



The African American Civil Rights Movement and Archbishop Iakovos of North and South America

Athanasios Grammenos, University of Macedonia, Greece

Abstract

When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marched from the Brown Chapel of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, Alabama on March 15, 1965, Archbishop Iakovos, leader of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, was among the few white men who accompanied him. Iakovos, who had experienced religious oppression himself as a child, accepted Dr. King's invitation demonstrating his commitment to freedom and civil rights as key principles of the American life. Iakovos stated that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese could no longer remain a "spectator and listener," and it must labor and struggle to develop its spiritual life. In the end, his firm support of Dr. King's initiative helped bring to fruition the passage of voting rights legislation, advancing equality among his communicants. This paper examines the leadership role of Iakovos in his support of the African American Civil Rights Movement and, furthermore, assesses the impact of his activism on the Greek Orthodox community in America with regard to the previously introverted and conservative attitudes.

Keywords: Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Iakovos, African American civil rights movement, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, interracial relations.

Introduction

The African American Civil Rights Movement has been the focal point of innumerable academic works in recent decades and has been examined from many perspectives and disciplines (see for example, Brans; Carson; Collier-Thomas and Franklin; Hope Franklin and Moss; Garrow 1978, 1986; Scott King; Sullivan; Williams and Bond). In this sense, there is not much story left untold and the reader could reasonably wonder what one more paper could

add to our understanding and knowledge. However, when Martin Luther King Jr. marched from the Brown Chapel of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, Alabama, after the memorial service to Reverend Reeb and Jimmie Lee Jackson carrying a purple and white wreath, a white Archbishop in his black robes walked next to him. This man was Archbishop Iakovos, Primate of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America and at that time the co-president of the World Council of Churches and the vice-president of the National Council of Churches. Iakovos, who was representing the fourth major faith in America and leading a Christian community of mainly white people, was supportive of the African American cause long before he was called by King in Selma. With both encyclicals to his clergy and laity and letters to U.S. policy-makers, he expressed his strong belief that American democracy could not tolerate racism and discrimination anymore.

This paper suggests that the mainstream literature has failed to examine some details of the African American Civil Rights Movement and more precisely the role of Iakovos. From this point of view, it aspires to fill that gap by assessing the history and the impact that the Archbishop had in promoting civil rights for all Americans. This paper will address two questions: what significant contribution did Iakovos make for the Civil Rights Movement? and what was the impact of Iakovos' initiatives on the movement and his community? The first question will be answered by exploring the facts of his participation in every stage of the African American political quest in the 1960s. The second question will need the evaluation of the political developments in the two communities in order to discover if there was any influence obtained from his actions.

The present approach takes into account the role that the spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox community played in order to help Martin Luther King reach his political aims, and comments on the influence that his efforts had on the Civil Rights Movement as well as the civil identity of his own congregation. Put differently, the contribution of this essay puts emphasis on a previously ignored factor that promoted, to a certain extent and from its own distinguished perspective, the African American demands for equality. Iakovos, as a high-ranking clergyman, enriched the character of the Civil Rights Movement with his Christian rhetoric, giving humanitarian and universal identity to a primarily racial discourse.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America is an Eparchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul). It was founded in 1922 in order to serve the people of the Orthodox Christian faith in America, who are mainly, but not exclusively, Americans of Greek descent, and to coordinate with the immigrant communities that were established all across the country. Thus, the term "Greek Orthodox" does not indicate the ethnicity of that congregation but specifies the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Christians which is defined by the bishop with whom they communicate. This distinction helps separate this community from other Orthodox Christian Churches¹ who did not have any (or any significant) participation in the African American Civil Rights Movement. The leader of the

¹ For example, the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) or the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese in North America.

Archdiocese is the Archbishop who is elected by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Archdiocese is responsible for the spiritual guidance of its members, supervising the operation of the parishes across the country. Beyond the implementation of liturgies and the worship canon, it is actively involved in the Orthodox community's everyday life, running Greek language schools and foundations for philanthropic services and charities. This communitarian way of life makes the interconnection between clergy and laity very strong and, considering that those organized ecclesiastical bodies initially consisted of immigrants who arrived from Europe, it can be understood that the Church provided them an environment for socialization and assistance.

By the 1950s and 60s, those immigrants had improved their life conditions significantly and the status of the Greek Orthodox community had been profoundly enhanced. As a result, the Orthodox confession in America was formally acknowledged by the State as one of the four major faiths (along with Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism), and Archbishops offered prayer at the presidential inauguration ceremonies.² The enlargement of the Archdiocese (with new departments, Youth Ministry, an Endowment Fund, the reorganization of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, the fruition of Hellenic College), the fostering of inter-faith dialogue, the promotion of civil and human rights, and the revitalization of Christian worship are credited to Iakovos (R. Stephanopoulos).

The Making of Archbishop Iakovos

Archbishop Iakovos was born in 1911 in Imbros, a former Ottoman island in the north-east Aegean. After the end of the Greek-Turkish War (1923) and the inclusion of Imbros to the newly established Republic of Turkey, he experienced a campaign of state-sponsored discrimination against the ethnic Greek inhabitants, who were the majority on the island at that time.³ For this reason, not long after he graduated from Halki Theological School (1934) he was ordained to the diaconate. He then asked to serve in the U.S. where he would feel free (see Mallouchos: 56-57).

