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Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X: Voices of Moral Authority

by Christine Dyslin

(History 2260)

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King both died violently. The United States of America of the 1960's could not tolerate them. Their message of the empowerment and dignity of black human beings in America, though approached through different means, was perceived as threatening to the white community and to the status quo of the communities from which they came. The social context into which their movements imposed themselves was turbulent with a subtext of violence. White Americans in the 1950's and 60's were by and large economically prosperous but living in fear: fear of communism, fear of nuclear war, fear of cultural change, and fear of the growing power and influence of black people. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were committed to making the black voice heard above the din of fears. Both spoke with a voice of authority rooted in righteousness and committed to social justice. The two men had little in common aside from their race. They did not share religious beliefs, but they did share the voice of religion. It was religion that gave them the righteousness to speak on behalf of the oppressed, even when their message was rejected. At times they used their different religious views to criticize each other. Religion gave them the moral authority to lead a movement dedicated to social responsibility; without religion, the Civil Rights movement would have had a different, and more violent, voice:

No race or people ever got upon its feet without severe and constant struggle, often in the face of the greatest discouragement. (Washington)

Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama

In 1899, Booker T. Washington was writing in the pessimistic era of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court case that legalized the segregation of the races; Washington urged black Americans to work hard, get educated, and gain self-respect despite the treatment they received from white America, for there was little hope of changing white attitudes (Washington). The struggle of black Americans that Booker T. Washington urged continued in fits and starts throughout the twentieth century, in the face of Jim Crow segregation laws in the South, and economic and racial discrimination in the North. The event that galvanized the Civil Rights movement, however, opening the door for blacks to push for redress from the society that had so long relegated black Americans to the back of the bus, was the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision of the Supreme Court in 1954 (Rosenthal). This decision from the highest court in America legitimized the struggle against segregation, especially in the eyes of white Americans, in a way that no previous event could have done, in a way that Booker T. Washington could only dream about. After the *Brown* decision, the leaders of the Civil Rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr., initiated a wave of public protests designed to call public attention to the injustice of segregation: these protests included the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955; the testing of the *Brown* ruling with nine black students entering Little Rock, Arkansas, High School in 1957; sit-ins of black students at white lunch counters. Eventually, freedom rides were organized to integrate public transport, and mass protests and marches occurred in many cities throughout the South at the height of the movement in the early 1960's. Pre-existing black organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) found a renewed sense of purpose in organizing these events, but even more influential were two

organizations that arose from the movement, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), organized by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (Rosenthal).

It was through SNCC that the Black Power movement began. The origin of the term “black power” seems murky, but its message was the legacy of Malcolm X’s call for the separation and independence of the races, articulated by Stokely Carmichael of SNCC (Rosenthal). In an address in 1966 at the University of California at Berkeley, bastion of 1960’s liberalism, and which Carmichael described as the “white intellectual ghetto of the West,” Carmichael made the Black Power case against integration and for direct confrontation with white America, laying bare its hypocrisy and injustice. He challenged liberal white activists to stop trying to “help” blacks, but rather to challenge their own white institutions and white supremacists, because the problem of racism was with white America, not with blacks. He called for blacks to “define their own terms”, and to empower themselves, but his message was largely a diatribe against white power rather than an empowering message for blacks (Carmichael).

The role of religion in the Civil Rights movement is easily overlooked, as the main thrust of the movement was socio-political. However, one needs only to read the rhetoric of the movement’s leaders, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, to see that religion played a vital role in the lives of both men and in their separate visions of the black struggle. In his essay, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” of 1960, King used the Socratic method to lay out his journey from one religious philosophy to an opposite, with the synthesis of the two being his arrival at nonviolence. He was attracted to liberation theology, seeing in it an optimistic spirit that held man to be essentially good. However, the painful history of the black man in America taught him that evil exists, especially in the collective, so he came to admire the works of Reinhold Niebuhr’s neo-orthodoxy, which held that man has an essential capacity for evil, with the greatest evils being committed by groups rather than individuals. His settling on Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence combined with Jesus’ command to “love your enemies” was the perfect synthesis for King to emphasize social responsibility and make a statement to the world about the suffering of a race of people (King 41-43 in Howard-Pitney). King made a bold statement regarding his early studies as a seminarian, saying that he entered on a “serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil” (King 42 in Howard-Pitney). While seemingly idealistic, even as a young man, King was deeply concerned about the plight of black Americans; he sought through religion and philosophy to find the tools to move mountains of injustice.

