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The Sixtieth Anniversary of King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

To Dream in North and South America: Reflections on the Sixtieth Anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech

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Abstract

This article reflects on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech delivered sixty years ago in Washington, DC. It begins by pointing to the concept of "dream" as it is understood in current language and how Dr. King used it in a theological way. Next, the essay compares this with what Pope Francis has frequently said about dreams, including his own. Reflecting on King's words and the sense that the dream he spoke about is still not a reality but a horizon of hope that stimulates struggle, the article presents a comparative study of racism in the United States, according to King, and Brazil, where structural racism permeates the whole society, delaying indefinitely the dream of equality and justice. I also show how liberation theology has been a helpful element in the struggle to keep the dream of equality alive. I conclude that in both countries, frustration remains because the dream has not been fulfilled. But in both situations, to continue dreaming is the only option. And that means not being satisfied with the little steps made but embracing the desire for more. Only by always desiring more and more fulness of life will salvation be experienced concretely for our generation and the next.

Keywords

Brazil, dreams, Martin Luther King Jr., liberation theology, Pope Francis, systemic racism

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Sixty years ago, a man of African descent and a citizen of the United States spoke words the whole world heard. This man was a pastor, too, and the language of faith infused his thoughts and words. This is why, sixty years later, we continue to celebrate Martin Luther King's Washington speech about his dream as the horizon of his life, and why it still inspires us today.

In this article, I will first reflect on dreaming as an exercise of faith and hope and consider a recent interview given by Pope Francis and how it relates to King's famous speech. Second, I will look more deeply at King's words about slavery in the United States, the effects of which were still prevalent when he addressed the Washington crowd. The legacy of slavery made his dream a desire not yet come true. I will then reflect on similarities and differences between the situation of slavery in the United States and racism in Latin America, mostly in Brazil. We will see that despite the abolition of slavery in Latin America, occurring more than thirty years after it did in the United States, the lingering effects are still evident in the poverty and violence experienced in Brazil, as in the United States, though with variations in each context.

We will conclude by reaffirming the importance of dreaming with hope and realism so that King's words, proclaimed sixty years ago, might finally become reality in the north and south of the American continent. This condition is the *sine qua non* for people from the north and south to be able to experience salvation and fullness of life.

To Dream: An Exercise of Faith and Hope

If we search for the meaning of "dream" in the dictionary, we can find, together with some definitions about what happens during sleep, others that speak of desire and hope—for instance, "something that you *want* to *happen* very much but that is not very *likely*; to *imagine* something that you would like to *happen*; something you *wish* would *happen* in the best possible way."[1]

Pope Francis, in a recent book resulting from conversations with his biographer, British writer Austen Ivereigh, declares a strong conviction about the importance of dreaming.[2] To stress his point, the pope quotes his favorite poet, Friedrich Hölderlin: "Where the danger is, grows the saving power."[3]

Calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in which a microscopic virus put humanity on its knees, can be, according to Francis, a "threshold" experience, dividing one era from another. "This is a moment to dream big," declares the Holy Father, "to rethink our priorities—what we value, what we want, what we seek—and commit to

1. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, s.v. "Dream," https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-hindi/dream (emphasis added).
2. Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis) and Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).
3. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Patmos, 1803," verses 3ff., in *Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin, Druck und Verlag von Philipp Reclam jun*. (Leipzig, 1873), S. 133, https://quotepark.com/quotes/2000600-friedrich-holderlin-wherein-lies-the-danger-grows-also-the-saving-pow/.

act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of."[4] And he adds, "Let us dare to dream."[5]

The same Pope Francis, in his speech to the US Congress, remembered four "dreamers" from US history: "These men and women offer us a way of seeing and interpreting reality. In honoring their memory, we are inspired, even amid conflicts, and in the here and now of each day, to draw upon our deepest cultural reserves." Among them, together with Abraham Lincoln, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton, was Martin Luther King Jr. The pope's speech referred specifically to King and his dream: "Here too I think of the march which Martin Luther King led from Selma to Montgomery fifty years ago as part of the campaign to fulfill his 'dream' of full civil and political rights for African Americans. That dream continues to inspire us all."[6]

In the speech we are still celebrating in 2023, King passionately describes his dream to those who were assembled to hear his words on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The date was August 28, 1963, just over one hundred years after the abolition of slavery in the United States. To begin, King recalled the historic date when President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, on January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of bloody civil war. The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the Confederate states "are, and henceforward shall be free."[7] But he also added with a sad and prophetic courage: "One hundred years later the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land."[8]

King remembered the origins of the country to which he belonged and which he deeply loved. This was the origin of the dream that inspired his life and struggle: "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."

King meant that, unfortunately, one century after being proclaimed, the abolition of slavery had not fully taken place and remained a dream that had not come true. That was why he and those who shared his struggle were there: to continue to claim equal rights for all human beings, created equal by God but continually made unequal by injustice and oppression.