In 1939 his request was accepted and he was appointed as the Archdeacon to Archbishop Athenagoras (and later Ecumenical Patriarch). In 1945 he was awarded a Master's degree in Sacred Theology from Harvard University and in 1954 he was elected Bishop (and in 1956 Metropolitan) of Malta. As a supporter of the ecumenical movement, he served (1955-59) as the personal representative of Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and in 1959 he was received in private audience by Pope John XXIII at the Vatican as a special emissary of the Patriarch. The Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate elected him Archbishop of North and South America in February 1959, with the support of the Prime Minister of Greece, Konstantinos Karamanlis, who wanted him "to fulfil special national interests" (see Svolopoulos: 3.204-205).

²For the recognition of the Greek Orthodox denomination as a major faith in America, see GOARCH, Box W2, Folder NN.

³Iakovos was banned from preaching with the charge of anti-Turkish actions (see Mallouchos: 34).

Iakovos travelled to the United States with the mission to continue the work of his predecessors and guide the Archdiocese in the challenging American melting pot. An ambitious clergyman himself, when the Civil Rights Movement emerged and King invited all religious and civic leaders to stand by him and his people, Iakovos foresaw not only a chance to support human rights but also a new dynamic that could increase recognition and prestige for his denomination. It was a unique opportunity for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese to broaden out – speaking to a larger audience – and for the first time to participate energetically in American social affairs. The African American Civil Rights Movement was an opportunity for Iakovos not only to show his solidarity with African Americans but even more to exercise his right, as a free man, to support those who are oppressed, something he was denied when he was in Turkey.

The African American Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The African American Civil Rights Movement began in the mid-1950s as a reaction to systematic discrimination against the Black community in the South (see Tsetsis). Despite constitutional provisions, local authorities were applying various legal barriers that prevented equal admission to universities, public spaces and private spaces of public use, as well as voter registration. School segregation became intolerable as the major part of the education budget was spent on white schools, and African American children were forced to learn in overcrowded classrooms and buildings with inadequate facilities. African Americans were second-class citizens.

The first step was taken in 1954 when educational segregation reached the Supreme Court. With the crucial decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Court ruled that “separate educational facilities were inherently unequal” (see Whitman). This early success was followed by a forceful bus boycott in Montgomery against racial segregation in public transportation. In December 1955, Rosa Parks, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) refused to give up her seat in the section of a bus for people of color to a white passenger. Her arrest led to a 381-day boycott, a period during which no African American man or woman rode buses, even if many of them had to walk miles to go to work each day. For the coordination of the boycott, which resulted in serious economic hardship for bus companies, local activists established the “Montgomery Improvement Association,” electing 26-year-old Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. as its spokesman. The boycott ended in a Supreme Court decision in December 1956, which ruled that segregation on public transportation was unconstitutional, featuring King as a rising star (see *Time*).

King, a Baptist minister who had just received his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Boston University (June 1955), was ready to commit fully to the Civil Rights campaign. As a man of faith and an admirer of Gandhi, King was convinced that non-violent action was the right thing to do and fully in accordance with the Christian values of love and understanding (King: 114-46). Despite strong opposition from within his community (Schuman: 111-12), he insisted that peaceful protests, sit-ins, and civil pressure were the best practices for African Americans to legitimize and achieve their goals.

To mobilize the Christian network across the country in support of racial equality, in January 1957 King formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) together with other clergymen of color. A few weeks later, on February 14, the Conference elected him

president. King started traveling frequently to facilitate coordination in the South and help organize peaceful protests and sit-ins. In March 1957, he made his first trip abroad to celebrate Ghana's independence from Great Britain (Carson et al.: 9). Upon his return, he stopped in several European capitals, paying a visit also to the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. There he first met Archbishop Iakovos, who was still Metropolitan of Malta and representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Branch: 331; Mallouchos: 224).

The First Greek Orthodox Response to Racial Segregation

From a philosophical standpoint, the Greek Orthodox tradition is ecumenical in the sense that it supports the unity of Christians throughout the world (*oikouménè*). Many Orthodox hierarchs have participated in the ecumenical movement between Eastern and Western Churches (Kalaitzidis et al.), standing at the frontline of the interfaith dialogue. In addition, all people are considered equal, regardless of ethnicity or differences in religion and cultural background. Consequently, racial segregation is unthinkable for communities not only in the United States but also in any other place of the world. The spirit of this attitude was clearly stated by Arthur Dore, Director of Public Relations of the Archdiocese, in a letter he sent in 1958 to Richard Harrison, a theology student at the University of Chicago. Harrison had written to Dore representing a group of students who were studying the racial problem in the U.S., asking for the Greek Orthodox Church's position vis-à-vis racial integration. Dore replied that his Church "has always been democratic without prejudice in reference to race or color," adding that it would be a paradox to discriminate communicants of color in the U.S. while in other countries, such as Liberia and Abyssinia, a majority of the members are dark skinned (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CA).

A similar reply was given a few years later, on January 15, 1962, to Chris Gauster, a researcher from Tennessee, who asked for the views of the Greek Orthodox Church on segregation. Dore replied on behalf of Iakovos that his Church "is unequivocally against segregation of any kind" and all Americans, regardless of color or race, should be granted equal rights and opportunities (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CA).