Malcolm X, like King, was the son of a Baptist minister. But his upbringing couldn’t have been more different than King’s middle class life of relative comfort. Malcolm saw first-hand the violence suffered by blacks, first at the hands of white supremacists, in the case of his father, who was killed by whites, and later at the hands of an indifferent white-run government, in the case of his mother, who was institutionalized when Malcolm was a boy (X 47-51 in Howard-Pitney). From an early age, Malcolm learned to link white people with evil, a theme to which he would return in later speeches (X 108-116 in Howard-Pitney). It is not surprising that Malcolm found personal salvation through a black messenger; Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam gave Malcolm religious justification to think of the white man as the representative of evil. The religion of Elijah Muhammad rescued Malcolm from a life of dissipation and gave him a purpose in fighting for racial independence, setting him on a path to leadership of a movement (X 55-56 in Howard-Pitney).

As he had in his “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” King referred again to Reinhold Niebuhr in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” of 1963. This “letter” is a marvel of rhetoric, making a well-reasoned argument for the nonviolent resistance in Birmingham which landed him in jail, and a not-so-veiled criticism of liberal religious leaders who had criticized his methods. His reference to Niebuhr was a pointed barb at the white establishment in Birmingham. King was criticized for staging a protest in Birmingham too soon after the election of a new mayor; King’s response

reasoned that the new mayor, like the old one, was a known segregationist whose administration would be unlikely to change its ways without the pressure of protest. He reminded his religious critics that groups of privilege, such as white segregationists, are usually unwilling to give up their privileges unless shamed into doing so; he recalled Niebuhr's caution, that "groups tend to be more immoral than individuals" (King 77-78 in Howard-Pitney). King called upon religious imagery and the support of religious figures and philosophers throughout the "letter," arguing with an authority sure to prick the consciences of the liberal religious leaders at whom the letter was directed. In answering a criticism that his movement was wrong because, although nonviolent, it "precipitated" violence, King argued that this censure was tantamount to criticizing Jesus for causing the crucifixion (King 82 in Howard-Pitney). A direct reference was also made in the "letter" to Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, in answer to the judgment that King's protest in Birmingham was "extreme". Again, using the Socratic method, King laid out the two extremes in the black community and found his own nonviolent movement to be the middle way; one extreme was the complacent portion of black individuals who preferred the status quo, while the other extreme was represented by Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, a force of "bitterness and hatred" which equated whites with the devil (King 83 in Howard-Pitney).

Malcolm X's speech, "God's Judgment of White America" from the same year as King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 1963, was an apocalyptic trumpeting of Elijah Muhammad's message, and certainly represented what King had in mind when he made the criticism of the extreme view. In the speech, loaded with religious imagery, Malcolm equated original sin with slavery, condemned the white man for perpetrating this sin, and predicted the destruction of white America by God in judgment. It is difficult to discern from this speech, however, how much of the rhetoric originated with Malcolm and how much came from Elijah Muhammad. In the same year, Malcolm appeared in a television interview with statements that, while still in support of Muhammad, seemed more certainly to emanate from Malcolm himself. In the interview, Malcolm roundly criticized King and the nonviolence method, arguing that it is the "moral," "God-given right" of the black man to defend himself against white violence. He reasoned that by advocating nonviolence with whites, King was giving tacit permission to blacks to become violent with each other (X 134-135 in Howard-Pitney). Infighting among civil rights leaders was a real problem that Malcolm attacked in his "Message to the Grassroots", also from 1963. Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP, King, and James Farmer of CORE, were fighting over financial issues while the grassroots activists continued to agitate, and, in Malcolm's view, frightened the white establishment (X 131-132 in Howard-Pitney). The Kennedy administration needed the leadership of the movement to put up a united front and temper the enthusiasm of the masses – hence, the well-organized March on Washington. This situation, to Malcolm, was a travesty in that the Civil Rights leadership, and King especially, ingratiated itself to the white power structure, and killed all the urgency of the march; "it ceased to be angry, it ceased to be hot, it ceased to be uncompromising" (X 133 in Howard-Pitney).

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X both experienced shades of change in their thinking late in life. As their views changed, their rhetoric became less self-righteous, but more deeply spiritual. Both began to speak less of civil rights and more broadly of human rights. The Vietnam War influenced King profoundly, and negatively, as he demonstrated in a speech given in 1967 at the Riverside Church in New York City. He had brought his message to a northern audience in an effort to emphasize the real problem of urban poverty. He pointed out the "cruel irony" that white and black young men were sent to bring liberty to Vietnam in the name of a country that wouldn't give them the liberty to attend the same schools. He found that the senseless violence being perpetrated upon the Vietnamese and doubling back on American soldiers lent his message of nonviolent resistance all the more credence (King 139-140 in Howard-Pitney). Though his new message against the war lost him support from the Johnson administration, King justified his mission once again through religion. His Christian ministry put an unavoidable burden upon him to be a peacemaker.

This broadened the focus of his ministry to include all human beings, white and black, “communist and capitalist” (King 141-142 in Howard-Pitney). He declared in essence, perhaps in a belated response to Malcolm’s attack of 1963, that he was not beholden to the white power structure or to any organization. Like Jesus, he was a free agent spreading the gospel of peace.

Malcolm X experienced a more profound change in his thinking when he left the Nation of Islam, made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and became an orthodox Sunni Muslim in 1964. He realized that he had become a sounding board for Elijah Muhammad, whom he had come to distrust, and his true opinions had yet to be expressed (X 176 in Howard-Pitney). Giving a press conference on his return from Mecca, he reported that he found in Saudi Arabia that people of all colors could share a religion and a brotherhood in the family of man. He realized that racism, because of the history of slavery, was an American problem, not truly a problem of race. Like King, he recognized that individuals, even whites, could be “good”, but evil manifests itself insidiously in the collective (X 159 in Howard-Pitney). Malcolm’s words at the end of his *Autobiography* in 1965 seem prophetic. He knew that he would be killed by agents of the Nation of Islam, who saw him as a traitor to Elijah Muhammad. He knew that posterity would always pit him as the antithesis to King’s creed of nonviolence. He knew that the white press would label him as the representative of “hate” (X 178 in Howard-Pitney). All these things came to pass. He was assassinated that year by Nation of Islam agents, shortly after having met with Coretta Scott King in an apparent attempt to find common ground with her husband (Howard-Pitney 188). Posterity has indeed insisted on making him the antithesis of King, perhaps because King’s tactic of nonviolence was so successful in winning desegregation in the South, and perhaps because so much of Malcolm’s initial message came not from himself, but from Elijah Muhammad. The white press did label him as the representative of “hate,” perhaps owing to the taint of Mike Wallace’s 1959 television documentary about the Nation of Islam, “The Hate that Hate Produced,” the vehicle that introduced Malcolm to the nation (Howard-Pitney 183 in Howard-Pitney). Malcolm was conciliatory in the end. He saw himself for what he was – a gadfly, biting at the conscience not only of the white community, but especially of the Civil Rights movement itself. He saw his role as necessary to bringing truth to light to “destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America” (X 179 in Howard-Pitney).

Violent times killed these two men long before they had exhausted everything they had to say. Had Malcolm lived, it seems quite likely that he might have effected a rapprochement with King; together they might have turned their efforts to peacemaking, who can say? In the end, both men declared their freedom from bondage: with his anti-war stance, King defined his independence from the white establishment; by taking a trip to Mecca, Malcolm defined his independence from the Nation of Islam. Establishing this freedom may have cost both men their lives in a tragic metaphor for black Americans winning freedom from slavery and meeting struggle, hardship, and death. In the end, both men found that the purpose of religion in their lives and in their movement was in the revelation of truth. Both men, in their final utterances, found their own mortality to be insignificant to the transcendent quality of truth (King 156 and X 179 in Howard-Pitney).

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