However, generally speaking, it has said that they are mainly protesting social and economic inequality, corporate greed, corruption and influence over government—particularly from the financial services sector—and lobbyists. The protesters’ slogan, “We are the 99%,” refers to the difference in wealth and income growth in the U.S. between the wealthiest 1% and the rest of the population. They believe “Declaration of the Occupation of New York City” shows the demands and goal of the protests. See The New York Times’ article “Protesters Debate What Demands, if Any, to Make,” October 16, 2011
89 See; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/mlk-monument-dc_b_936345.html
Moreover, Civil Rights leaders are now in the spotlight again. For example, Jesse Jackson is actively speaking of the Occupy Wall Street movement. On the day that President Obama celebrated the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. at the dedication of the King memorial in Washington, Cornel West channeled King his own way and joined the Occupy D.C. protests where he was arrested on the steps of the Supreme Court. West said, “we want to send a lesson to ourselves, to our loved ones, our families, our communities, our nation and the world, that out of deep love for working and poor people that we are willing to put whatever it takes (on the line)—even if we get arrested today—and say we will not allow this day of Martin Luther King Jr.’s memorial to go by without somebody going to jail, because Martin Luther King would be here right with us.”

Many liberal black activists tend to associate King’s voice with the Occupy movement. Andrew Young clearly shows his interpretation of the link between what King tried to do and what the Occupy protester is trying to do:

>Recently, our nation witnessed two events whose origins are widely separated in time, but nonetheless share relevance today: the long overdue dedication of the national memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the nationwide protests of the “Occupy” movement ... Similar to the “Occupy” movement today, there was a general feeling in the Civil Rights movement that there were few the movement felt it could trust. They didn’t want someone monopolizing the leadership, using it for their own purposes, using it to promote their own ego, or co-opting it for the very power-structure and institutionalized unfairness that they opposed. The Civil Rights Movement then, like Occupy, lacked -- and was criticized for lacking -- clear policies, strategies, or leadership. The movement had to undergo a rough growth process of discussing issues, defining a coherent purpose, debating achievable solutions, and eventually, the core concerns, strategies, agendas, and leaders would emerge ... America must return to the vision of Dr. King, recognizing that our economic, political, and social systems are inter-dependent, that our civil, political,
and economic rights along with a sense of justice are crucial ingredients in a fair and functioning society. We ultimately cannot prosper alone. Either we all prosper together, or we do not prosper at all. We restore our tattered economic confidence by restoring social trust and political responsibility. If our leaders in Washington and on Wall Street do not soon hear the call for justice soon, the crowds in the streets will grow and they will overcome.\textsuperscript{91}

In Obama’s speech at the Memorial dedication, he seemed to link King’s own struggles for civil rights with his political struggles during the economic downturn. Moreover, Obama said the nation was still encountering many of the same challenges that King saw when he made his “I Have a Dream” speech that helped to galvanize the civil rights movement in 1963. Obama states, “our work, Dr. King’s work, is not yet complete … In the first decade of this new century, we have been tested by war and by tragedy; by an economic crisis and its aftermath that has left millions out of work, and poverty on the rise, and millions more just struggling to get by. Indeed, even before this crisis struck, we had endured a decade of rising inequality and stagnant wages… In too many troubled neighborhoods across the county, the conditions of our poorest citizens appear little changed from what existed 50 year ago… neighborhoods with underfunded schools and broken-down slums, inadequate health care, constant violence, neighborhoods in which too many young people grow up with little hope and few prospects for the future. Our work is not done.”\textsuperscript{92} Obama speech tends to focus on “economic struggle.” some would criticize his ignoring King’s denunciation of militarism and devotion to nonviolence.\textsuperscript{93} Indeed, Obama never mentioned King’s prophetic rage about the Vietnam War. In a sense, this is one way that King is routinized; that is, King is used to legitimate the status quo rather than criticize it. Obama referred to the Occupy movement and delivered some mixed feelings about the movement. He said, “Dr. King would

\textsuperscript{91} Huffington Post, November 10, 2011.
\textsuperscript{92} October 16, 2011. Remarks by Barak Obama at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Dedication
\textsuperscript{93} http://www.progressive.org/martin_luther_king_memorial_dedication.html, the article criticizes Obama that he shrank King to suit his own purposes.
want us to challenge the excesses of Wall Street without demonizing those who work there.” This Obama’s comment about not demonizing people who work on Wall Street fits in with King’s idea of agape. This reflect King’s view that God loves all people so we should love everyone too and do no violence to anyone. Obama urged Americans to harness the energy of the civil rights movement for today’s challenges and to remain committed to King’s philosophy of peaceful resistance. “Let us draw strength from those earlier struggles,” Obama said. “Change has never been simple or without controversy.” Although Obama’s words are selective, throughout interpreting the experience of the civil rights movement and King’s voice, Obama urged Americans to overcome today’s issues. Obama said, “we need more than ever to take heed of Dr. King’s teachings.” The president equates “our work” and “Dr. King’s work,” he equates the Nation’s goal to what King sought to accomplish. In comparison to what the president said about King, “Dr. King’s work... to take heed of Dr. King’s teachings,” pious Christians often said the same thing in regards to Jesus, “what Jesus said, what Jesus did.” King became the national figure of the United States. He undoubtedly became the icon of the American Civil Religion. Again, Obama is reflecting both the prophetic and the iconic aspects of King’s public image.

In conclusion, King became the national figure of the United States. He is accepted and honored by many Americans today. His new monument in Washington D.C. creates a visual “line of leadership” from the Lincoln Memorial to the Jefferson Memorial. The appearance of King’s monument is way bigger than Jefferson and Lincoln statues. He undoubtedly became the icon of the American Civil Religion. His life and actions should be understood in the context of American Civil Religion, which holds Jewish and Christian traditions and the founding spirit. It need hardly be said that King represented and preached American Civil Religion. However, we should not underestimate King’s prophetic figure, even though he has been routinized and institutionalized. His status as a prophet of the civil religion still remains a powerful force in American life. Closely reading Weber and Marty, King can be easily defined as a “prophetic” leader since Weber’s idea of a “prophet” holds the characteristics of anti-institution,
devotion to change, and charismatic leadership. He was always trying to improve and change America, and was always challenging the authorities. King was a Moses who not only led American Blacks to the Promised Land, but also led all Americans in the right direction. King was a Moses who could not enter the Promised Land, but he is honored and enshrined by future generations just as Moses was. King rescued America’s fundamental values – equality and freedom. King tried to reset or “renew” American society. He was the “drum major” of the march toward the Beloved Community. Taking into account King’s commitment and references to the Anti-Vietnam Campaign and economic inequality, King is not only a prophet of American Civil Religion but also a preacher of American Civil Religion to the world.

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