Towards a Stronger Civil Rights Regulation

In 1961, John Fitzgerald Kennedy became President with help from King who thought he would be more supportive to the Civil Rights Movement than his Republican opponent, Richard Nixon. Kennedy had realized that segregation was keeping the South isolated and economically stunted. Thus, integration was not only a matter for the Black community but for America as a whole. Some of his steps towards integration included establishing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (May 1961) with the task to eliminate racial discrimination, working on the housing problems of black citizens (1962), and calling on Congress to develop major civil rights legislation (June 1963).⁴ King was looking for a breakthrough to capitalize on the momentum after Kennedy's address to the nation. This laid the ground for him to work on further legislation and he began focusing on attracting more political attention.

⁴ After consulting with Republican leaders, in June 1963, Kennedy sent his bill to Congress with the note "imperative" (see Loevy: 171).

Earlier, in April of 1963, King decided to march in Birmingham despite a judge's order against demonstrations, which resulted in his arrest (Dierenfield: 81-82). While in prison, he wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which embodied his political reasoning for non-violent action. He was released two weeks later. His action led the municipal and business leaders of the city to agree on desegregating public areas and various vacancies (Dierenfield: 83).

After June, King asked his fellow African American activists Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin to organize a massive march on August 28, in Washington D.C. with support from all major civil rights, labor, and religious groups. In support of the political pressure launched with this campaign, the recently founded Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches issued a statement, which was signed by Iakovos, calling for the enactment of strong civil rights legislation that "is necessary in order to achieve needed social change" (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CA). The "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" attracted more than two hundred thousand demonstrators to the Lincoln Memorial, among them tens of thousands of clergymen, who listened to King give his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Only two weeks later, on September 15, white terrorists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four girls – one age eleven and three at the age of fourteen – and wounding 21 adults. In light of this development, the Commission on Religion and Race sent a delegation of clergymen to Congress to discuss tensions in respect of the Birmingham bombings. Iakovos did not attend the meeting, but sent Charlous Raphael in his place (*New York Times*, March 18, 1963). On September 28, the Archdiocesan Central Council of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese passed a resolution on racial equality, which was signed by Iakovos (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CA). The resolution condemned segregation and supported that equal opportunities are promptly needed for all races and people in America. More importantly, the document called American citizens to refrain from actions of bigotry because equality and justice should obey the Christian principles of love and understanding. Besides, "the Negro community has great talents which should be given every opportunity to develop for the further cultural enrichment of America." With regard to the Birmingham church bombing, it emphasized that violence is a threat to democracy and urged for restraint and tolerance.

The Momentum of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Archbishop Iakovos

On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as the new president. Johnson came from a lower class family and could identify himself with the poor and weak social groups of America. He shared the views of his predecessor that integration in the South was a social imperative and, furthermore, he wanted to implement a wide program of social policy for all. In his address to a Joint Session of Congress on November 27, 1963, he emphatically stated that "no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill for which he fought so long."

The Bill was sent to Congress in June 1963 by Kennedy. Johnson wanted it passed as soon as possible because he wanted to focus on the presidential election at the end of the year. Iakovos followed those advancements very closely, preparing to seize the chance and get involved when he had something to offer. Simultaneously, he realized that his Church had to

grow and develop within American society, and in order to do so, it had to be a part of American society. Support for African Americans was not merely a Christian duty or ample demonstration of solidarity, it was also a confident declaration that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese was present to the great challenges of the American society, as an integral part, ready to defend its values and help shape the future. The Church, Iakovos thought, should not stay away of the social discourse and become autistic and isolated. The Civil Rights Movement was a unique opportunity for him to transition and reintroduce Greek Orthodoxy in America.

On February 10, the House passed the Bill but the Senate took longer due to several filibusters. In late April, while the civil rights Bill was in the Senate, the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the America (SCOBA), that Iakovos chaired, published a statement on the issue of human rights. The Conference deplored segregation and violence, asserting that “persecution, prejudice and intolerance is the greatest sin that the free soul of man can bear” (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CC). Eventually, the Senate passed the Bill, after a bipartisan vote for Cloture to end the filibuster on June 19 and it was signed into law on July 2, 1964.

When Johnson announced the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Iakovos was in Denver for the 17th Biennial Clergy-Laity Congress. In that Congress, he made some very important remarks with regard to the new strategy his Church wanted to follow related to the African American Civil Rights Movement. Speaking about the Archdiocese’s mission in his introductory report, he began with the recognition that the Church did not belong exclusively to Greek Americans but to all Americans regardless of their ethnic background and thus it is vitally important to open its love to everyone without restrictions. Furthermore, he underlined the need for the Church to reach maturity and fulfill its mission, which was to become one of the most powerful and populous American denominations. To that extent, Iakovos pointed out that it was time to express a more active stance on issues of national concern, instead of being merely a “spectator and listener” (1998: 66). From the Archbishop:

Our Church must remove itself from the sidelines and place itself fully in the center of American life. It must labor and struggle to develop its spiritual life, and thus assume its place among the other Churches as a living, thriving, courageous church ready to accept responsibilities and eager to submit sacrifice (1998: 66-67).

At the concluding General Assembly meeting on July 4, he warmly welcomed the news that Johnson had signed the law, issuing a statement in which he compared the spirit of that day with the spirit of 1776 and 1863 as a landmark of justice and equality for all men.