King announces in his speech that he doesn't intend to stop struggling against and denouncing this ongoing reality of slavery. Although recognizing that some

4. Bergoglio and Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 6.
5. Bergoglio and Ivereigh, 6.
6. Francis, "Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress: Address of the Holy Father" (September 24, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.
7. See the text of the proclamation in the National Archives Catalog, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299998?q=Emancipation+Proclamation&objectPage=3.
8. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963, https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety.

achievements had been reached, he is not 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, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. . . . We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating for whites only."[9]

Those who dream are not easily satisfied. Because, as always in human history, dreamers want fullness; abundance; and an excess of justice, of life, of joy, and of peace. Mediocre solutions can't fulfill a dreamer's aspirations. And so, they will continue to search for the realization of their dreams and the fulfillment of their hopes. They will go on claiming freedom ought to be real in the life of all.

The United States abolished slavery in 1863; Brazil did it in 1888. The two countries, nevertheless, share the same situation of not fulfilling in reality what was signed in papers and declarations. These pronouncements have not been put fully into practice either in North or South América.[10] As in 1963, when King had to once more remind his fellow compatriots that the Black population's dream was yet to be put into practice, south of the equator, particularly in Brazil, the "Golden Law" (Lei Aurea), signed by Princess Isabel in 1888 is still not a reality.

Racism in Latin America: Recalling a History

A 2021 study of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)[11] on populations of African descent in eighteen Latin American countries showed that this population group lives in dramatically unequal social and economic conditions. This study concluded that in more than 80 percent of the eighteen countries analyzed, people of African descent live with a wide range of disadvantages related to poverty, employment, maternal and child health, and lack of access to adequate housing and basic services such as drinking water and sanitation. That has a tremendous impact on their health conditions.

The report emphasizes that limited access to health care for people of African descent translates into "high rates of maternal mortality, early pregnancy, and epidemiological profiles in which sickle cell disease, chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, and HIV are prevalent."[12]

In Latin America, 134 million people self-identify as of African descent. The report revealed that, in many countries, the disadvantages suffered by these people are glaring.[13] This situation of injustice threatens life at its foundation, as pregnancy and

9. King, "I Have a Dream."
10. We use "América," as it is used in Spanish, to refer to the continent as a whole, north and south, and not only to the United States.
11. Pan American Health Organization, *La salud de la población afrodescendiente en América Latina* (Washington, DC: Organización Panamericana de la Salud, 2021), https://doi.org/10.37774/9789275323847.
12. Pan American Health Organization, *La salud de la población afrodescendiente*.
13. The countries mentioned explicitly are Uruguay, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, among others.

intrauterine and newborn lives are considered by this report to be affected by structural and systemic problems: "We are living in a context of systemic racism against African descendants," said Costa Rica's Vice President Epsy Campbell Barr during the study's launch event. "By systemic, I mean it is included in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres and that means then that health is incorporated into this reality of racial exclusion regarding people of African descent and of course indigenous peoples."[14]

The report recommended improving public health policies for people of African descent by incorporating "specific knowledge and ancestral practices of Afro descendants, respect for their autonomy, culture and customs, and the creation of participatory settings conducive to equal opportunities for all," and it argues that "these are urgent issues that cannot be postponed if the goal is to ensure equitable and inclusive processes that guarantee the right to health for all people of African descent."

In addition to those physical and concrete injustices that occur at a continental level, there are also sociological and political consequences—for example, a progressive invisibility of people of African descent in society. This is a condition to which Blacks are subjected throughout almost all of the continent. In eighteen of the twenty countries that make up the region, Afro-Latinos face situations of everyday racism as they struggle to have their existence recognized by states that often treat them as invisible or second-class citizens.

The way this historical "erasure" occurred varies from country to country, but in general it can be characterized by a series of practices marked by the reproduction of racial hierarchies. "What happened in Latin America," according to Flavio Francisco, "particularly in Argentina, was a process, the attempt to create a white nation, based on the idea that a Eurocentric nation, whose racial profile is white or whitened, is ideal for progress."[15]

These policies—applied in Brazil by means of state incentives for the migration of European workers with the objective of making the country "less Black"—constituted, according to Francisco, a symbolic imagination of a state that erased, throughout history, the presence of Black and indigenous peoples.

Part of this vision found an echo in a statement by Argentinian President Alberto Fernández in June 2022. In an event with the Spanish prime minister, he said that "Mexicans came from the indigenous people, Brazilians came from the jungle, and we

14. For Epsy Campbell Barr's comments, see OPAS, "Pessoas afrodescendentes nos países latino-americanos vivem em condições totalmente desiguais que afetam saúde e bem-estar, mostra estudo da OPAS," December 3, 2021, https://www.paho.org/pt/noticias/3-12-2021-pessoas-afrodescendentes-nos-paises-latino-americanos-vivem-em-condicoes.

15. Flavio Thales Ribeiro Francisco, professor at the Federal University of ABC, in *Folha de São Paulo*, one of the most important periodicals in Brazil and Latin America: "Negros na América Latina são tratados como invisíveis ou extintos, dizem pesquisadores," November 19, 2021, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2021/11/negros-na-america-latina-sao-tratados-como-invisiveis-ou-extintos-dizem-pesquisadores.shtml. See also the works published by Francisco in https://scholar.google.com.br/citations?user=pEhDlUMAAAAJ&hl=pt-BR.

