

The Canonization of Martin Luther King Jr.:
Collective Memory, Civil Religion, and the Reconstruction of an American Hero

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Abstract

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Today we commonly accept that Martin Luther King Jr. is a national hero who embodies America as one nation under God with liberty and justice for all. This has not always been the case. According to a Gallup poll, in August 1966 King had a 33% favorable to 63% unfavorable rating. By contrast, his popularity rating in August 2011 was 94% favorable, a complete reversal.¹ This dissertation explores the "canonization" of King in American society by tracing the process by which he has been elevated to the status of an unquestionable national hero. I use and refine theories of collective memory and civil religion to evaluate four critical cultural moments that have established and reaffirmed this elevation. Those critical moments are, first, the thirteen-year public debates that resulted in the establishment of a national holiday in King's honor; second, the Reagan-inspired, conservative reimagining of King as a colorblind priest; third, the creation of the National King Memorial in the pantheon of American heroes; and, fourth, the dedication ceremonies of that memorial which sought to remind the nation of King's commitment to economic justice and equality. Taken together, these critical cultural moments in the canonization of Dr. King reveal the discursive, contested nature of collective memory and civil religion in American society as individuals and groups struggle to name and shape shared social and moral values.

¹ Jeffrey M. Jones. "Americans Divided on Whether King's Dream Has Been Realized." <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149201/Americans-Divided-Whether-King-Dream-Realized.aspx>. Last accessed August 26, 2011.