Glory to God in the highest! . . . We do not simply celebrate and commemorate Independence Day this year, we implement and enrich its meaning with the signing of the Civil Rights Bill (Iakovos 1964a).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was moderate in scope but was a critical step for integration of the African American community. Change would not come instantly as segregation and racist attitudes were rooted deep in the past. Iakovos wanted to mobilize his clergy to support the implementation of the law and so he prepared an encyclical that he sent out on August 13,

1964. In his letter he described how equality, whether political, social, or religious, derives from Christian faith and freedom from the Hellenic (Greek) heritage, and he urged them “to ensure a better and happier society” (1964b). Iakovos was determined to work in support of African American grievances no matter how hard it would be.

The Voting Rights Campaign and the Walk in Selma

In February 1963, the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL), with support from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), launched a voter registration campaign in Selma, the city with the most severe voting restrictions. Richardson and Luke (475) write that “Selma was 57 percent African American, but only 130 individuals were actually registered to vote.” Since no law can change attitudes, white officials obstructed their efforts to register African Americans, and even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the League’s efforts bore no fruits. To avoid the campaign’s collapse, DCVL asked for help from King and his SCLC. King accepted the invitation, focusing on Alabama to assist in voter registration. After a short break in December, when he travelled to Oslo, Norway, to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, he traveled to Selma.

During demonstrations in January 1965, King was arrested, hoping to attract media attention by exposing the unfairness of the local authorities. A few weeks after his release he encouraged SCLC activist Cordy Tindell Vivian to coordinate a “night march” in Marion, near Selma. On the night of February 18, Vivian led the protest walk, but soon police troopers along with local segregationists shut off the streetlights and started chasing the protesters forcefully. The demonstrators retreated to nearby facilities, such as restaurants and churches. In one of those restaurants the police shot one young man who was trying to protect his mother and bleeding grandfather, Jimmie Lee Jackson. Jackson passed away one week later and his death mobilized many more people bringing them into the movement (Branch: 276-78).

King, alerted by Jackson’s loss, announced his plans to organize a voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery to have Alabama’s segregationist Governor George Wallace receive their official complaint (Schuman: 150). The 54-mile march across Alabama was set to launch on March 7, but without King, who had to fly to Atlanta. Some 600 marchers started from Brown Chapel and soon crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where they realized that the way was blocked by police forces. A few minutes later the police started cruelly attacking the marchers, while live TV coverage broadcasted the shocking pictures all around United States. King’s reaction to “Bloody Sunday” was to immediately call a second march two days later. On March 9, King himself led a column of 2000 protesters, including many clergymen who had accepted the SCLC invitation. But when they arrived at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, troopers were again blocking the way. Fearing that more people would get hurt, King asked an officer of the Alabama Police to let the marchers kneel and pray. The officer accepted King’s request and the column turned around after the prayer.

The disappointment for the course of the march was soon overshadowed by yet another incident of discrimination and violence. That evening, Reverend James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister who travelled from Boston to Selma to support King’s initiative, was lethally beaten by three Ku Klux Klan members and died two days later. The announcement of Reeb’s death upset the local community and the visitors and mobilized an intense interest in the situation

in Selma. It was the straw that broke the camel's back urging Martin Luther King Jr. to address a nation-wide call to religious leaders to join the memorial service and attract attention in Selma to display the seriousness of the situation.

On March 12, Archbishop Iakovos sent a telegram to Reeb's widow extending condolences for the tragic death of her husband (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CD). The next day, March 13, he received a telegram from Robert Spike, Executive Director of the Commission on Religion and Race of NCC, inviting him to attend the memorial service for James Reeb (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CK). Iakovos decided to attend the ceremony despite his advisors' serious reservations about security (Branch: 325).

On the morning of March 15, Iakovos, together with his Chancellor Father George Bacopoulos and several other distinguished clergymen of the Commission on Religion and Race, landed near Selma and proceeded to Brown Chapel which was already fully crowded. The Archbishop was directed to a distinguished seat as the highest ranking clergyman present. King, who arrived late, offered him a warm welcome when he entered the church. The two men had known each other for seven years, since their first meeting in Geneva; now they were both aligned behind the Civil Rights Movement.

After the first speeches in memory of Jackson and Reeb, Reverend Ralph Abernathy interrupted to announce that the Federal Judge had permitted the people to walk in procession – three abreast – to the Dallas County Courthouse (Constanelos: 187). It was already afternoon when King, with Abernathy and Iakovos by his side, launched the 8-block march of 3,500 people, holding a purple and white wreath, a mournful symbol for the loss of Jackson and Reeb (Branch: 332). The march was conducted peacefully despite some provocations from whites who were standing on both sides of the street. At one point, a black boy held the hand of Iakovos (Mallouchos: 223). As the marchers arrived at their destination, King walked up the steps of the courthouse (whose doors were locked from the inside and the external lights turned off) with Walter Reuther, a white labor union leader (Fager: 150). That moment was captured by a *Life Magazine* photographer and later, on March 26, it was depicted on the front cover of the issue. King gave a short prayer and the event ended with the crowd singing “We shall overcome.”

The same evening President Johnson surprised everyone by addressing Congress in support of a Voting Rights Bill. Johnson did not yet seem ready to push civil rights any further. However, he said, “there is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma. There is no cause for self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans. But there is cause for hope and for faith in our democracy in what is happening here tonight.” He also added that “in our system the first and most vital of all our rights is the right to vote. Jefferson described it as the *ark of our safety*. It is from the exercise of this right that all our other rights flow” (1965). With this speech Johnson made his intentions clear and promised that in the following days he would introduce a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote.