[Argentines] arrived in boats," in reference to his Spanish ancestry. Societies like Argentina celebrate their "blanquidad" (whiteness) to the detriment of Afro-Latin and native populations, who would be, according to this racist logic, doomed to disappear because they are of an archaic heritage.[16] Undoubtedly, the country where racial injustice is most visible and present is Brazil.

Brazil: Structurally Enslaved

Racism in Brazil is shaped by more than three centuries of slavery and racialist theories that were part of the construction of its national identity. After abolition, the absence of state efforts to integrate the Black population by providing material and political conditions for their participation in a free society ensured the survival and continued prevalence of the slave mentality in the practice and structures of the republic.

Between 1501 and 1870, more than 12.5 million Africans were kidnapped, sold as slaves, and transported to the American continent. Of these, one in four were sent to Brazil, about 4.8 million by the second half of the nineteenth century. About 20 percent, 1.8 million people, did not reach their destination—they died of scurvy, smallpox, measles, syphilis, dysentery, or by the brutality of their traffickers. Often the dead would lie for days alongside the living on the slave ships, until they were thrown overboard.[17]

During this period, even the sharks' eating habits in the Atlantic Ocean changed.[18] Some Africans committed suicide by jumping into the high seas, and those who survived the crossing, which could last for months, arrived weakened, malnourished, sick, bruised, and sometimes blind due to eye infections.

The official record of the unloading of slaves in Brazil dates back to 1530, when the production of sugar cane was just beginning. The peak of the slave trade in Brazil occurred between 1800 and 1850. Most of those who landed in Brazil came from Angola, Congo, Mozambique, and the Gulf of Benin. The precarious conditions of hygiene, food, and rest, and the exhausting workdays and cruel physical punishments to which they were subjected, reduced the life expectancy of the enslaved to an average of twenty-five years.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Brazil had a large Black population, due to an increase in runaways and the formation of *quilombos* (i.e., communities composed primarily of fugitives from slavery, where Black families were protected

16. In countries such as Colombia and Peru, rendering Black subjects invisible occurs through geographical isolation. There are territories where Afro-Latinos concentrate and celebrate their culture and roots, but this is not reflected in the national imagination.
17. For a full treatment of slavery in Brazil, see the three volumes of Laurentino Gomes, *Escravidã*, 3 vols. (São Paulo: Globo Livros, 2019, 2021, 2022).
18. Gomes, *Escravidã*, vol. 1.

from random killings);[19] international pressure—especially from England—that led to the end of slavery and, thus, more opportunities for the Black population to grow; and the need to adapt to capitalism, which was expanding in the country. Brazil was the largest slaveholding territory in the Western Hemisphere, the last to abolish the slave trade—with the Eusebio de Queirós Law in 1850—and also the last to abolish slavery, which occurred with the Lei Aurea (Golden Law), in 1888.

At this point, it is important to make a semantic distinction, which has at bottom a historical and political reality. In English, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines "slave" as "a person who is legally owned by someone else, who works as a servant for that person, and who has no personal freedom."[20] Similarly, for *The Oxford English Dictionary*, a "slave" is "one who is the property of, and entirely subject to, another person, whether by capture, purchase, or birth; a servant completely divested of freedom and personal rights."[21] However, the "enslaved" has a different connotation than the "slave," one that is not lacking in importance:

> The term slave reduces the human being to the mere condition of a commodity, as a being that does not decide and has no conscience about the commodity, as a being that does not decide and has no conscience about the direction of his own life, that is, acts passively and in a state of submission. The word enslaved modifies the semantic charge and denounces the process of violence underlying the loss of identity, bringing to light a content of historical and social character relating to the struggle for power of people over people, in addition to marking the arbitrariness and the abuse of force by the oppressors.[22]

We face here a linguistic difference between English and Portuguese. The latter is a Latin language and applies to "slave" the sense of a permanent condition. The verb accompanying the word slave in Portuguese is "ser"; however, the same verb "to be" can be translated as "estar," which describes a transitory condition, and thus, here, the situation of being enslaved. The Africans were enslaved, put into that situation, which

19. Quilombos have existed in Brazil since the country started importing Africans as enslaved labor—back then they were self-sustaining communities of escaped enslaved Africans, often established deep in the forest. Today, the term refers to communities reminiscent of those original quilombos that use their Afro-Brazilian heritage and strong ties to their land as a form of resistance against cultural erasure, environmental destruction, and even racism. See Kiratiana Freelon, "Brazil's Quilomobos: The Heart of Afro-Brazilian History," *Lonely Planet*, August 15, 2018, https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/brazils-quilombos-the-heart-of-afro-brazilian-history.
20. Elizabeth Harkot-de-La-Taille and Adriano Rodrigues dos Santos, "Sobre escravos e escravizados: Percursos discursivos da conquista da liberdade," III Simpósio Nacional Discurso, Identidade e Sociedade (III SIDIS), https://www.iel.unicamp.br/sidis/anais/pdf/HARKOT_DE_LA_TAILLE_ELIZABETH.pdf, 350 (all translations are my own).
21. Harkot-de-La-Taille and dos Santos, "Sobre escravos e escravizados," 182.
22. Harkot-de-La-Taille and dos Santos, "Sobre escravos e escravizados."

was not their original condition. In the first case, "to be" refers to permanence, while "being enslaved" creates tension between continuation and change.

