

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X: Different Views on the Question of Racism and Social Justice

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Forty years after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and forty-three years after the death of Malcolm X, scholars and activists continue to discuss the differences and similarities between these two prominent leaders of liberation movements in the United States. Many of the differences are obvious. King grew up in the Southern United States where racial segregation was legally mandated in America's apartheid system. He attended racially segregated schools for African Americans from his elementary days through university.

His daily life was spent in the protective cocoon of the black community, where his family lived a middle class life by black standards of the time. King also found a loving community in his African American church, Ebenezer Baptist Church. When young Martin did venture beyond his home and church into the broader world where whites ruled he was faced with a public setting that was thoroughly segregated by race. Your racial classification determined where you dined, saw a movie, entered public facilities, and even where you used the toilet. Funeral homes and cemeteries were segregated by race. Some whites hoped that even heaven and hell were segregated. But most of young Martin's life was lived in the black community and he was kept safe from some of the psychic affects of racism. His church constantly reminded Martin that he was a child of God.

Young Malcolm Little was raised in the Northern states. He attended schools where he was one of the only black students in his classes. After school he played with white children. Unlike young Martin's cocoon-like protection in the African American community, young Malcolm faced the daily onslaught of racism. At school he experienced the racism of white teachers. Malcolm's family was brutalized by explicit racist acts. Their house was burned down because of a clause in the deed that said only whites could own the property.

The Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations tormented the Little family eventually killing Malcolm's father when Malcolm was six years old. Malcolm wrote that his mother was committed to a psychiatric hospital when he was thirteen years old because she could no longer maintain her sense of dignity while a social service system run by whites demeaned and distressed her. Malcolm was placed in the foster care of white families and eventually found himself in a life of crime leading to seven years in prison.

Malcolm X could have been speaking of his own beginnings when he stated, "When they start indicting us because of our color that means we're indicted before we're born, which is the worst kind of crime that can be committed." Malcolm X lived in a social context where humanity and whiteness were equivalent terms.

In his autobiography Malcolm X repeatedly reflected on his own internalized racism and his efforts to gain acceptance. He described how as a teenager he had straightened his hair through using lye to burn his hair straight. "How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand

there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking 'white' ... This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are 'inferior'—and white people 'superior'—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards."

Malcolm's downward spiral in life was similar to the situation described by Franz Fanon in his study on the impact of European colonization on blacks and the internalization of racism. Fanon wrote, "I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world. ... Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am a human."

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X emerged as leaders early in their adult life. Martin Luther King, who was raised in the protective embrace of a segregated black community, became the leading voice for racial integration. Malcolm X, who was raised completely integrated into the white community, became the leading voice for black separation from whites. Their childhood years shaped their different views on racism. King grew up in a supportive African American community where, especially in the African American church, he had acquired some self esteem as a black person. Malcolm X was dehumanized by his circumstances and needed a place and process to reclaim his sense of blackness. His psyche and spirituality were deeply damaged by societal racism.

Their religions also determined their futures. Martin Luther King embraced the reconciliation core beliefs of Christianity and sought to implement this in society. This is best illustrated in his "I have a dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963. King exclaimed, "I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists ... that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam, a small religious group that taught racial separation, the inherent evil of whites, and the need to embrace African culture. Their teachings countered his internalization of racial victimization. Religion professor Cornel West writes, "Malcolm X's notion of psychic conversion holds that black people must no longer view themselves through white lenses. He claims that black people will never value themselves as long as they subscribe to a standard of valuation that devalues them." Through his involvement in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X discarded his internalized view that "white" and "human" were interchangeable and rediscovered his value as a black man of African descent. From my limited understanding of the concept of Negritude as discussed by Aimé Césaire and others, it seems to me that Malcolm's journey to claim his identity and history as a black man of African descent offers an American example of Negritude.

For most of the 1950s and 1960s Martin Luther King Jr. led the nonviolent integration-focused Civil Rights Movement. His goal was to dismantle racial segregation through bus boycotts, protest marches in the streets of cities and towns throughout the southern United States, legal challenges to segregation and discrimination in the court room, and use of the media to re-educate the citizenry of the nation. The end of segregation would lead to the possibility for integration. During much of the same time period Malcolm X, as the spokesperson and leading minister in the black separatist Nation of Islam, led a movement for black empowerment. The focus was to restore the dignity and power of oppressed black

people through spiritual and historical teaching about racism, economic development and business creation, cultural re-connection to Africa, and training in self defense.

Their different views and actions related to racism in the United States complemented each other. The message of Malcolm X helped erase the internal discord caused by racism while the actions of Martin Luther King helped erase the societal structures that maintained racial discrimination. Both were essential for transformation. The successes of both approaches remain visible today. Yet, both Malcolm and Martin found themselves primarily focused on addressing the problem created by a history of racism rather than on envisioning a future of social justice without racism.

While the Nation of Islam offered Malcolm X a positive view of his blackness and African origins, it "was predicated on an obsession with white supremacy." Cornel West explains: "This preoccupation with white supremacy still allowed white people to serve as the principal point of reference. That which fundamentally motivates one still dictates the terms of what one thinks and does—so the motivation of a black supremacist doctrine reveals how obsessed one is with white supremacy." West continues: "This is understandable in a white racist society—but it is crippling for a despised people struggling for freedom, in that one's eyes should be on the prize, not on the perpetuator of one's oppression."

Therefore, Malcolm X's sense of self was still connected to white identity. The Nation of Islam could only reverse the effects of racism, not reconcile Malcolm X with the broader human family. His essential understanding of himself and others was transformed when he left the Nation of Islam and embraced Orthodox Islam in 1964. Regarding his hajj to Mecca, Malcolm stated, "In my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being."

Malcolm's embrace of orthodox Islam allowed him to accept his own sense of self without dismissing the humanity of whites. This awareness first struck him on his way to Mecca when Muslims of all races including whites surrounded him. Malcolm wrote: "Packed in the plane were white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair—all together, brothers! All honoring the same God Allah, all in turn giving equal honor to each other ... In America, 'white man' meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been." In other words, Malcolm discovered a difference between "the white man" and people whose complexion just happened to be white.

This change in Malcolm X opened the door for he and Martin Luther King to draw closer to each other. A few weeks after Malcolm X quit the Nation of Islam, he and King were both in the visitor's gallery of the United States Senate building for the debate on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. After the session they spoke to each other and were interviewed jointly by a reporter who happened to see them standing next to each other. King made contact with Malcolm through his lawyer suggesting the two meet. A meeting was scheduled, but did not occur. The two did speak to each other several times by phone. In February 1965, Malcolm and Martin spoke by phone and agreed to meet soon and discuss how they might work together. Malcolm X's home was fire bombed later that night. A week later, Malcolm X was assassinated—just two days before a scheduled meeting with Martin Luther King Jr.

Malcolm X wrote in his autobiography: "Sometimes, I have dared to dream to myself that one day, history may even say that my voice—which disturbed the white man's smugness, and his arrogance, and his complacency—that my voice helped to save America from a grave, possibly even a fatal catastrophe ... And if I can die having brought any light,

having exposed any meaningful truth that will help destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America—then, all of the credit is due to Allah.”

Martin Luther King lived for three more years beyond the death of Malcolm X. It seems that King was affected by his encounter with Malcolm X. In Dr. King’s final three years he tried to address racism in the Northern states; he became concerned with economic justice and poverty; he critiqued capitalism; and his rhetoric spoke more often of human rights issues than civil rights.

The final protest movement that Martin Luther King was organizing at his death was the Poor People’s Campaign. He was planning to bring thousands of poor people to Washington, DC. They would seek to paralyze the nation’s capital city with civil disobedience until the U.S. government took action to end poverty. King and others were organizing blacks, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and poor whites from urban and rural locations to accomplish this dramatic vision. King was killed before he could complete the Poor People’s Campaign.

I have stood in Memphis, Tennessee, looking at the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. Last month I stood on the very spot in the Audubon Ballroom in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City where Malcolm X was killed in 1965. Both were murdered at the age of 39 years. Their deaths stole from history the potential of what might have been if they had lived and worked together.

As I think about standing in those sacred places where Malcolm X and Martin Luther King spoke their last words over 40 years ago, I am compelled to consider how we can ensure that the essence of their messages is not extinguished. We must become the instruments of reconciliation and cultural empowerment in the 21st century. We must become voices speaking out against injustice in the 21st century. We must become the people who march against racism, dismantle the systems that keep people poor, and work for peace.

And we need to raise up young women and young men to be the Malcolms and the Martins, the Aimé Césaires and Maryse Condés, for the 21st century in Guadeloupe, France, the United States, and all around the world.

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