Iakovos reacted spontaneously, seeing the efforts of the previous period producing positive results. On March 16, he sent a telegram to Johnson to express feelings of gratitude on behalf of his people for “marking the dawn of a new era of the American Democracy” and for opening “new horizons for our political philosophy and life” (GOARCH, Box E24, folder

CK). On that evening, he delivered remarks on the CBS nationwide radio program, *The World Tonight*, expressing his warm approval for Johnson's address. Targeting the politically active audience of the show, he mentioned that the unresolved civil rights issue had done extensive damage to the country's image, both in the U.S. and abroad (GOARCH, Box E24, folder CK).

After the end of King's eulogy in Selma, Iakovos flew to South Carolina to pay a visit to Charleston's Greek Orthodox community. Iakovos had never been to this area, but his visit was not appreciated by some of his pro-segregation communicants, some of whom made threatening calls to his hotel. "Upon my return someone called me *prodóti* (traitor), some others that I should be ashamed of what I have done, some that I am not an American, some that I am not a Christian," Iakovos said (Archbishop Iakovos). Although disappointed by these marginal reactions, he was not discouraged from illustrating his conviction. More importantly, the majority of Greek Orthodox Americans supported him.

To set the example for his clergy and laity, he issued an official statement to the press. The statement quoted him explaining that he went to the Memorial Service to dedicate himself to the noble cause for which James Reeb gave his life and to show his willingness to continue fighting against prejudice, bias, and persecution, feeling that he had the support of all the Greek Orthodox faithful in America. "For our Greek Orthodox Church and our people fully understand from our heritage and our tradition such sacrificial involvements," the statement mentioned (from the memorial service for Rev. James Reeb in Selma, GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CD). To keep his clergy updated, Iakovos asked Arthur Dore to send an encyclical to all the priests of the Archdiocese on March 17. Dore's letter explained why Iakovos went to Selma, mentioned the strong emotions related to the circumstances, and praised the reactions from the people for this "dynamic and striking presence." Last, he urged the recipients of the encyclical to support the legislation proposed by President Johnson "in accordance with the biblical exhortation *may all be one*" (from a telegram sent to President Johnson, GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CK).

For Iakovos, Orthodoxy in America had already planted the seeds for growth, and he was prepared to defend them. The initiatives inspired by Selma were successful. On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in the presence of Dr. King and Rosa Parks. Finally, the new law reinforced the voting rights guaranteed by the fourteenth and fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution, enfranchising minorities, especially in the South.

Iakovos and the Greek Orthodox Community in the Aftermath of Selma

In the following weeks many letters were coming to the Archdiocese in New York. The letters of admiration outnumbered those of criticism (for the congratulatory letters, see GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CF, and for opposing letters, see Folder CG), nevertheless Iakovos was dismayed by the fact some of his own people ignored or underestimated the effects of discrimination. After all, he was born in a place where he and his family were an oppressed minority.

In the archives of the Archdiocese there are 27 letters and telegrams from people who expressed their displeasure or disapproval for Iakovos' initiative, especially after *Life Magazine's* issue was published. On the other side, 66 letters and telegrams congratulated him, fully supporting his position. Unsurprising, the vast majority of the negative letters came from

southern states such as Alabama (9), Florida (2), South Carolina (2), Florida (1), Georgia (1), Mississippi (1), Louisiana (1) and Tennessee (1). Letters came also from Virginia (3), New York (1), Ohio (1) and Washington DC (1), and Pennsylvania (2), while 2 very harsh and threatening letters were anonymous. Among those letters, one was signed by the Parish Council of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church of Charleston, South Carolina,⁵ and one other from the Board of Trustees of the Greek Orthodox Community Holy Trinity-Holy Cross, in Birmingham, Alabama (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CG). In both letters, the criticism is related to the consequences of Iakovos' publicity to the local communities. They note that the Greek Orthodox faithful suffered economic and social reprisals from the Anglo-Saxon majority, arguing that because of his "ill timed, quasi-political visit to Selma" more difficulties arose. In a letter dated March 17, 1965, the Parish Council of Holy Trinity and Saint John the Divine Church, in Jackson, Mississippi, explained that most of the Greeks in the South are restaurant owners and any uncalled for publicity could harm them financially and render them unable to "support the Archdiocese with Parish Obligations" (signed by the 7 members of the Parish Council; GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CG).

The letters of support came from states with a completely different sociopolitical status, either from the North or from the coasts. The biggest number of letters arrived from New York (11), Massachusetts (10), California (7), and Illinois (6) – where one could find the largest Greek American communities – but also from Michigan (3), Ohio (3), Pennsylvania (3), Connecticut (2), Maryland (2), Indiana (2), Minnesota (1), New Jersey (1), and Washington D.C. (1). Nevertheless, letters of support came also from the South and precisely from Alabama (3), Missouri (2), Tennessee (2), Arkansas (1), Georgia (1), Kentucky (1), and Texas (1), whilst 3 letters were anonymous. The senders of those letters perceived Iakovos' visit to Selma with a very different spirit. For them, Iakovos had drawn attention to the Orthodox commitment by showing active interest in the welfare of all humankind. Charles Moskos, Jr., Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan, observed the concurrence between words and actions, saying that "it is certainly incumbent upon all of us to begin to live up [to] the principles we profess to cherish" (dated May 1, 1965; GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CF). Therefore, the Greek Orthodox Americans who were not materially affected by those facts embraced the humanitarian dimension of their leader's representation for equality and dignity, and even more, the embodiment of Orthodoxy as a vital living force in the United States. As Professor Aris Phillips from Yale University put it in his letter, "the promise of America has been realized by a Greek American" (dated March 16, 1965; GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CF).