Linguists Elizabeth Harkot-de-La-Taille and Adriano Rodrigues dos Santos affirm (and I agree) that it is not just a question of semantics: "We observe that the way of saying contributes to the effects of meaning provided by what is said. Referring to enslaved people as being in a permanent or transitory situation is, in itself, a modest political act that may contribute to the maintenance of the status quo or for the empowerment of the oppressed."[23]

In the predominant narrative of the history of Brazil, the Black captives gain their freedom by the hand of a noble and compassionate woman—Princess Isabel, daughter of the Emperor Pedro II—and that can be understood as a gift or a mercy and not a right. There is no sign there of overcoming injustice or of fighting for rights. On the contrary, this story may induce one to continue to accept the situation without committing to a further struggle to change it, thus evading responsibility for slavery as a plague that caused profound wounds in Brazilian society.

After the proclamation of abolition, the former slaves lived in extreme poverty and did not have ownership of the lands they worked on. The historian Luiz Felipe Alencastro says that what was at stake at the time of abolition was not only the freedom of the enslaved but, even more so, the fear that agrarian reform would lead to a loss of property.[24] The abolitionist André Rebouças, a Black engineer, had proposed that a tax be created on unproductive farms and that these lands be distributed among former slaves.[25]

This was the beginning of a difficult and complicated process of the "whitening" of labor in Brazil, as an agreement between landowners and the republican movement meant that rural property would be spared and freed up for Blacks who would be granted land without compensation as an alternative to their inclusion into the freemen's labor market. This turned out to be not a very profitable business for the landowners. Thus, these same landowners began to hire European immigrants to work on the land. These workers were generally Europeans and white (Italian, German, Polish, etc.). The former slaves, even as Brazilians, were left without work in the rural areas and, in part, in the city, while also not enjoying full citizenship. Many of them were illiterate and, therefore, could not vote. This is an important element in explaining

23. Harkot-de-La-Taille and dos Santos, "Sobre escravos e escravizados."
24. Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, in his work *O Trato dos Viventes*, sought to demonstrate that there was not a metropolis that only exploited the colony on the one hand and a colony that only produced to enrich the metropolis on the other. According to him, slavery and the slave trade created a bond between Portuguese and Luso-Brazilian merchants and both accumulated fortunes from colonial exploitation. For more on de Alencastro, see https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luiz_Felipe_de_Alencastro.
25. For more on Rebouças, see Andréa Santos Pessanha, *Da Abolição da Escravatura à Abolição da Miséria: A vida e as ideias de André Rebouças* (Rio de Janeiro: Quartet, Belford Roxo: UNIABEU, 2005).

why, even today, the Black population in Brazil is poor and has great difficulty in ascending the social ladder.[26]

Further hindering the full integration of the Black population was the lack of adequate housing and work. Abolition did not create the mechanisms needed to give Blacks a new start in life, and this led them to continue in poverty, without work or with precarious jobs, living on the outskirts of the cities, far from the central neighborhoods, without schooling and, consequently, without the right to participate in politics.[27]

In addition, the practice of enforcing slavery with severe physical punishment had the effect of making torture legal in Brazil for slaves. Even with slavery abolished, the practice of whipping and beating was widespread and continued to be practiced by police officers, even though it was forbidden by law. The mechanisms of slavery's repression survived slavery. This partially explains why the main victims of urban violence continue to be those of African descent.

Racial violence continues to be a serious problem in the country, as indicated by the recently released 13th Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security.[28] The data show that Black people still represent the highest number of victims of violent crimes. For intentional violent deaths—a category that includes intentional homicide, robbery, physical injury followed by death, and deaths by police intervention—78 percent were Afro-Brazilians and 21.7 percent were white. In Brazil, 56 percent of the population is Black, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). In the case of police killings, the difference is even greater: 84 percent of the targets are Black. In 2021, this rate fell 31 percent among the white population but grew 5.8 percent among those of African descent compared to the previous year.[29]

Despite this data, the fact is that—much more than 100 years after "abolition"—the formation of Brazilian national identity pretends to have as one of its components the myth of racial democracy—that is, the idea of "mestizaje" as a place of

26. A recent IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatísticas) study shows that in 2021, considering the monetary poverty line proposed by the World Bank, the proportion of poor people in the country was 18.6 percent among whites and practically double among Blacks (34.5 percent) and browns (38.4 percent). The data are from the study "Social Inequalities by Color or Race in Brazil," https://g1.globo.com/economia/noticia/2022/11/11/proporcao-de-pobres-pretos-e-pardos-chega-ao-dobro-em-relacao-aos-brancos-mostra-o-ibge.ghtml.

