

Martin Luther King, Jr. and American political discourse: rhetoric and religion

Being a representative of the integrationist approach to the problem of discrimination in the USA, Martin Luther King, Jr. made a number of powerful speeches in front of the African American audience. In them he often alluded to the Bible and Christianity in general as there he found numerous examples of humility and atonement. So this was what M.L.King urged Americans to.

Key words: discourse, African Americans, rhetoric, religion, integrationism

Long before the Civil war in the USA, African Americans began to gather together to discuss problems of white Americans' attitude towards them, slavery, discrimination and the ways of avoiding these problems in the future. It did not matter how many people came to such meetings – they expressed the views of millions. Among the most famous leaders who took part in them one can name Samuel Cornish, journalist and founder of the first Black newspaper; Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), the first independent black denomination in the United States; James Forten, an African American businessman; Martin Delany, David Walker, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and others. [1]

There were two ways for African Americans of sorting out the serious problems: integrationism and nationalism. Every tendency had its advantages and disadvantages but no one knew which variant is the only one to be realised. No one stated the dilemma as sharply as W.E.B.Du Bois. Among his famous books “The Souls of Black Folk” is the most popular. In it he drew attention to the “twoness” of African Americans' character and identity: “One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being

torn asunder.” [4] Even the name “African American” proves this idea of “twoness”: are they Americans or expatriate Africans? What is their origin? Here one more sequence of questions is bound to arise: “Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American?” [3: 11]

The dilemma led to the division of African Americans into two groups: integrationists and nationalists. The members of the former group found it possible to “be both” by establishing close relations with the white Americans on the basis of the Declaration of Independence. They believed that the white Americans could treat them as their equals according to what is written in the political documents. Integrationists’ optimism about the blacks achieving full citizenship rights in America was connected to Christianity. Black preachers would say that Jesus Christ died for all people – the whites and the blacks alike. That is why the idea of equality lies not only in the Declaration of Independence, but also in religion.

The first churches for black Christians were opened. This separation from the churches for white Americans did not mean that African Americans rejected the ideas of Christianity or interpreted them differently – it meant that they did not approve of racism. This enabled the pastors to become outstanding leaders in the black struggle for equality. Among them one can name Martin Luther King, Sr., and Jr., William Holmes Borders, Vernon Johns, who spoke against segregation and racism in churches.

On the other hand, nationalist thinkers believed that only the African side of their identity is important. That is why they could not “be both”. They had experienced slavery for decades and then followed segregation, exploitation and other political and social restrictions. The only way for the blacks to stop it, according to nationalism, was to leave America and return to Africa or some other place. Among the advocates of nationalism one can name David Walker, Martin

Delany, Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Their main idea was that black people are not Americans – they are Africans.

In the present article attention is paid to the samples of Martin Luther King's political discourse.

Sharing integrationists' views, Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed them in his numerous speeches. Religion played a great role in them as Martin Luther King wanted to show African Americans that it is God who could and would help them in their struggle for freedom and equality. He would give advice to rely on God's aid and believe in the future success. For him America was a Christian nation which had lost its way in life.

Nevertheless, Martin Luther King was not the first to adduce the religious subject in his speaking experience. Other African American preachers urged people to look forward to a new America, which would be possible after everyone's redemption. To illustrate this idea one could turn to Booker T. Washington's address in 1895 where he used the phrase "a new heaven and a new earth" [2: 154], foretelling America's future.

As it has been mentioned above, Martin Luther King's faith had its roots in Christianity. It was shaped by the belief in redemption and total mercifulness. God could not let it continue that some of his people were subject to mistreatment. He believed that Jesus the Redeemer suffered not only for the white but for everyone. Therefore, race and colour do not play any role as far as religion is concerned and human rights must be equal for everyone.

Martin Luther King had extensive experience of addressing people during sermons. When reading parts of the Bible he was assuring the public of freedom and was calling for establishing close relations to each other. Moreover, King pointed to the unsatisfactory nature of segregation. This division of the society was rendered with the help of "the cross": "The cross is an eternal expression of the length to which God is willing to go to restore broken communities" (from a sermon at Dexter Baptist Church). [2: 127] That is why what African Americans

needed to do is to follow the example of Jesus Christ forming a peaceful basis of life for future generations but not using force. There would be no success without suffering first. Only then a new life would start. This idea later got the name “non-violent approach”.

The non-violent approach was supported by a number of people sharing the views of Martin Luther King. On the other hand, his opponents, with Malcolm X among them, denied the fact that non-violence was the best opportunity which would provide African Americans with everything they were striving for. What they suggested was uniting force in order to fight against their enemy. This fight, however, should not be won by means of arms. Violent retaliation is only possible when the whites commit atrocities.

As the non-violent approach prevailed, Martin Luther King, Jr. was asked to represent all African Americans and to lead the civil rights movement. It was there where he addressed the public with his most powerful and thus well-known speech. Martin Luther King began working on it for four days before the March on Washington was to take place.

M.L.King’s speech is full of set pieces he developed during his career as a public speaker. He didn’t stop working on his speech even at the March because he was the last to speak and had an opportunity to understand the mood of the public. For some minutes he was reading the prepared speech almost verbatim but then he understood that he needed a strong conclusion. That is why King added more set pieces to his address. He effectively mapped out some parts of his speech as he went along. And as a result, his speech lasted for about sixteen minutes instead of five.

The main source of M.L.King’s language was the King James translation of the Bible. In childhood King attended his father’s church and listened to the preachers. He had a unique memory and could cite the passages from the Bible. As a result one can find numerous allusions to the Bible in the speech under analysis,

which got immediate response because religion plays a significant role in the American history and is an integral part of the Americans' life¹ [6: 101-102]:

King's metaphor	Biblical sources
"joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity"	<p>MATTHEW 1:16: "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light was sprung up."</p> <p>LUKE 1:79: "To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide their feet into the way of peace."</p>
"dark and desolate valley of segregation"	PSALM 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death"
"cup of bitterness and hatred"	ISAIAH 51:17: "You which hast drunk at the hand of the Lord, The cup of his fury; thou hast drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling, and wrung them out."
"we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."	AMOS 5:24: "But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."
"I have a dream that every valley shall be exalted"	ISAIAH 40:4: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low"
"from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of	MATTHEW 7:24-27: Parable of the houses built on the sand and on the

¹ The table is the exact replica of the one adduced in Drew Hansen's book "The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation", Ecco, New York, 2003.

brotherhood”	rock.
“hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope”	DANIEL 2: Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of a stone hewn out of a mountain.

The use of Biblical allusions is truly remarkable because by introducing such metaphors in the address Martin Luther King not only expresses his own idea, connected with the actual state of affairs at the time, but also reminds people of the parables, which are relevant at all times. The ‘joyous daybreak’/ ‘long night of captivity’ metaphor becomes an allusion to the birth of Christ and the beginning of a new era. The same function is ascribed to the Emancipation Proclamation, which proclaimed the freedom of every African American, thus marking the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the USA. [6: 103]

Moreover, M.L.King quotes the Bible twice [7]:

No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."(Amos 5:24)

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."(Isaiah 40:4-5)

The first citation is rendered precisely in The American Standard Version of the Bible (in King James Bible instead of “to roll down” the verb “to run down” is used). The second citation is borrowed from King James Version of the Bible.

Even the structure of M.L.King’s sentences is influenced by the Biblical language. This influence is noticeable in the parallel constructions. Such a structure of sentences enables the speaker to intensify his idea, to add one more shade of meaning to it. Parallelism may occur in a number of elements starting with separate words and finishing with entire sentences. Thus, parallelism is among the

most effective and most frequent rhetorical devices, which make it easy to write and then deliver the speech. Parallel elements are often joined by a conjunction. [5: 447] In M.L.King's speech one may find plenty of such examples:

- *crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination*
- *no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism*
- *the riches of freedom and the security of justice*
- *from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city*

As Martin Luther King feels deep concern for the future of African Americans, he makes his speech even more emphatic and expressive by means of metaphors connected with the notion of nature. Ill-treatment of African Americans, injustice, persecution, discrimination, oppression are shown as threatening, sinister and sullen. Some of the examples also have their roots in the Bible:

- *the long night of captivity*
- *quicksands of racial injustice*
- *storms of persecution*
- *winds of police brutality*
- *heat of injustice*
- *heat of oppression*

Thus, M.L.King points to the destructive nature of all the social and political phenomena mentioned above. It is something that makes people suffer, it is the heat and "the flames of withering injustice" that destroy one's personality and demolish their social status. Moreover, he mentions that segregation and discrimination "cripple [people] by manacles...and chains," describing these

phenomena of social injustice as unnatural and alien to the naturalness of positive treatment.

On the contrary, positive treatment is seen as a pleasant and joyful natural phenomenon:

- *a joyous daybreak*
- *sunlit path of racial justice*
- *invigorating autumn of freedom and equality*
- *oasis of freedom and justice*

It is strong (“a solid rock of brotherhood”) and grand (“palace of justice”) at the same time to let people feel safe and protected. Its result is pleasant not only to the eye and ear but brings calmness and cheerfulness to people’s souls.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was the embodiment of the Christian religion in the African American world. This is true not only for his soul and thoughts but also for his words. As can be seen from the analysis carried above, most of his speeches are full of allusions to the Bible and the religious world. He managed to reach people’s souls and evoke their hidden feelings. This enabled Martin Luther King to become the most trustworthy speaker of the civil rights movement.

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