The study of this correspondence brings to light the way that the Greek Orthodox communicants were affected by the dominant ideological currents and the socioeconomic conditions of the states where they were living. When they faced up to the question of political and human rights, they were decisively influenced by their environment. Those who lived in an open society aligned with Iakovos, but those who were in the South, where segregation and

⁵ The letter was signed by Andrew Melissas and George Fassuliotis, President and Secretary of the Parish Council respectively, on March 20, 1965, and it was notified to Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CG).

discrimination were still the norm, condemned him, not merely and not primarily for his participation *per se* but because of the consequences of his publicity upon them.

Consequently, the publicity of Iakovos' engagement, especially his appearance on the front cover of a popular magazine with nationwide circulation, challenged the political identity of the Greek Orthodox community in America. Most of the letters he received after Selma, either negative or supportive, were in reference not merely to his walk but additionally to the impact of his "exposition" upon his congregation in America. In that sense, when he was displayed in the front line of the Civil Rights Movement, he urged the community to a gradual transition, having to defend itself on a daily basis against the conservative critics. With his march, Iakovos pushed his people to engage in the dialectics of identity and otherness in a multicultural society and eventually obtain a socially confident role.

A sign of this change is that fifty years later, at the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the 1965 National Voting Rights Act and "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Archbishop Demetrios was among the distinguished guests delivering his own remarks while the Archdiocese launched a website to publicize the details of its long support to the African American Civil Rights Movement (see <http://civilrights.goarch.org>). When Iakovos marched in Selma he faced criticism from the segregation establishment in the country, but his efforts bore positive results that his successors can celebrate.

Together with its socio-economic enhancement that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Moskos and Moskos: 139-74), the Greek Orthodox community claimed through its religious leader an active role, turning from an immigrant group into an integral part of the American society. This change would become visible in the coming years, and the recognition would be capitalized on many times over, especially when Turkey invaded Cyprus making illegal use of American military equipment provided exclusively for NATO purposes. In August 1974, after the Turkish troops occupied 40% of Cyprus' territory, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, in cooperation with Greek American activist groups, organized a rule of law campaign asking Congress to impose an embargo on arm sales to Turkey. With the heritage of Selma, Iakovos justified his solidarity to Cyprus "in the light of the principles of justice, equality and respect of the rights of all men regardless of race, color and religion" (2008: 169). That pressure resulted in a 3-year embargo on arms sales to Turkey, despite the Administration's fierce opposition due to NATO's strategic objectives, with severe consequences for the country's military capabilities (Kitroeff; Wantanabe). The major part of the success of the rule of law campaign belongs to the civil awareness that Iakovos provoked in his congregation.

Iakovos' Recognition from the African American Community and the American State

In November 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed the law that established *Martin Luther King, Jr. Day* as a federal legal holiday "to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., by setting aside a day each year to remember him and the just cause he stood for." The first observance of the holiday took place on January 20, 1986. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, founder and chairwoman of *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change*, invited Iakovos to join the celebrations. The first occasion was on January 16, at the unveiling of King's bust in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol and the VIP reception at the Rayburn Office. The second was on January 20, at the Ecumenical service at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, in King's hometown

of Atlanta, Georgia, where he and his father preached. Especially for the second event, Scott King asked Iakovos to deliver a 3-minute tribute to the distinguished guests, which included Vice President George Bush, expressing her esteem that he would join them “on this historic occasion to which he had personally contributed so very much” (from a telegram, dated October 16; GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CP). On December 18, 1985, Iakovos received another invitation, from Lloyd Davis, executive director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, to arrive in Atlanta on January 19 for the International Conference of Apartheid and the “All Peoples Reception” in which the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and those who worked with King would be honored (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CP).

Iakovos accepted the invitation and pledged to support the organizing committee by advertising the Federal Holiday within his community (see the memorandum to Iakovos by Presvytera Niki Stephanopoulos, dated December 18, 1985; GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CP). On January 7, 1986, Metropolitan Silas of New Jersey sent an encyclical to the clergy, the members of the Parish Councils, and the charities and the youth organizations of the Archdiocese informing them about the National Holiday and the participation of the Archbishop in the Ecumenical Service. On behalf of Iakovos, he wrote that “his Eminence has asked that the Greek Orthodox faithful affirm their commitment to peace, unity and racial harmony” (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CP).

In Atlanta, Iakovos recalled walking hand-in-hand with Martin Luther King, Jr., sending a signal to the rest of the world that they could overcome all the obstacles that keep people divided. He described King as “an idealist, dreamer, activist, Prophet, martyr, pioneer, humanist, hero and Teacher” who never hesitated to call for a general awakening. Furthermore, he stated that the march in Selma has not been completed because the work towards full recognition of civil and human rights has not ended (draft of his speech; GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CP).

