

American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)

e-ISSN :2378-703X

Volume-07, Issue-12, pp-42-47

[www.ajhssr.com](http://www.ajhssr.com)

Research Paper

Open Access

## The Impact of Martin Luther King's Religious Life During the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s in Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*

MASSALA Hubert Franck Lylian, NZAMBI MIKOULOU Donald,  
MPANDZOU DIANTETE Jacques Barel

<sup>1</sup>*Maître-assistant, CAMES, Université Marien NGOUABI, Congo Brazzaville,*

<sup>2</sup>*Maître-assistant, CAMES, Université Marien NGOUABI,*

<sup>3</sup>*Chercheur, Université Marien NGOUABI, Congo Brazzaville,*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper shows how Charles Johnson's imaginative story intertwines with that of Martin Luther King's religious life as one of the Blacks' leaders in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It is in fact, the analysis of King's nonviolent struggle for an equalitarian American society. His religious life has undoubtedly influenced the institutionalized disequilibrium of common considerations based on the inequality and injustice between Blacks and Whites in the United States. This means that King's peaceful fight for justice is based on his faith in God, constant prayers, and love for their enemies in the United States.

**Keywords:** *Religious life, Injustice, nonviolent struggle, prayers, Civil Rights.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Blacks in the United States has influenced many African American writers. As for example themes like slavery, racial segregation, discrimination and all other forms of prejudice have been conceptual tools that have helped them to write their stories.

In *Dreamer*, for example, one sees how Charles Johnson reconstructs Blacks' struggle against prejudice and racial reconciliation in the United States. He uses Martin Luther King as the main character in this novel to show how history is part of this fiction.

The choice for Charles Johnson's *Dreamer* is focused on the need to show the impact of King's religious beliefs in his struggle for African Americans' rights, acceptance, and integration as full citizens of the United States. One learns how the protagonist teaches his black fellows to respond to the Whites' brutality, hatred, and atrocities with love and nonviolent demonstrations.

What is worth knowing here is that Charles Johnson's *Dreamer* has not received much critical attention yet. Then, we think that writing a paper on it could help us discover other aspects of the novel. Benjamin Evayoulou who first scrutinized the book argues that it is based on the:

*Péripéties appartenant à l'époque brûlante du mouvement pour les droits civiques. Pendant les années 1960, l'explosion de la colère dans les communautés noires résulte de plusieurs frictions avec les policiers blancs qui patrouillent dans les quartiers noirs, arrêtent et tuent, souvent au hasard, les noirs qui ont le malheur de les croiser* (Evayoulou : 2006, p.03).

One sees that works on this novel are rare, and that, we agree with the fact that, we are among the first to write on Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*. If Benjamin Evayoulou has discussed racial prejudice and Martin Luther King's involvement in the struggle for Blacks' integration, we, however, show in this paper how King's religious life has impacted this fight to grant Civil Rights to all Blacks in the United States. This means that, here, we are mainly concerned with the notions of faith, prayer and love, which have been weapons for reverend King to fight racism. It is in this context that one asks the following question: How does Charles Johnson reconstruct the impact of Martin Luther King's religious faith in the Civil Rights struggle during the 1960's?

What we demonstrate in this paper is King's capacity to convince his black fellows to love their enemies. For, he considers "love" as the strongest weapon to fight racial prejudice.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first deals with Martin Luther King's religious life. Here, we show the way the protagonist conducts his struggle under religious principles of faith to meet Blacks' demands. The second tackles the image of nonviolent philosophy with love as a tenet, helpful to live in harmony with one's persecutors.

### 1. Martin Luther King's religious life

The origin of the King's religious life may be checked on a first sight of his name "Martin Luther King". This patronym is more than revealing in the sense that the name "Martin Luther" is from the German theologian, one of the leaders of the Reformation, founder of Lutheranism. Martin Luther has impacted the Christian church in rebelling against the rules established by the Catholic Church. Then, King's father was born Michael, a name that he changed later into Martin.

In fact, when we go deep in Martin Luther King's religious life, we realize that his name derives from his father's strong Christian faith. He looks at former Martin Luther as the model of Christianity. Charles Johnson, who develops this hidden part of King's origin name, writes: "*Martin, we informed Smith, was originally named Michael King Jr. after his father who was also christened Michael and then later, like his son, replaced that with Martin*" (Dreamer, p.106).

Certainly, Michael King changed his name into Martin Luther King because, he wanted to be seen as the follower of Martin Luther, a revolutionary leader in the reformation of the Christian Church. So, the today King, formerly known as Martin Luther King Jr. has boosted this philosophy of Church reformation, and has used the Bible to fight both, the outsiders of the word of God and the white supremacy that looked at Blacks as inferior citizens in the United States. Martin Luther King traces his family tree when he says:

*Of course I was religious. I grew up in the church. My father is a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy's brother is a preacher. So I didn't have much choice.* (TAMLK, 2008, 1).

This passage evidences that King's surrounding has played an important role on the decision he has made for his destiny. He clearly illustrates that as descendent of a Christian family, he had no choice than following the steps of his forefathers. Religion has strongly changed Martin Luther King's vision of life. He became fearless before any hard situation.

From his childhood, King was still ignorant of his predestinated spirituality. But as that grain of spirituality was endowed in him, it started bringing reactions within him, urging him to consider the church as part of his life. Carson in this context reports the protagonist's words: "*I was about five years age, how I questioned my parents about the numerous people standing in breadlines (...). Our church, Ebenezer Baptist, is on Auburn Avenue. I'm now a co-pastor of that church*" (TAMLK, p.2). We see that King was a precociously spiritual child who plunged into Christianity, first motivated by his family members and then by his own conviction to make a choice and decide to follow his predestinated vocation. In accordance with his words, Charles Johnson writes: "*he could say, like Apostle Paul, (I bear in my body the marks of the Lord)*" (Dreamer, p.17). These comparative words are an illustration of the encroachment between Apostle Paul and King as a faithful Christian.

Although, facing influence from his teachers at school, mainly at university, King stood firmly to follow his path to serve God and do His will: "*As a man (...) I decided to give my life to something eternal and absolute (...) to God who is the same yesterday, today and forever*" (Dreamer, p.137).

One sees how Reverend King is caught between being a journalist, a lawyer, or doctor to meet his demands. Yet, he is determined to do what his mind led him to do. But the circumstances in which he socializes with his racist white counterparts, urges him to engage himself in the struggle for African Americans' rights. As a Christian, he promoted a peaceful strategy in this fight.

In fact, having a brief sight on Martin Luther King's struggle for Civil Rights, the author argues that this character "*thought back to the astonishment victories granted to him by the Lord of Love*" (Dreamer, p.75). These victories, the author argues, give much hope to many black Americans to later experience change, equal chances with Whites, and peaceful life in the United States as testified by the following passage: "*many black Evanstonians he shared the belief that was getting, that life was getting better that their offerings to the Lord had been blessed a hundredfold since they left the South*" (Dreamer, p.129).

Johnson reconstructs here the hope and challenging situation of former black slaves in the North of the United States. He shows the contrast between Blacks' conditions in the South and in the North. His description of the northern part of the country leaves us with the impression that the North is a land of salvation because Blacks are free and enjoy some of their civil and human rights. Whereas, the South is for many, a hell in the sense that they are not free of their movement and are still looked down upon by their white counterparts. This movement described in many books as a 'westward movement', consisting in leaving the South for the North, is for many Blacks a form of struggle for freedom and acceptance. They overcame fear and death by rebelling against their white masters. In the novel, Martin Luther King who is similar to this category of people argues that, "*I would never submit wrongly to any authority through fear of death, but would refuse even at the cost of my life*" (Dreamer, p.25). Then, on page 133, he goes on saying "*They (...) know that death was not final, because Jesus conquered that once and for all*".

Martin Luther King who is the main character and the leader of the Civil Rights Movement uses his faith in God to overcome fear and death. He thinks that when one fights for something right, God, is behind as a

protector and before as a guide to help gain it. He prefers dying for the welfare of his people by denouncing the wrong doing of Whites than saving life by remaining death and dumb before injustice.

Through his faith, King could convince some white Americans to change their wrong view over Blacks and looked at them as equal citizens. That is why; one sees that during the Civil Rights Movement, many Whites had joined it to help Blacks gain their freedom and integration, as King confesses it: *"I have seen good white people who sacrificed their lives on Freedom Rides. Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were killed and burned"* (Dreamer, p.174-175). One of those good white people King talks about is Abraham Lincoln who, during his election campaign proclaimed:

*A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall-but I do expect it will cease to be divided* (Lincoln quoted by Inges: 1987, p.340)

Lincoln's words are viewed by many Blacks, including Martin Luther King as a claiming for racial reconciliation. When he says he cannot believe that "this this Government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half-free", he wants just to help black slaves recover their freedom. Then, those white Americans who tried to side with Blacks in the 1960's had followed their former President's example of friendship to Blacks. The historical King recalls this when he argues:

*Finally, I said that the formidable foe we now faced demanded more unity than ever before and that I would stretch every point to maintain this unity, but that I could not in good conscience agree to continue my personal involvement and that of SCLC in the march if it were not publicly affirmed that it was based on nonviolence and the participation of both black and white. After a few more minutes of discussion, Floyd and Stokely agreed that we could unite around these principles as far the march was concerned. The next morning, we had a joint press conference affirming that the march was nonviolent and that whites were welcomed* (TAMLK, p.319).

In *Dreamer*, too, the fictional King continues this fight through strong words of friendship to Whites. That is why he urges his black fellows to love their enemies. As a pastor, King had a great influence on his community. Everybody believed in him. He was looked at by many African Americans as a Moses who had come to save a people long oppressed. In the novel, Bishop's mother for example looks at him as *"a saint. She kept his portrait right beside photos of Jesus (...) over her bed"* (Dreamer, p.26).

But, despite the fact that King was seen as a saint, a savior anointed with the power of God, he was vulnerable. What means that, he had some weaknesses; and those weaknesses sometimes, created a kind of fear that brought doubt in his fight and religious faith when the narrator argues: *"He wondered if his faith was weak, if perhaps he was the worst of sinners and hypocrites"* (Dreamer, p.79). As every human being, Martin Luther King faced many difficulties in his fight, and led him think to be abandoned by both, God and his people. In Chicago for example, he and his members were not welcomed by their countrymen. The implementation of their philosophy of nonviolence had encountered difficulties to give an answer to violence and poverty that African Americans were facing. As victims of that violence and denial of their rights, Blacks from Chicago had lost hope and resigned their faith contribution to the common cause. Many of them thought that the only answer to such mistreatment was to act in the same way with Whites. That is to say, to respond violence with violence. This implies that his partisans of nonviolence no longer share the same view with him. They now espouse the philosophy of violence against violence, focusing on the Biblical verses. Chaym Smith for example refers to Deuteronomy when addresses to Bishop in these terms: *"It's just a li'l karma catching up with me, I guess. Check your Deuteronomy 32:35"* (Dreamer, p.206). This Deuteronomy verse deals with revenge on the enemies. Here, it is clear that sometimes, King's partisans doubt of the efficiency of their nonviolent strategy, conducted by Martin Luther King. They think it is time to adapt the strategy at the high of enemies' actions.

However, as a pastor, King never failed in advising his countrymen that *"Get the Nietzsche out of your system (...) he's really the one we're fighting against"* (Dreamer, p.27-28). Nietzsche represents the evil of the society because he is the one who denied the existence of God, by proclaiming His death. Despite his strong faith, the temptation of abandoning even to resort to violence in Chicago was stronger within his companions' attitude. So, for King this devil spirit has to be fought within people's mind. He believes that to fight it back, every American citizen, whatever his color, has to pray God to help him overcome it as he argues: *"I- Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus (...), 4- Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free"* (Dreamer, p.91-92).

As a pastor and leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King was obliged to make alliance with God, obeying totally the Biblical principles. That is to say that prayer, love, the exclusion of violence and hate are the Bible's recommendations that a Christian who needs to be in close contact with God has to observe, and that Martin Luther King has not put himself aside of these recommendations. He feared God and served Him faithfully.

In fact, prayer, Christians thought, would be more efficient if people gathered and prayed for something profitable for everybody. Then, Martin Luther King who still considers it as a weapon for Blacks'

Civil Rights in the United States, calls for unity of all American citizens. By heading the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King appeared as the captain of the movement and wanted everybody, especially Blacks to follow him, as Charles Johnson writes: *"Follow the directions of the movement and the captain on a demonstration"* (Dreamer, p.92). What Charles Johnson writes concerning Martin Luther King's leadership in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is not his own creation, but drawn from the lexicon of the American history. Like him, Mills writes: *While she was still SCLC executive director, Ella Baker had urged her boss, Dr Martin Luther King Jr., and the rest of the organization leadership to stress this kind of educative* (Mills: 2007, 52).

Despite the fact that King devotes much time in convincing his people to rely on God and prayer as a solution to the race problem, some of them are still skeptical of these prayers as Bishop says *"Prayers had always failed for me"* (Dreamer, p.214). This quotation is an illustration that while King remained firm in his faith in God as a way out to the Blacks' inferiority, rejection and victimization, others still doubt out of his method. Certainly, these doubtful people wanted King to initiate a different method, tending to respond to the white violence with Blacks' violence. His peaceful method led many Blacks to follow Malcolm X who promote violence against violence as a direct response to the Whites' brutality. But what is interesting here is that, King did not give up his faith and continues to pray for his people. Bishop, for example, reports King's devotion to pray for Smith in these terms: *"Mr. Smith has suffered much, I'd like to say a prayer for him"* (Dreamer, p.41).

In the novel, King argues that what he fulfills in the black community does not derive from his own will, but from the will of the Almighty who sent him, as he confesses in the following passage: *"Not I, (...). But the Father within me doeth the works...I seek not my will but the will of the Father who sent me"* (Dreamer, p.83). The protagonist reveals here his divine mission down on earth, especial in the United States where a minority of people unjustly seen as inferior was victimized by Whites who considered themselves as superiors. Bishop's question to Smith: *"Do you have faith?"* (Dreamer, p.112) brings evidence that many black fellows start believing in King's philosophy of nonviolence, relying on God to deliver them from the manacles and injustice of the Whiteman.

Like King, Bishop also believes that the solution to the race problem in the United States would only come from the intensification of their prayers to God. He considers Blacks' victories on Whites' wrong view as coming from God Himself: *"He thought back to the astonishing victories granted him by the Lord of love"* (Dreamer, p.75). It is clear here that the Lord of love is not King himself, but the God's force of love that leads Martin Luther King to love his counterparts, the force to whom King addresses to walk in the path of love as taught by the Bible: *"(...) how more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him"* (Bible, New King James Version, Matthew 7:11). These Biblical verses were an argument for King to convince his people. For, as Christians, nobody would gainsay them, he for example urged them to love their enemies, pray for them and help them to know the Word and put into practice. It is only in this context that racism, segregation and discrimination will be totally eradicated in American society.

In the section that follows, we learn how King's nonviolent philosophy is implemented to fight the racist view of the Whiteman in the United States.

### 1- The image of the nonviolence philosophy

King's peaceful way to face violence by the police to African Americans derives from his daily reading of the Bible. Belonging to a Christian family has also totally helped him to have another vision of the fight for Blacks' integration. He thought that resorting to violence could be more dramatic than fighting with nonviolence. He considered "nonviolence" as the strongest weapon to fight the Whiteman's violence. This means that his vision of the fight totally opposed that of Malcolm X: *"There were stark differences in the lives philosophies, and achievements of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X"*<sup>(9)</sup>

In fact, while planning to fight for Civil Rights and the way to protest against the forces of evil embodied by certain white men and institutionalized by American government, King thought it better to solve this question of racial differences pacifically. He chose nonviolent method to lead his fight as reported by Charles Johnson: *Nonviolence, he felt, was an experiment with truth. It was a truth-seeking process. That was all in this world he could say with certainty ...* (Dreamer, p.75).

This statement proves that King was not a violent leader in the Civil Rights Movement. His pacific method derives from his religious background. As a Christian he could not urge people to resort to violence, but would rather encourage them to love their enemies. The word "love" he constantly used in his speeches was viewed as strong weapon that could not be fought by any other weapon.

The writing of his book *Strength to Love* (1963) came to reinforce Blacks' determination to fight with nonviolence. This philosophy, in effect, took root in his trip to India where he met Gandhi and learnt a lot from

him, as the following passage brings light: *After his trip to India, he'd vowed to set aside one a week for fasting and meditating and to spend more time in study- he was certain he needed these things to be a better leader*" (Dreamer, p.77).

In fact, King wants to increase love within his black fellows as well as Whites to fight social injustices for more unity. What is true in this statement is that King's trip to India is not the creation of Charles Johnson but rather a historical fact grounded in the American history as it is testified as follows: *Dr and Mrs. King spend a month in India studying Gandhi's method, techniques of nonviolence, as guests of Prime Minister Nehru*" (IHD: WS, p.27).

Nonviolence was a direct inspiration from Gandhi's struggle. After that trip King did not hesitate to put into practice what he learnt, as he says: *"Stop this, I won't lead a violent march"* (Dreamer, p.214).

This statement places King a different leader in the Civil Rights struggle. His position as a nonviolent leader has brought misunderstanding between him and Malcolm X and his followers. That is to say when King preaches love and asks his black fellows to forgive their enemies, those who espoused violence called him a traitor and reinforced their hatred and called for violence against violence. The notion of "love" on which King's philosophy is based is well explained in the following quotation:

*Love was ontological foundation of value. God was love. It followed that without Him there could be no basis for all his appeals to justice"(...) "There will be no permanent end to the race problem until oppressed men develop the capacity to love their enemies"* (Dreamer, pp. 81, 136).

The word "love" that King insists on cannot be seen as a mere concept, but rather as a spiritual energy, as a force capable to change bitterness to peace, fearfulness to friendship. Through this word, the leader wants to create a peaceful atmosphere between the two conflictual races in the United States. By putting into practice the notion of "love" Martin Luther King hopes to see an equalitarian America, an America where everyone will see the other as his brother or sister. For, he thinks that one cannot pretend to love God and hate His creature, as he says as follows: *"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar (...)"* (Dreamer, p.218).

What is interesting to note here is that Reverend King does not rely on firearms to fight racism and injustice promoted by Whites. He uses peaceful demonstrations like sit-ins, marches, and bus boycott to show their indignation to the wrongful treatment they are accorded by the white neighbors. A character in Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* goes on sustaining this in these terms:

*I have watched the sit-ins, the freedom raids, the Mississippi Blood Summers, demonstrations all over the country, the FSM movement the teach-ins and policy all of this the thousands of little details, show me it is time to straighten up and fly right.* (Cleaver: 35)

In fact, what is worth knowing is that Martin Luther King was a predestinated leader who would save black Americans from oppression. His Christian background and his trip to India had inspired a lot in a way to fight racism and discrimination that gangrened the American society. He relied on the Bible because he thought that it was the best way to combat firearms and violence promoted by their white counterparts.

One can see that his nonviolent method revealed itself stronger than the violent one espoused by other black leaders like Malcolm X and others.

## II. CONCLUSION

In short, this paper shows events that happened in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement. Led by Martin Luther King and other black leaders, that movement was conducted through two distinctive methods: violent and nonviolent. In this paper, however we have concentrated upon King's religious life with his philosophy of nonviolence.

It has been divided into two sections. The first talks about Martin Luther King's religious life. Here we have demonstrated the circumstances in which the protagonist's Christian faith has impacted all his lifetime. We have also discovered that the little King was predestined for a religious career. His patronymy and immediate Christian environment have been helpful for him to achieve his dream. In this section, the place of faith and prayer also has been of great importance.

The second section deals with the image of nonviolent philosophy. As an activist, Reverend King should well define the way to guide his brothers and sisters in the fight in accordance with the religious principles. Here, we have put emphasis on the way he has pacifically fought racism and all other evil practices of the Whiteman. We have also discussed the determination of King to travel to India to learn more about the nonviolent philosophy from Gandhi who has also preached love in front of hate.

In a word, one can notice that the story told in *Dreamer* is entirely devoted to King's real religious life which has got a great contribution on his leadership in the movement. The impact of Christianity is visible through the protagonist and his friends' way of acting. We may then agree that the problematic raised in the introduction of this paper found out here its answer. It is attested that Martin Luther did not lead his fight out of the Bible's message and recommendations, as it was illustrated all through this analysis.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Charles Johnson, (1998)*Dreamer*, Scribner Paperback Fiction, Published by Simon & Schuster
- [2] Clayborne, C.(2008)*The Autobiography of Martin Luther King*, Edited, Abacus,
- [3] Cleaver, E.(1968), *Soul on Ice*, New York: McGraw Hill,
- [4] Evayoulou, B. (2006) “M L King Remémoré: UneExploration de *Dreamer* de Charles Johnson”, *Revue Ivoirienne de Philosophie et de Culture*, Le Kore, n°37-2006, Editions Universitaire de Côte d’Ivoire (EDUCI),
- [5] *Holy Bible*, New King James Version, ap. Android
- [6] Inges, Thomas, (1987), *A Nineteenth-Century American Reader Washington DC: USA. Institute for the Black World, 1972” Afterword to How I Wrote Jubilee. Chicago: Third World Press.*
- [7] Martin L.K. and James M. W. (1992), *I have a dream: writings and speeches that changed the world*, Editor, HarperSanFrancisco
- [8] Martin L. K.(1963), *Strength of Love*, Harper & Row editions
- [9] Mills, K. (2007), *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie LouHamer*. Lexington: The Univesity Press of Kentucky,
- [10] [www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu), retrieved on 10/11/2023