27. For more on the data of Fundação Perseu Abramo, see Ana Luíza Matos de Oliveira, "Negros são 78% entre os mais pobres e somente 25% entre os mais ricos," *Focus Brasil*, November 30, 2018, https://fpabramo.org.br/2018/11/30/negros-sao-78-entre-os-mais-pobres-e-somente-25-entre-os-mais-ricos/.

28. Agência Brasil, "Últimas notícias Brazilian Public Security Yearbook," November 9, 2019, https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/tags/brazilian-public-security-yearbook.

29. See also Ana Luiza Albuquerque, "Negros são a maioria das vitimas de crimes violentos no Brasil, mostra levantamento," *Folha de São Paulo*, July 2, 2022, https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2022/07/negros-sao-a-maioria-das-vitimas-de-crimes-violentos-no-brasil-mostra-levantamento.shtml.

convergence among the many peoples who arrived in the country and of a historical, harmonious coexistence that once existed between enslaved Blacks, the native population, and the Portuguese, a concept even reinforced in the classics of Brazilian literature and sociology.[30]

Brazil is the country with the largest Black population outside Africa in absolute numbers. However, this population, which is the majority in the composition of Brazilian society, is underrepresented in all areas of social life. This happens because, although there is legal equality, there are informal mechanisms of discrimination that filter their access to opportunities, professional training, and decision-making spheres.[31]

This central problem has engendered what is called structural racism.[32] The absence of public policies to integrate the freed slaves' population, relegating them to their fate, generated dramatic consequences that reproduced themselves over time. This created a structural racism that still permeates all spheres of social life, in culture, in institutions, in politics, in the job market, and in educational training. It is the secular result of a country that was built on slavery and influenced by racialist dogmas, and that has not sought to integrate the former slave population into its formal system, relegating them to marginality and blaming them for the harmful consequences of this purposeful abandonment. It may seem far away in time, but slavery was abolished only 131 years ago, and the racial inequality caused by it and by the incomplete transition to freedom since that time did not provide the means for autonomy and are still noticeable in Brazil today.[33]

The racial inequality endured in Brazil is the consequence of a structural racism that has been slowly and systematically built upon. It is not an occasional reality, something that exists for a period of time and then disappears. Rather, this racism affects the whole structure of society—making social realities and cultural attitudes seem normal and natural. The few legal measures passed have not been enough to solve a problem of this magnitude. For example, the Statute of Racial Equality of 2010 tried to address the problems of racial inequality, which it defined as "every unjustified situation of differential access to and enjoyment of goods, services and opportunities, in the public and private spheres, due to race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin." Its goal was to ensure that the Afro-Brazilian population received "equal opportunities, [and] the support for individual collectives and diffuse ethnic rights," and it committed the state to resisting "discrimination and other forms of ethnic intolerance."[34]

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30. Gilberto Freyre, *Casa grande e senzala*, rev. ed. (1933; repr., São Paulo: Global, 2014).
31. See Florestan Fernandes, *A integração do negro na sociedade de classes*, rev. ed. (1964; repr., São Paulo: Globo, 2008).
32. See, among others, Silvio Almeida, *Racismo estrutural* (São Paulo: Jandaíra, 2019); Djamila Ribeiro, *Pequeno manual antiracista* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019); Abdias do Nascimento, *Genocídio do negro brasileiro. Processo de um antirracismo mascarado* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2016).
33. Harkot-de-La-Taille and dos Santos, "Sobre escravos e escravizados."
34. The Statute of Racial Equality (2010), can be found here: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2007-2010/2010/lei/l12288.htm.

However, like other legal endeavors, it has had limited success. The struggle to fully implement the law has been ongoing, and it has faced numerous difficulties—the majority of which have occurred since 2016, in the wake of the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff and the policies of the Bolsonaro government (2018 to 2022). In addition, many believe that the law was not aggressive enough in addressing underlying issues. Black interest groups, for example, have voiced their disappointment that the statute does not endorse any of the affirmative action policies that had been discussed during the parliamentary debates on the law. In particular, they advocate for quotas that would make it easier for Black persons to obtain higher education, find jobs in the public and private sector, and enter politics.[35]

The new government of Brazil has brought a fragile hope to this situation. Presided over by Luis Inacio (Lula) da Silva, who was elected in 2022, it is very committed to fighting racism and racial discriminations, especially instances of violence against Afro-descendant people. Among the president's efforts is the creation of the Ministry of Racial Equality (Ministério da Igualdade Racial). Reflecting the tensions afflicting Brazil at this present moment, this ministry is directed by Anielle Franco, a woman of African descent whose sister—a well-known politician in Rio de Janeiro—was assassinated in 2018. Her murder has not been solved and thus the responsible party remains unpunished.[36] Minister Franco has already undertaken important measures since assuming the office in January 2023, most of them implemented together with the Ministry of Human Rights, directed by Silvio Almeida, an Afro-descendant lawyer. The president has given mandates to both ministries (that of Racial Inequality and of Human Rights) to address issues of racial inequity. In light of the new visibility given to this work, we can hope that their acts will compose a more effective instrument in the struggle against racism and discrimination in Brazil.

As we can see, the dream of equality is as distant in Brazil as it was in the United States in 1963; and the speech of Martin Luther King in Washington is as relevant today in the south of the American continent as it was in its north sixty years ago.

Despite this apparently negative situation, there are some seeds of a dream about racial equality that can be found along the way. Some of them can be seen in the recent history of the church in Latin America.

Anti-racism and Liberation Theology

Over the course of four centuries, Europeans took millions of Africans from Africa.[37] Those who survived their passage to América suffered a process of "deculturation."

35. Annie Gasnier, "Brazil passes racial equality law but fails to endorse affirmative action," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/29/brazil-race.
36. For more on Marielle Franco, see https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marielle_Franco.
37. I follow here the discussion in my book *Latin American Theology: Roots and Branches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016). See chapter 5, "A Theology in Dialogue with Other Traditions," 107–9. The book is a collection of addresses delivered at Boston College in February 2015.

Nevertheless, they continued to hold on to religious beliefs and traditions that affirmed their past.[38] As a result, an Afro-Black-Brazilian "diaspora" culture emerged, expressed in a new family—the *família de santo* (saintly family, or religious community)—united in search of the *axé*, or vital force, which was expressed in diverse forms of religion. A similar process took place in the Caribbean islands, Cuba, and the Antilles, with the emergence of Santeria.[39]

African slaves were forcibly baptized into the colonizer's religion. While ostensibly accepting this new religion, however, they gave the names of Catholic divinities or saints to their own *orixás*, or divine entities.[40] Thus, we find in Brazilian African religions that God the Father is Oxalá, Jesus Christ is Xangô, Our Lady is Iemanjá, Saint Barbara is Iansã, Saint George is Ogum, and so forth. This strategy of resistance allowed the Africans to maintain relatively peaceful religious relationships with the white Europeans, without really adopting their religion. Instead, they continued practicing their own under a Christian cover.[41]

The religious cults of African origin were preserved and served as a privileged space to safeguard the cultural identity of those of African descent. Certainly, the traditional African religions retained their own cultures by reinterpreting their forms, by renaming former local gods, and by simplifying their rituals. Moreover, through this process of syncretism they were able to affirm the values of African people under new sociohistorical circumstances. Hence, a new Black identity was created, in configurations more or less linked to African identity. The essential feature of such configurations remains the characteristic of "color," which denotes racial origin, and in the case

38. In terms of the dialogue among religions and the inculturation of faith, some points should be clarified: "deculturation" is the loss of one's own values and senses by a people; "enculturation" refers to socialization in the ethnic-mythic nucleus and in the elements of the civilization of the original culture; "acculturation" is the asymmetric integration or adaptation between cultures (which transform the otherness into a differentiated type of sameness, in folklore); and "inculturation" is the manner in which people recreate their lifestyle, starting from the dialogue of faith with another culture and religion. We follow the definitions and concepts, accepted by Paulo Suess, of *inculturação, desafios, caminhos,* and *metas* (inculturation, challenges, paths, and targets) in *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, vol. 49, fasc. 193, mar. 1989, 81–126, which will be more appropriate here. See Suess, "O óbvio e o profético," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 58, n. 229 (1998): 81–126. See also Andrés Torres Queiruga (and his concept of "inreligionization"), *Autocompreensão cristã: diálogo das religiões* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 2007); and Basarab Nicolescu (and his perspective of transcultural dialogue) "Transdisciplinarity as Methodological Framework for Going Beyond the Science and Religion Debate," in *Transdisciplinarity in Science and Religion*, vol. 2, ed. Magdalena Stavinschi (Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing, 2007), 35–60.

39. See Orlando Espín, *A fé do povo—reflexões teológicas sobre o catolicismo popular* (São Paulo: Edições Paulinas, 2000), originally published as *The Faith of the People: Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

40. The Orixá is a divine entity in the African American religions.

41. On this, see the work of Geraldo Jose da Rocha, *Teologia e negritude* [Theology and Negritude] (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1999).

of Brazil, a history of slavery. Cuba in 1820 and Brazil in 1888 were the last countries in Latin America to abolish slavery. As Portuguese men slept with African women, a new *mestizo* (in Portuguese, *mulato*) population emerged as a visible sign of cultural synthesis.

Did the strategy adopted by Africans solve all of their problems? Did Afro-Brazilian and Caribbean religions find real peace and harmony in this way? Certainly not. Since the "abolition" of slavery in Brazil,[42] many persecutions were directed to the *terreiros*,[43] where those of African descent who tried to resume their religious practices gathered. These persecutions were obviously connected to the racial question.

Today, people of African descent make up a large part of the Brazilian population. However, they belong mostly to the poor classes of society and find obstacles almost everywhere: to get jobs, to be accepted socially, and to enjoy the opportunities available to those of European descent.[44] Despite this, their religious ceremonies are sought out by white people who enjoy the experience of the dance and the music of the *candomblé*.[45] Carnival, a festival first appropriated by African descendants, has become a commercialized event, attracting multitudes of tourists with transactions of great amounts of money.

It is quite clear that, in the case of Afro descendants in Latin America, and especially in Brazil, the problem or difference in culture and religious tradition is deeply connected to the problem of poverty. And overcoming this poverty is the central priority of liberation theology. This theology, which started to appear in South America around the end of the 1960s, proclaims and demonstrates the need for the Catholic Church to make a preferential option for the poor.

At first, this preferential option was directed to those who were economically and socially poor and deprived of positive conditions to make a good living. After 1989 and the fall of socialism in eastern Europe, this poverty took on other anthropological faces and perspectives. One of them was the racial issue, together with gender, ecology, and colonialism. The dream to see the poor empowered and liberated was seen as being hand in hand with racial liberation and was taken as a research topic of great

42. Brazilian liberationist groups question the statement that slavery was actually abolished in Brazil in 1888. Slavery continues to exist, as they understand it.
43. *Terreiro* is the place of worship and liturgy for the Afro-Brazilian religions.
44. See, among others, Franco Cagnasso et al., *Desafios da missão* [Challenges in the mission] (São Paulo: Mundo e Missão, 1995); Paulo Suess, *Evangelizar a partir dos projetos históricos dos outros—ensaio de missiologia* [To evangelize based on other peoples' historical projects—A study regarding missions] (São Paulo: Paulus, 1995); Agenor Brighenti, *Por uma evangelização inculturada: Princípios pedagógicos e passos metodológicos* [Towards an encultured evangelization: Pedagogical principles and steps in methodology] (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1998).
45. Candomblé is a popular religion practiced in South America (especially Brazil), based on traditional African religious practices integrated with elements of Roman Catholicism and spiritualism.

importance by Latin American theologians, not only in Brazil but also in other countries on the continent.[46]

This theological effort was important in raising consciousness of the growth of racism inside the Christian churches as well as in society. It reinforced the conviction that the most efficient way to delay the dream of King and others is to deny racism's existence.

Denial: Delaying the Dream

Denial is essential for racism to continue. Prejudice against those of African descent can only function and reproduce itself without embarrassment when it is denied, naturalized, and incorporated into daily life as something normal. If racism is not recognized, if it appears as if the problem does not exist, then no change is necessary. Awareness, therefore, is a fundamental starting point.

In Brazil, there was a movement of fiery indignation, which had significant repercussions on social networks and even in street protests, following a worldwide antiracist wave in reaction to the murder of Black American security guard George Floyd, asphyxiated by a white police officer in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020.[47] All this indignation seems contradictory because Brazilians almost daily see on local media racial crimes just as cruel as the ones committed in the United States. Nevertheless, they don't react with the same commotion—if at all. They have grown accustomed to seeing policemen aggressing young Black boys in favelas and in the streets.

Brazilians understand that racial hatred exists out there, but not in their country, which is a cordial one. They believe that in Brazil we live in a racial democracy. This is the perversity of Brazilian racism. It was built in such a way that Brazilians get to the point of not wanting or not being able to see the astonishing reality right in front of their eyes.

In Brazil, being Black means being poorer than whites, having less schooling, receiving lower salaries, being rejected in the job market, having fewer opportunities for professional and social advancement, having difficulty reaching the top of public power and leadership positions in the private sector, being underemployed, having less access to health services, being a preferential victim of urban violence, facing greater rates of incarceration, and dying earlier.

When denial prevails, this reality is interpreted as a natural and inevitable consequence of Brazil's social inequalities, and it is not possible to see that the real cause is

46. See Bingemer, *Latin American Theology*. See also the works of the main authors on liberation theology—Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino, among others—all of them translated in English.

47. For more on the murder of George Floyd, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_George_Floyd.

racism. That is why the deniers reject racial policies such as the creation of quotas in universities and in public competitions.[48] According to scholars, the foundations of Brazilian racism were established during the almost four centuries of African slavery. During the colonial and imperial periods, slavery was responsible for placing Blacks and whites in different worlds. With the signing of the Lei Aurea in 1888, whites created less explicit mechanisms to keep those of African descent in a place of subordination.[49]

Brazilian racism is "disfigured," multifaceted, and extremely slippery. It can be found in many schools that do not obey the 2003 law that made it mandatory to teach African history and Black culture in schools—important and necessary content, above all because 55 percent of the Brazilian population is Afro descendant.[50] Racism is evident in the fact that people are not amazed or indignant when faced with the news of the murder of a Black person; with the absence of Black people in government, in the courts, and in the management of companies; and with a state that offers quality transportation, basic sanitation, and public safety to rich neighborhoods but none of this to the peripheries, inhabited mostly by Afro descendants. This is structural racism. It is so insidious that even Black people reproduce racism.

For Black women, the situation is worse. They normally are sent back to the service door when coming to visit a friend in a building situated in a rich or even a middle-class neighborhood. As patriarchalism goes hand in hand with racism, Black women are doubly discriminated against, seen both as objects, because of machismo, and as subhuman, because of racism. If Black men are already given little space in society, Black women are given even less.[51]

There can be no democracy in a racist society. And a racist society is a perverse fruit of a permanent denial of the existence of racism. A racist society is systemically authoritarian, because it needs to use force to reject the just demands of the majority and serve the minority. Maintaining inequality, poverty, and low political representation requires systemic violence, which, one can imagine, will then eventually be used against whites as well. Furthermore, if most of the society is poor, violated, and humiliated all the time, that society cannot be healthy. Engaging in an anti-racist struggle requires a commitment to democracy, good economic development, and humanity.

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48. Law 12,711/2012, also known as the Quotas Law, determines that half of the vacancies in public higher education institutions must be reserved for candidates who studied all three years of high school in public schools. In 2022, the law turned ten years old.
49. See, for instance, the work of Laurentino Fernandes, Djamila Ribeiro, Silvio Almeida, and Florestan Fernandes, among others.
50. Law 10.639/2003 establishes that the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture is compulsory in both primary and secondary education.
51. See Bingemer, *Latin American Theology*. For more on Lélia Gonzalez, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9lia_Gonzalez. For an Afro-Latin American feminist perspective, see Lélia Gonzalez, *Confronting the Crisis in Latin America: Women Organizing for Change* (Santiago: Isis International & Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era [Dawn], 1988), 95–101.

To Dream in Order to Be Saved

Not letting our best dreams die is necessary in order for our struggles to bear fruit. To dream is imperative to the experience of salvation. Ceasing to dream is ceasing to hope and in a short time ceasing to believe. But dreams must be fulfilled with some sort of realism too.

Sixty years ago, Martin Luther King knew that and questioned authorities of all kinds:

> We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to his hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

To dream is not an alienating experience. On the contrary, it awakens the sense of urgency that exists inside every utopian project. Dreams don't delay hopes to a vague and empty future. They help us to become aware of the urgency of now. The time to make justice is now.

In addition, the beauty of King's dream is that it excludes violence and bitterness: "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence." His dream remains faithful to the Christian values of love and forgiveness. To dream and to desire to make the dream happen now doesn't mean to demonize those who have different socioeconomic statuses. Many of them are causing the oppression that is the source of suffering and injustice. But not all of them. There are white people committed to the struggle too and they have to be taken into account: "The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny."

To dream for a better future for a part of humankind is inseparable from believing that what aggresses one aggresses all. We are not isolated egos: "And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom." Dorothy Day herself, while writing on Fr. Camilo Torres's activity in Latin America,[52] criticizes his use of weapons and invokes Martin Luther King to recall the way of the Gospel: "Martin Luther King Jr., we ask your prayers that we learn more to overcome ourselves, and to

52. Camilo Torres was a Colombian Marxist-Leninist, Roman Catholic priest, a proponent of liberation theology, and a member of the National Liberation Army (ELN), a guerrilla organization. During his life, he tried to reconcile revolutionary Marxism and Catholicism; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camilo_Torres_Restrepo.

learn the violence we need to impose upon ourselves in overcoming righteous wrath against the oppressor and so grow in nonviolence."[53]

King died for his faithfulness to those principles of nonviolence. But his dream is alive and finds resonance all over the world. And it is inspiring for situations like the Latin American and Brazilian ones we just described.

Conclusion

Martin Luther King knew how difficult it is to dream and to pursue the realization of dreams. As he said in his speech, "So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

The dream Dr. King had for the United States is the dream of Brazil today, leaving a state of fear and destruction through legitimate elections and beginning to rebuild the country. We have just begun a government where diversity is welcomed and valued; where indigenous people, Afro descendants, and European descendants can dream together and work together to make this dream come true.

Nevertheless, we are not satisfied, just as King was not. And the reason for this eternal dissatisfaction is that those who believe and desire a kingdom of justice and peace always want more. They praise and thank God for the signs that respond to their hopes but feel and know that there is a lot still to do and rest is not allowed while it has not been fully achieved.

Those who were seduced by Jesus Christ's word and practices know they will have to struggle continuously and tirelessly. While there will still be poverty, and hunger is still a reality, as it is for one-third of Brazilian people; while Black lives don't seem to matter and Afro descendants, mostly youth and women, suffer violence and death; while diversity is not a reality that generates peace instead of conflict—satisfaction is not an option. In the inspired words of King, which still resonate as they did sixty years ago in Washington, DC, "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

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53. J. A. Garcia and C. R. Calle, eds., *Camilo Torres: His Life and His Message* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1968), 36. See also my article on Dorothy Day: Maria Clara Bingemer, "The Witness of Dorothy Day and the Future of Liberation Theology," *Diálogo* 16, no. 2 (2013): 5–16, https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2013.0034.