Coretta Scott King expressed her personal appreciation for Iakovos’ participation in the observance with a letter she sent to him on March 10, asking for his continued support and involvement in her efforts to fully institutionalize King’s National Holiday (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CP). To foster this initiative, Scott King invited him to co-chair or consider being a member of the National Committee of the Martin Luther King Federal Holiday Corporation (and later Honorary Director; GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CL), a position that Iakovos accepted, although he asked to be represented by his Ecumenical Officer, Fr. Alexander Doumouras, because of his heavy schedule.⁶ Iakovos remained a steady supporter of King’s legacy until the end of his career, responding positively to the Corporation’s calls for political and financial support.

Many years later, Iakovos commented on his trip to Selma:

Unlike you and most of you I was not born in the United States, to live in a jure democracy. I came to the United States from Turkey where I was a third category citizen. So, when Martin Luther King, Jr. had his walk to the

⁶ See the letter from Rev. Alexander Doumouras to Dr. Randall, on April 9, 1985 (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder EE), and the telegram sent to Archbishop Iakovos by Coretta Scott King, on September 24, 1986 (GOARCH, Box E24, Folder CL).

courthouse of Selma, Alabama, I decided to join him and say this is my time to take revenge against all those who oppress people . . . I know that civil rights and human rights continue to be the most thorny social issues of our nation, but I will stand for both rights, civil and human, as long as I live. I feel it a Christian duty and a duty of a man who was born as a slave (Archbishop Iakovos).

Greek Orthodoxy was transformed de facto from an immigrant Church to an American faith, and its leader became commonly accepted as a “champion of human rights” (Severo). Photos of King and Iakovos were seen by thousands of Americans in several publications such as that of *Life Magazine* (March 26, 1965), the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Greek Star*, and the *Atlanta Constitution* (March 16, 1965), familiarizing the public with the strange Orthodox robes.

From the political perspective, Iakovos’ contribution did not pass unnoticed. In 1980, President Carter honored him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award, for dedicating his life “to defend basic civil and human rights, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world” (1979). Carter recognized the role he played in extending human rights and respect to all Americans and also his ability to serve the need for a rebirth of the American spirit at critical times. With Carter’s own words Iakovos

walked shoulder to shoulder with Martin Luther King, Jr., holding the hand of a small black girl in Selma, Alabama. He didn’t have to do it. His church did not demand it. Had he not been there, few would have noticed his absence. But he was there. And this simple act was not extraordinary in his life, because it’s one of many similar acts that have exemplified his public and his private and his religious service. He has always sought justice for the poor (1979).

Conclusion

This study examined the Civil Rights Movement from a different angle, assessing the role of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and, more precisely, the initiatives of its Archbishop. The first outcome of this research is that even for topics that have been debated thoroughly and covered substantially there can be a new way of looking into them. Most African Americans may be unfamiliar with the Greek Orthodox tradition; even still, it was a valuable ally to their struggle against oppression in their own country.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese is fundamentally in favor of justice and equality and against violence and coercion. Based on values of love and forgiveness, it provides a theoretical scheme that fights against oppressive structures of domination. In this spirit, when King was assassinated in 1968, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras himself, the spiritual leader of all Orthodoxy around the globe, transmitted a message of sympathy for King, “a martyr in behalf of peace” (*Hellenic Chronicle*).

In a more theological approach, it is not an individualistic mode of faith but, in contrast, it calls for a shared experience of all human beings to verify God’s “epiphany” (Yannaras: 24-25). In that sense, it is an inclusive institution whose message is ecumenical and non-discriminating.

Consequently, Iakovos had a meaningful impact on the character of the Civil Rights Movement because: first, the participation of an Archbishop gives by itself a moral character; second, his universal perspective shifted the debate from a racial and political position to a human rights standpoint, inspiring a different dimension to Martin Luther King's quest; and, third, the mobilization of the collective national religious institutions, such as the NCC and SCOBA, elevated the pressure on behalf of African Americans to the highest level. His argumentation based on Christian values such as equality and justice for all humans in front of God, beyond its symbolic value, elevated the question of civil rights from a domestic political issue to an ecumenical and humanitarian demand that could not wait any longer for a solution. Most importantly, Iakovos was not a low ranking or an isolated clergyman but the leader of the fourth major faith of America and, as discussed above, his position could not be neglected either by the President or by the policymakers and his communicants.

From an internal point of view, since its founding, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America was limited to serving the immigrants coming from Greece and Asia Minor. That first community of Greek Americans was a proletarian diaspora (see Armstrong: 393-95) with certain subsistence concerns, and, not surprisingly, it was introverted and self-oriented. When Iakovos was appointed to lead the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the situation was very different as many of his communicants were already socially and economically liberated. Therefore, he realized that it was time to actively participate in the mainstream political and judicial arena of American life. Without a recognizable social presence, the Church would neither fulfil its mission nor could it survive in the long term. When Iakovos took up his duties, he announced as one of his goals "to bring the Orthodox of other ethnic origins into one close association" (Cage: 64).

The Civil Rights Movement happened when he was in a position to act, and Iakovos seized the opportunity to do his duty as a Christian and as a leader, offering his support to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the African American community at large. Iakovos also helped the transition of his Church into a new era in the United States.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank Mr. Nicholas Anton and Ms. Katrina Potts, for their valuable comments in both style and content.

Bibliography

Archbishop Iakovos

- 1996 *Archbishop Iakovos of North and South America: A Legacy*. A documentary for the Telecommunications.

Armstrong, John A.

- 1976 "Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas." *The American Political Science Review* 70, 2: 393-408.

Branch, Taylor

- 2006 *At Canaan's Edge: America in the in King Years, 1965-68*. New York: Simon and Schuster. EPUB version.

Brans, Roger

2006 *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Biography*. Westport: Greenwood.

Cage, Nicolas

1996 "Archbishop Iakovos." In *Iakovos, the Making of an Archbishop*. New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America.

Carson, Clayborne

1981 *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Carson, Clayborne, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Dana Powell, and Peter Holloran, editors

2000 *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Carter, Jimmy

1979 "Archbishop Iakovos of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America Remarks at a White House Reception Honoring the Archbishop" (September 18). The American Presidency Project. Available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=31371>.

1980 "Presidential Medal of Freedom Remarks at the Presentation Ceremony" (June 9). The American Presidency Project. Available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45389>.

Collier-Thomas, Bettye, and V. P. Franklin

2001 *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*. New York: New York University Press.

Constantelos, Demetrios J., editor

1981 *Orthodox Theology and Diakonia*. Brookline: Hellenic College Press.

Dierenfield, Bruce J.

2004 *The Civil Rights Movement*. London: Routledge.

Fager, Charles E.

2015 *Selma 1965: The March that Changed the South*. 50th Anniversary Edition. Boston: Beacon.

Hellenic Chronical

1968 "Patriarch, Archbishop Lead Dr. King Tribute." *The Hellenic Chronicle* (April 11).

Hope Franklin, John, and Alfred Moss

2000 *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. Eighth edition. New York: A. A. Knopf.

Iakovos, Archbishop of North and South America

- 1964a Statement Issued on the Occasion of the Signing of the Civil Rights Bill into the Law of the Land (July 4). Archived at GOARCH, Box E24, Folder XX.
- 1964b Encyclical of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese to the Reverend Clergy, with Protocol 126 (August 13). Archived at GOARCH: Box E24, Folder CC.
- 1998 *Visions and Expectations for a Living Church: Addresses to Clergy-Laity Congresses, 1960-1996*. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- 2008 *Ta apanta epi pananthropinon dikaionaton ke ethnikon thematon (The Omnium on Panhuman Rights and National Matters)*. Thessaloniki: University Studio Press.

Garrow, David

- 1978 *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 1986 *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: W. Morrow.

GOARCH

- n.d. Archives of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, New York.

Johnson, Lyndon

- 1963 Address to a Joint Session of Congress (November 27). Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64. Volume I, entry 11.
- 1965 "Special Message to the Congress on the Right to Vote" (March 15). The American Presidency Project. Available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26806>.

Kalaitzidis, Pantelis, et al.

- 2014 *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism, Resources for Theological Education*. Oxford: Regnum.

King Jr., Martin Luther

- 2010 *Why We Can't Wait*. Boston: Beacon. EPUB version.

Kitroeff, Alexander

- 1994 "Diaspora-Homeland Relations and Greek-American Lobbying: The Panhellenic Emergency Committee, 1974-78." *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 11: 19-40.

Loevy, Robert

- 1997 *The Civil Rights Act of 1964: The Passage of the Law that Ended Racial Segregation*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Mallouchos, Giorgos

2002 *Ego, o Iakovos (I, Iakovos)*. Athens: Livanis.

Moskos, Peter, and Charles Moskos

2014 *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success*. Third edition. New Brunswick: Transaction.

Reagan, Ronald

1983 "Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday" (November 2). The American Presidency Project. Available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40708>.

Richardson, Christopher M., and Ralph E. Luker

2014 *Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Schuman, Michael A.

2014 *The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Leader for Civil Rights*. Berkeley Heights: Enslow. EPUB version.

Scott King, Coretta

1969 *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Severo, Richard

2015 "Archbishop Iakovos, Major Ecumenical Force, Dies." *New York Times* (April 12). Available online at <http://nyti.ms/1I7GYNM>.

Stephanopoulos Nikie, editor

1996 *Iakovos, the Making of an Archbishop*. New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America.

Stephanopoulos, Robert G.

n.d. "The Greek (Eastern) Orthodox Church of America." Available online at <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8086>.

Sullivan, Patricia

1996 *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Svolopoulos, Konstantinos, editor

1994 *Konstantinos Karamanlis: Arxeio, gegonota kai keimena (Constantinos Karamanlis: Archive, Events and Texts)*. Athens: Karamanlis Foundation and Ekdotike Athenon.

Time

1957 "The South: Attack on the Conscience." *Time* (February 18): 19-26.

Tsetsis, Alexander

- 2008 *We Shall Overcome: A History of Civil Rights and the Law*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Watanabe, Paul

- 1993 “Ethnicity and Foreign Policy: The Greek-American activism and the Turkish Arms Ban.” Pp. 31-50 in *Diasporas in World politics; the Greeks in Comparative Perspective*. Edited by Dimitris Conostas and Athanasios Platias. London: Macmillan.

Whitman, Mark

- 1993 *Removing a Badge of Slavery: The Record of Brown v. Board of Education*. Princeton: Markus Wiener.

Williams, Juan, and Julian Bond

- 1987 *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*. New York: Viking.

Yannaras, Christos

- 2006 *Orthodoxy and the West*. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox.