

SECTION IV.

## Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

### A Reassessment of the Relationship Between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. are often referred to as the most significant Black leaders in America in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>1</sup> They are perceived as having stood at opposite extremes on the spectrum of Black leadership, representing profoundly different organizations and political-religious perspectives. Their disagreements concerning love and hate, violence and nonviolence, separatism and integration, and the relevancy of the Christian faith in the Black freedom struggle not only prevented them from becoming closely connected by friendship or association, but were also of considerable importance in determining how they viewed and related to each other. Such disagreements have left many with the impression that Malcolm and King were "adversaries in a great Manichaeian contest, the forces of light against the forces of darkness, with the future course of black protest at stake."<sup>2</sup> This image has been created in the public imagination by the

American mass media and reinforced in the writings of misinformed scholars, and, therefore, must not be taken seriously by those who wish to understand the true nature of Malcolm's and King's relationship, as well as their meaning and significance for the black struggle.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their many differences—religiously, philosophically, politically, and organizationally—Malcolm and King, both ministers, were drawn together in a dialectic of social activism by the nourishment they shared in the Black folk tradition, by their common devotion to the liberation of the oppressed, by the ideas and convictions they shared, by the personal admiration and respect they had for each other, and by the impelling moral, spiritual, and intellectual power they received from one another.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship between Malcolm and King passed through two stages. The first stage covered the period



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from 1957 to March, 1964. During most of this time, Malcolm was a minister in Elijah Muhammad's Black Muslim Movement, based in Harlem; and King was the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.) and a co-pastor at his father's church in Atlanta, Georgia. The second stage began on March 26, 1964, when Malcolm and King met briefly in Washington, D.C., and it ended with Malcolm's death on February 21, 1965. In both periods they often reached out to each other in public, private, and rather unorthodox ways. The difference between the two periods is suggested by the manner in which the two men softened their criticism of each other in the last eleven months of Malcolm's life, and also by the ways in which they moved closer together, personally and philosophically, in that same period.<sup>5</sup>

It was during that first stage that the religious, philosophical, and political differences between Malcolm and King became crystal clear. In 1957 Malcolm and the Black Muslims tried unsuccessfully to start a dialogue with King and S.C.L.C. concerning strategies and goals for the Black movement.<sup>6</sup> On March 19, 1958, Elijah Muhammad sent a letter to King, inviting him to appear before the Muslims and other citizens "in a free rally in our great Temple #2 in Chicago's exclusive Hyde Park District." King responded in a letter dated April 9, 1958, expressing deep gratitude for the invitation, but declining it because he had "accepted as many speaking engagements that my schedule will allow for the remainder of the year."<sup>7</sup> On July 21, 1960, Malcolm invited King to attend an "Education Rally" in Harlem, noting that

Since so much controversy has been spoken and written about Mr. Muhammad and his 'Black Muslims,' we invite you as a spokesman and fellow-leader of our people to be among our invited guests, so you can see and hear Mr. Muhammad for yourself and then make a more intelligent appraisal of his teachings, his methods, and his program.<sup>8</sup>

The letter arrived after the program was held, and again Martin Luther King escaped an opportunity to meet Malcolm X and his fellow Muslims face to face.<sup>9</sup> During the next three years, King ignored numerous challenges from Malcolm to "come to Harlem and prove that 'peaceful suffering' is the solution to the atrocities suffered daily by Negroes throughout America."<sup>10</sup> Malcolm reacted calmly to the brush-offs, and constantly urged Black leaders to forget their "petty differences" and to "reason together and keep open minds." He was convinced that King and other moderate civil rights leaders were avoiding him out of a fear "of irking their white bosses (or) embarrassing their white liberal friends."<sup>11</sup> But there was a larger issue involved; namely, the fact that Malcolm and the

Black Muslims and King and the S.C.L.C. were divided by too many religious, philosophical, and political differences to feel comfortable meeting and talking together. The Muslims' stress on Black supremacy, on Black self-love, on self defense or counter-violence in the face of violence from whites, on the need for complete separation from white society, and on Islam as the "natural religion" of Black people was too much at odds with S.C.L.C.'s emphasis on human equality, Christian love (agape), nonviolence, integration, and the redemptive power of Black Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The Muslims constantly accused King of teaching Blacks to love whites before they learned to love themselves, and they frequently attacked him for turning potential freedom-fighters in the Black community into "contented, docile slaves."<sup>13</sup> King often dismissed the Muslims as "a hate group" with "a strange dream of a black nation within the larger nation," and declared that "at times the public expressions of this group have bordered on a new kind of race hatred and an unconscious advocacy of violence." He readily admitted, however, that "I can well understand the kind of impatience that leads to this kind of reaction."<sup>14</sup> Considering the Muslims' and S.C.L.C.'s sharp differences and images of each other, a meeting between them would have most likely been quite emotional and counter-productive for the Black cause.

The personal attacks Malcolm and King made against each other between 1960 and 1964 also contributed to the alienation between the Black Muslims and S.C.L.C. Malcolm often castigated King in speeches, magazine and newspaper interviews, and on radio and television as "a fool," "a chump," "a clown," "a traitor," "a false shepherd," "a Rev. Dr. Chickenwing," and "a twentieth century religious Uncle Tom" who had sold out to "white devils."<sup>15</sup> King sometimes used terms like "crazy," "tragic," "irresponsible," and "demagogic" in reference to Malcolm.<sup>16</sup> Although these attacks did not surge up from a deep hatred, they were symbolic of Malcolm's and King's strong dislike for each other's philosophy and methods. Malcolm was disturbed by King's refusal to publicly recognize him as a legitimate Black leader, and also by his refusal to meet with the Muslims.<sup>17</sup> Visibly shaken and hurt by Malcolm's and the Black Muslims' harsh criticism of his philosophy and style of action, King concluded that "they've heard those things about my being soft, my talking about love, and they transfer their bitterness toward the white man toward me." Furthermore, he insisted that Malcolm and the Black Muslims clearly misunderstood and misrepresented his views:

Now, my feeling has always been, again, that they have never understood what I was saying, because they don't see that there's

a great deal of difference between nonresistance to evil and non-violent resistance. And certainly I'm not saying that you sit down and patiently accept injustice. I'm talking about a very strong force, where you stand up with all your might against an evil system, and you're not a coward; you are resisting but you come to see that tactically as well as morally it is better to be nonviolent. . . . Even if one didn't want to deal with the moral question, it would just be impractical for the Negro to talk about making his struggle violent.<sup>18</sup>

King wondered if Malcolm and the Black Muslims were in some way responsible for several violent attacks on his person in Harlem between 1958 and 1964. On September 20, 1958, while autographing copies of his first book in a Harlem department store, King was stabbed with a letter opener by a crazed Black woman named Izola Curry. He later said that

. . . it may be that she had been around some of the meetings of these groups in Harlem, Black Nationalist groups, that have me all the time as a favorite object of scorn, and hearing this over and over again, she may have responded to it when I came to Harlem.<sup>19</sup>

Though King quickly added: "It may be that she was just so confused that she would have done this to anybody whose name was in the news. We will never know."<sup>20</sup>

In June, 1963, King's car windows were splattered with eggs as he drove through Harlem. He conceded that he was very depressed because "these were Negroes throwing eggs at me," and he was certain that Malcolm and his followers were somehow behind this deed:

I think that was really a result of the Black Nationalist groups, and a feeling—you know, they've heard all of these things about my being soft and talking about love and the white man all the time. . . . And I think it grows right out of that. In fact, Malcolm X had a meeting the day before and he talked about me a great deal and told them that I would be there the next night, and said, "you ought to go over there and let old King know what you think about him." And he had said a great deal about nonviolence, and saying that I approved of Negro men and women being bitten by dogs and the fire hoses, and I say go on and not defend yourself. So I think this kind of response grew out of the build-up and the. . . all of the talk about my being a sort of polished Uncle Tom.<sup>21</sup>

In a statement to *The New York Post*, Malcolm X denied that his followers were involved in the egg-throwing incident.<sup>22</sup>

In July, 1964, as Black riots shook Harlem and Rochester, New York, King was again the object of attack by Harlemites. He had gone to Harlem for a series of meetings with Black leaders and New York Mayor Robert F. Wagner, hoping that the riots could be stopped. Malcolm was touring Africa and the Middle East at that time. According to Stephen B. Oates, who has written a lengthy and impressive biography of King, "The trip was a disaster":

While King toured the riot sites, embittered Harlemites booed him and spouted anti-Semitic vitriol that made him grimace. At the same time, local Negro leaders fumed that no 'outsider' imported by the Mayor had the right to invade their territory and tell them what to do.<sup>23</sup>

Referring undoubtedly to the influence of Malcolm and other Black Nationalists on Harlem and Rochester, King suggested that "Though it is never expressly stated, there are numerous indications that in some strange way, the Negro leadership is fundamentally responsible for the acts of violence and rioting which have occurred within these Negro communities."<sup>24</sup>

It is difficult to avoid the notion that Malcolm X's and Martin Luther King's attacks against each other resulted from personal jealousies that were not particularly malicious in nature. In a *Newsweek* poll taken in late 1963, Black Americans ranked King and S.C.L.C. far above Malcolm and the Black Muslims in terms of effectiveness and popularity.<sup>25</sup> King was obviously the most prominent Black leader in terms of visibility and influence. He had personal access to presidents and world leaders, and he could prevail upon the great and powerful to act. Furthermore, King was more successful than Malcolm in developing a consistent, overall philosophy, program, and movement for Black liberation. It was not always easy for Malcolm to graciously accept these realities. On the other hand, King could have been slightly jealous of Malcolm's influence among a ghetto lumpenproletariat that he had talked about but never reached, and of Malcolm's easy access to radio, television, and newspapers.<sup>26</sup> King and other civil rights leaders were also rankled and somewhat intimidated by Malcolm's reputation as a skillful and effective debater. The white South's stubborn refusal to respect the lives and the rights of Black people made it increasingly difficult for them to counter Malcolm.<sup>27</sup> Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young would not meet him, and neither would Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young. Although Malcolm's formal education was limited to the eighth grade, it was always difficult to get King, a Ph.D., to consider challenging him in a debate. Malcolm, on business trips to Atlanta, regularly visited S.C.L.C.'s main office on Auburn Avenue to chat privately with King, but King was never in on these occasions.<sup>28</sup> King declined an invitation to debate Malcolm from Radio Station KDLA in Oakland, California in 1962. In a letter dated November 26, 1962, Dora McDonald, King's secretary, gave this explanation:

On the question of debating with Malcolm X, Dr. King has taken a consistent position of not accepting such invitations because he feels that it will do no good. He has always considered his work in a positive action framework rather than engaging in consistent negative debate.<sup>29</sup>

The East Bay Ministerial Fellowship of Berkeley, California reported in a letter to Martin Luther King, dated December 4, 1962, that "We have indicated to CBS and NBC that you have declined their kind offer of discussion with Malcolm X, minister of the New York Temple of Islam Movement."<sup>30</sup> King also threatened on one occasion to withdraw from a David Susskind television panel if Malcolm was invited.<sup>31</sup> Malcolm found King's refusal to debate him particularly amusing, declaring on one occasion that Martin would lose a debate with him on integration:

Why King? Because integration is ridiculous, a dream. I am not interested in dreams, but in the nightmare. Martin Luther King, the rest of them, they are thinking about dreams. But then really King and I have nothing to debate about. We are both indicting. I would say to him: "You indict and give them hope. I'll indict and give them no hope."<sup>32</sup>

King's refusal to debate Malcolm in public was not rooted in any personal dislike or disrespect of the dynamic young Muslim spokesman. He always viewed Malcolm as a brilliant and personable young man who, because of racial conditions beyond his control, had turned to the rhetoric of hate and Black separatism.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, King insisted that their quarrel was with the oppressive society, and not with each other. Moreover, both he and Malcolm knew that any public debate or dispute between them could be used by the media and the white power structure generally to further divide Black people, and thus weaken the Black thrust for equal rights and social justice. They also understood that they were involved in a protracted life-and-death struggle against the same enemy, white racism, and that this struggle alone demanded all of the time, energy, and resources that they could muster.<sup>34</sup>

Black America needed both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and both were quite conscious of the reciprocal roles they played in their people's quest for freedom, justice, and equality of opportunity. Despite their many differences, ideological and otherwise, they *needed* each other, *learned* from each other, and helped *make* each other. Malcolm occasionally mentioned how he and the Black Muslims had a very special role to play not only in making white Americans more sensitive to the importance of racial justice, but also in preparing the ground so that Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, Whitney Young, Martin Luther King, and other moderate civil rights leaders would be heard.<sup>35</sup> On one occasion, Malcolm alluded to how he and the Muslims helped prepare the way for King's and other civil rights leaders' rebellion: "The Black Muslim movement did make that contribution. They made the whole civil rights movement become more militant, and more acceptable to the white power structure. He [the white

man] would rather have them than us."<sup>36</sup> In his celebrated "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail," issued in April, 1963, King spoke of the importance of the alternative roles presented by himself and the Black Muslims, indicating how each articulated different dimensions of the anguish and goals of Afro-Americans which had to be taken seriously. "If our white brothers dismiss as 'rabble-rousers' and 'outside agitators' those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts," King wrote, "millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies."<sup>37</sup> He repeated this warning a year later, suggesting that "If sizable, tangible gains are not made soon across the country, we must honestly face the prospect that some Negroes might be tempted to accept some oblique path such as that Malcolm X proposes."<sup>38</sup>

After he officially announced his split with Elijah Muhammad's Black Muslim Movement on March 8, 1964, Malcolm still found himself alienated and excluded from the main core of civil rights leadership. King had predicted the split, and said shortly thereafter that he would confer with Malcolm about his position on guns, but he never did.<sup>39</sup> On March 16, 1964, he circulated a statement affirming the "critical significance" of Malcolm's challenge to white America regarding race relations, but denying that his schism with the Muslims had any special significance for the civil rights movement:

The recent declaration by Malcolm X of his break with Mr. Muhammad holds no particular significance to the present civil rights efforts of the American Negro. The program of 'reciprocal bleeding' and the irresponsible prophecy of widespread violence that he espouses offers little comfort or hope of relief to the dilemma of the Negro community. It is regrettable that Malcolm X has publicly confessed to such a negative and desperate course of action. I must honestly say that this new turn of events is not so much an indictment against him as it is against a society whose ills in race relations are so deep-rooted that it produces a Malcolm X. The critical significance of his present statements is that they challenge the national community of the United States to support the efforts of the Negro in his struggle for full citizenship while the masses are responsive to disciplined and responsible nonviolent leadership now at its helm.<sup>40</sup>

On March 26, ten days after this statement was issued, Malcolm and King met face to face for the first and only time in Washington, D.C. Peter Goldman, one of Malcolm's biographers, has described the circumstances under which this meeting occurred:

In March, 1964, just after Malcolm had quit the Nation, he visited the U.S. Senate to take in a day of the civil rights filibuster and later slipped into the back row of a King news conference off the floor. King afterward left by one door; Malcolm popped out another into his path. 'Well, Malcolm, good to see you,' King said. 'Good to see you,' Malcolm grinned. Reporters crowded around. Flash bulbs flared. 'Now you're going to get investigated,' Malcolm teased, and then they parted.<sup>41</sup>

David L. Lewis, who has produced one of the best critical biographies of King, claims that this meeting had significant implications for the Black struggle because Malcolm and King publicly expressed solidarity on a pressing issue facing Black America for the first time:

The civil rights propaganda value of this meeting was considerable, as both men pledged to concert their efforts to pressure Congress into passing the pending civil rights legislation. Practically, however, it represented little in the way of intrinsic collaboration. Ideologically, they still appeared to be antithetical personalities. But Malcolm was a mind in flux, finally liberated from the cult of white devilry preached by Elijah Muhammad, and profoundly troubled by the light-skinned Algerian and Egyptian revolutionaries whom he had encountered during his recent roving tour of Africa.<sup>42</sup>

The meaning and significance of this Washington meeting in changing the personal relationship between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King have been virtually ignored by scholars. The meeting, however brief, was important because it showed that the two men could touch, smile at, and even tease each other, thereby casting serious doubt on any notion that they disliked each other as persons. They actually greeted each other in the ancient tradition of hospitality, and the playful manner in which they related to each other must have diffused any anxiety they may have felt. Malcolm, who initiated the chance encounter, was actually reaching out to King in a public way. In a real sense, the meeting showed that each man's capacity to love was stronger than any differences which separated them. After the friendly encounter, Malcolm ceased his constant, public denunciations of King as a traitor and an Uncle Tom, and the two men increasingly began to talk about getting together to discuss their views on friendly terms.<sup>43</sup>

The friendly nature of the March, 1964 meeting between Malcolm and King disturbed some white liberals who were active supporters of the latter. The picture Malcolm took with King on that occasion, which showed the two men smiling and shaking hands, was not a pleasant sight for those who were determined to exploit the philosophical differences between them. Abram Eisenman of *The Savannah Sun* in Georgia sent King a telegram inquiring about the implications of the picture. King responded in a letter on April 3, 1964, noting that:

I can assure you that there are no implications of an agreement of basic philosophy. I am still strongly opposed to the Black Muslim philosophy and to Malcolm X's constant attempt to exploit the despair of the Negro. I am committed to nonviolence as a philosophy and method. I think it is the best method available to Negroes in their fight for freedom.<sup>44</sup>

The Black theologian James H. Cone is essentially correct in contending that white liberals were largely responsible for preventing Malcolm and King from working together.<sup>45</sup> The concern expressed by some

white liberals about the Washington meeting, coupled with Malcolm's subsequent attacks on Jews and his refusal to embrace nonviolence, convinced King that it was unwise to establish a close association with the former Black Muslim leader. King wanted fervently to refute any notion that his March, 1964 meeting with Malcolm represented a change in his fundamental convictions and outlook. In an interview with *Playboy*, a few months after the meeting, King admitted that Malcolm was "very articulate," but stated emphatically that he could not agree with his basic philosophy and methods:

I totally disagree with many of his political and philosophical views, at least insofar as I understand where he now stands. I don't want to seem to sound self-righteous, or absolutist, or that I think I have the only truth, the only way. Maybe he does have some of the answer. I don't know how he feels now, but I know that I have often wished that he would talk less of violence, because violence is not going to solve our problem. And in his litany of articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice. Fiery, demagogic oratory in the black ghettos, urging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he has done, can reap nothing but grief.<sup>46</sup>

Malcolm X was keenly aware of the dilemma Martin Luther King faced in trying to maintain white liberal support while, at the same time, reaching out in a cordial manner to Black nationalists. He knew that the oppressor's strategy of "divide and conquer" had always been used to keep Black leaders apart.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Malcolm, who shared so much of King's pain and anxiety over social reality, wanted to be recognized and accepted on the main front of civil rights leadership. He complained that much of King's appeal and prominence as a leader was encouraged by the oppressor and built on a philosophy and style of action that were degrading to Afro-Americans.<sup>48</sup> When Harlem staged a rally to celebrate King's Nobel Peace Prize in December, 1964, Malcolm told a Black writer:

He got the peace prize, we got the problem. I don't want the white man giving me medals. If I'm following a General, and he's leading me into battle, and the enemy tends to give him rewards, or awards, I get suspicious of him. Especially if he gets a peace award before the war is over.<sup>49</sup>

Later in a panel discussion at Harvard University, Malcolm made a similar remark, but insisted that "I have no comment to make about my good friend, Dr. King."<sup>50</sup>

Malcolm's travels abroad in the spring and summer of 1964 were important in bringing him and King closer together, especially at the point of ideology. After visiting Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, and Algeria, Malcolm made the pilgrimage to Mecca and met many orthodox Muslims who were white but not racist. This experience compelled him

to cease characterizing all white people as "devils," and it also broadened his perspective concerning the relationship of the Afro-American struggle to the struggles of peoples in the so-called Third World.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, King was advancing a more international perspective, and he thought it a propitious sign that Malcolm was moving beyond a simple skin-racism to a more enlightened and complex view of the world.<sup>52</sup> As the two men graduated to a higher level of analysis of the economic roots of racism, classism, and imperialism, and attempted to relate the Black American struggle to the struggles of the poor and oppressed all over the world, they stimulated each other's increasing sophistication and radicality.<sup>53</sup> In response to Malcolm's challenge, King affirmed that "black is beautiful," moved beyond integration as a panacea to stress economic justice, and became less cautious about making positive references to Black power and the need for Black unity.<sup>54</sup> As a result of King's challenge, Malcolm ceased his strong opposition to intermarriage and began to entertain the possibility of Blacks and progressive-minded whites working together. Furthermore, the two men moved toward solidarity on issues on which they agreed; namely, South African apartheid and the war in Vietnam.<sup>55</sup>

More discussion of how Malcolm and King reached out to each other in private and public ways is in order in view of the contention that they moved closer together personally and ideologically. King's wife Coretta has reported that the two men occasionally had friendly conversations, probably by telephone, in which an atmosphere of mutual respect and admiration was evident:

They had talked together on occasion and had discussed their philosophies in a friendly way. At the same time, I know that, though he never said so publicly, Malcolm X had deep respect for Martin. He recognized that Martin was unique, not alone in talent or eloquence, but in fearlessness and courage. Malcolm admired manhood and he knew how supremely Martin exemplified it.<sup>56</sup>

According to the Black psychologist Kenneth B. Clark, Malcolm X not only began to understand Martin Luther King better after rejecting the "hate whitey" rhetoric of the Black Muslims, but he also sought an opportunity to meet face to face with the apostle of nonviolence for a frank and friendly discussion of the future course of the Black movement:

... he began to express his respect for the point of view of Martin Luther King. He stated to me his growing belief that black racism and white racism were practically one and the same. He wanted the opportunity to be able to talk with Martin face to face. . . . He asked if I could arrange for him to speak with Martin Luther King and James Baldwin. I told him I would do my best to arrange for such a meeting. We agreed that prior to such a meeting, we would have a personal talk at my office at City College. It was arranged for a certain Tuesday. The Sunday before that Tuesday, Malcolm X was assassinated.<sup>57</sup>

During the last year of his life, Malcolm was quite emphatic in saying that he and King were not leaders with entirely different philosophies, standards, and goals. In a meeting sponsored by the Militant Labor Forum in New York in April, 1964, he denounced the oppressors' strategy of making it appear that nationalists like himself and integrationists like King had different goals and objectives:

All of our people have the same goals, the same objective. That objective is freedom, justice, equality. All of us want recognition and respect as human beings. We don't want to be integrationists. Nor do we want to be separationists. We want to be human beings. Integration is only a method that is used by some groups to obtain freedom, justice, equality and respect as human beings. Separation is only a method that is used by other groups to obtain freedom, justice, equality or human dignity. Our people have made the mistake of confusing the methods with the objectives. As long as we agree on objectives, we should never fall out with each other just because we believe in different methods or tactics or strategy to reach a common objective.<sup>58</sup>

Malcolm regarded King as a Black brother and fellow struggler in the cause of freedom for the oppressed, and he was genuinely moved and angered by the physical and verbal abuses visited upon him in parts of the South. On June 30, 1964, Malcolm sent King a telegram in St. Augustine, Florida stating that

We have been witnessing with great concern the vicious attacks of the white racists against our poor defenseless people there in St. Augustine. If the Federal Government will not send troops to your aid, just say the word and we will immediately dispatch some of our brothers there to organize self defense units among our people, and the Klu Klux Klan will then receive a taste of its own medicine. The day of turning the other cheek to those brute beasts is over.<sup>59</sup>

On February 1, 1965, about three weeks before his death, Malcolm issued another statement expressing concern for the safety of King and his followers. King was involved in a campaign for voting rights in Selma, Alabama at that time, and was receiving many threats from the American Nazi Party and the State's Rights Party. Angered by these threats, Malcolm sent a telegram to George Lincoln Rockwell of the American Nazi Party, warning him that

I am no longer held in check from fighting white supremacists by Elijah Muhammad's separationist Black Muslim Movement, and if your present racist agitation against our people there in Alabama causes physical harm to Reverend King or any other black Americans who are only attempting to enjoy their rights as free human beings, you and your Klu Klux Klan friends will be met with maximum physical retaliation from those of us who are not handcuffed by the disarming philosophy of nonviolence, and who believe in asserting our right of self-defense by any means necessary.<sup>60</sup>

Malcolm would later recall the pain he experienced when he saw King brutalized by a racist on television:

I saw the man knock him in his mouth. Well, that hurt me, I'll tell you. Because I'm black and he's black. . . . When I see a black man knocked in the mouth, I feel it, because it could happen to you or me. And if I was there with King and I saw someone knocking on

him, I'd come to his rescue. I would be misrepresenting myself if I made you think I wouldn't. Yes, and then I'd show him, see, he's doing it the wrong way—this is the way you do it.<sup>61</sup>

Knowing full well that King was not interested in his offer of protection, Malcolm later said teasingly: "I was curious to find out how Dr. King would react."<sup>62</sup>

On February 4, 1965, Malcolm went to Selma to witness first-hand the movement there. It is reported that Malcolm's unexpected appearance, planned by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.), "sent S.C.L.C. officials into a tailspin." King, who was confined in a Selma jail, expressed amazement that Malcolm would "invade my territory down here."<sup>63</sup> Some forces in the white community, determined to discredit King's efforts in Selma, sought to link him to Malcolm's visit, but King vehemently denied any involvement. In mid-March, six weeks after this event, and about a month after Malcolm's assassination, King was questioned about the Black nationalist's Selma appearance during *The Williams vs. Wallace Case* in the Federal District Court in Montgomery, Alabama. While testifying in this case, which involved S.C.L.C.'s effort to secure an injunction preventing Alabama authorities from interfering with its right to protest, King strongly rejected the suggestion that he could have kept Malcolm out of Selma:

I couldn't block his coming, but my philosophy was so antithetical to the philosophy of Malcolm X, so diametrically opposed, that I would never have invited Malcolm X to come to Selma when we were in the midst of a nonviolent demonstration, and this says nothing about the personal respect I had for him. I disagreed with his philosophy and methods.<sup>64</sup>

Despite King's and S.C.L.C.'s uneasiness with Malcolm's visit to Selma, that event had important implications for the civil rights movement. After his speech at the Brown's Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), Malcolm had a friendly conversation with King's wife, Coretta, assuring her that "I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult. I really did come thinking that I could make it easier. If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King." Malcolm went on to explain his desire "to work with Dr. King, and not against him."<sup>65</sup> This gesture of goodwill was apparently appreciated by King, and Coretta would later write about how she

... was impressed with Malcolm's sincerity, but found it difficult to reconcile with some of the Muslim principles which were so different from our thinking. They advocated separation of the races and condoned violence so that they were open to the charges of teaching hate and violence. Martin insisted that violence was the derivative of despair; both Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm had suffered terribly at the hands of white racism and their bitterness was a derivative of the suffering.<sup>66</sup>

Martin Luther King's reaction to Malcolm X's appearance in Selma should not be taken as an indication that he wanted absolutely nothing to do with the Muslim minister. In the fall of 1964, several months before the Selma campaign, King told a Black newsman that "I look forward to talking with him."<sup>67</sup> Ralph Abernathy of S.C.L.C. has said that he and King had planned to go to New York to meet with Malcolm after the Selma movement, mainly because they saw him as someone who might be useful to them when they moved their crusade to the Northern ghettos.<sup>68</sup> "We were trying to build a coalition," Abernathy explained. "We knew he wanted to be supportive of our movement, and, although we did not agree with his total philosophy, we thought it would be good to talk with him. Before we were able to arrange the trip to New York, Malcolm X was killed."<sup>69</sup>

The brutal assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965 deeply wounded and disturbed Martin Luther King. He reacted to this tragic event at press conferences and in newspaper and radio interviews. King expressed regret that numerous commitments prevented him from attending Malcolm's funeral in New York, but he assured an interviewer in Los Angeles that "I will certainly extend my sympathy to his wife and to his family and, as I said, this has come as a great shock to so many of us, and although we had constant disagreements, I had a deep affection for Malcolm X, and I am very sorry about this whole thing."<sup>70</sup> The telegram King sent to Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow, carried essentially the same message:

I was certainly saddened by the shocking and tragic assassination of your husband. While we did not always see eye to eye on methods to solve the race problem, I always had a deep affection for Malcolm and felt that he had the great ability to put his finger on the existence and root of the problem. He was an eloquent spokesman for his point of view and no one can honestly doubt that Malcolm had a great concern for the problems that we face as a race. While I know that this is a difficult hour for you, I am sure that God will give you strength to endure. I will certainly be remembering you in my prayers and please know that you have my deepest sympathy. Always consider me a friend and if I can do anything to ease the heavy load that you are forced to carry at this time, please feel free to call on me.<sup>71</sup>

King felt that

... it is even more unfortunate that this great tragedy occurred at a time when Malcolm X was re-evaluating his own philosophical presuppositions and moving toward a greater understanding of the nonviolent movement and toward more tolerance of white people, generally.<sup>72</sup>

Coretta Scott King echoed this same sentiment in 1969, a year after her husband's assassination, as she reminisced about the relationship between King and Malcolm:

The death of Malcolm X affected me profoundly. Perhaps that was because I had just met him, and perhaps it was because I had begun

to understand him better. Martin and I had reassessed our feelings toward him. We realized that since he had been to Mecca and had broken with Elijah Muhammad, he was moving away from hatred toward internationalism and against exploitation. In a strange way, the same racist attitude which killed others who were working for peaceful change also killed Malcolm X. . . . I said to Martin, 'What a waste! What a pity that this man who was so talented and such an articulate spokesman for black people should have to die just as he was reaching for something of real value.' Martin believed that Malcolm X was a brilliant young man who had been misdirected.<sup>73</sup>

As Martin Luther King saw it, the tragedy of Malcolm's death was compounded by reports that he died at the hands of Black men—men who were victims like he was. Although King refused to accept such reports as final, he did caution that

The American Negro cannot afford to destroy its leadership any more than the Congo can. Men of talent are too scarce to be destroyed by envy, greed and tribal rivalry before they reach their full maturity. Like the murder of Lumumba, the murder of Malcolm X deprives the world of a potentially great leader. I could not agree with either of these men, but I could see in them a capacity for leadership which I could respect, and which was only beginning to mature in judgment and statesmanship.<sup>74</sup>

King interpreted Malcolm's assassination as being symbolic of the kind of violent climate that America and Western society as a whole had created. He expressed this view in several statements which left no doubt about his high regard for Malcolm. On the day of Malcolm's death, King wrote:

We must face the tragic fact that Malcolm X was murdered by a morally inclement climate. It reveals that our society is still sick enough to express dissent through murder. We have not learned to disagree without being violently disagreeable. This vicious assassination should cause our whole society to see that violence and hatred are evil forces that must be cast into unending limbo.<sup>75</sup>

In a much more extensive statement, in which he revealed that he was quite knowledgeable about Malcolm's youth and rise to prominence as a Black Muslim spokesman, King said:

Malcolm X came to the fore as a public figure partially as a result of a TV documentary entitled, "The Hate That Hate Produced." That title points clearly to the nature of Malcolm's life and death. Malcolm X was clearly a product of the hate and violence invested in the Negro's blighted existence in this nation. He, like so many of our number, was a victim of the despair that inevitably derives from the conditions of oppression, poverty, and injustice which engulf the masses of our race. But in his youth, there was no hope, no preaching, teaching or movements of nonviolence. He was too young for the Garvey movement, too poor to be a Communist—for the Communists geared their work to the Negro intellectuals and labor without realizing that the masses of Negroes were unrelated to either—and

yet he possessed a native intelligence and drive which demanded an outlet and means of expression. He turned first to the underworld, but this did not fulfill the quest for meaning which grips young minds. It is a testimony to Malcolm's personal depth and integrity that he could not become an underworld Czar, but turned again and again to religion for meaning and destiny. Malcolm was still turning and growing at the time of his brutal and meaningless assassination. . . . In his recent visit to Selma, he spoke at length to my wife Coretta about his personal struggles and expressed an interest in working more closely with the nonviolent movement, but he was not yet able to renounce violence and overcome the bitterness which life had invested in him. There were also indications of an interest in politics as a way of dealing with the problems of the Negro. All of these were signs of a man of passion and zeal seeking a program through which he could channel his talents. . . . But history would not have it so. A man who lived under the torment of knowledge of the rape of his grandmother and murder of his father, and under the conditions of the present social order, does not readily accept that social order or seek to integrate into it. And so Malcolm was forced to live and die as an outsider, a victim of the violence that spawned him, and with which he courted through his brief but promising life. . . . Surely the young men of Harlem and Negro communities throughout the nation ought to be ready to seek another way. Let us learn from this tragic nightmare that violence and hate only breed violence and hate, and that Jesus' words still go out to every potential Peter, "put up thy sword." Certainly we will continue to disagree, but we must disagree without becoming violently disagreeable. We will still suffer the temptation to bitterness, but we must learn that hate is too great a burden to bear for a people moving on toward their date with destiny.<sup>76</sup>

This statement shows that King had a deep understanding of the forces that shaped the personality of Malcolm X. Indeed, a more perceptive and sensitive view of Malcolm's life and work cannot be found even among the works of the most brilliant Malcolm X scholars.

There remained enormous differences between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King relative to their levels of education, statuses, and achievements. However, they were unified in terms of their essential quality of caring and in their commitment to the struggles of the oppressed. Their philosophies were essentially the same in terms of their belief in and devotion to the human community.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, their contributions and their legacies cannot be evaluated and appreciated separately. One cannot truly honor King without also honoring Malcolm. The King/Malcolm dialectic was healthy not only because it helped give the Black struggle integrity, vitality, and direction, but also because it kept white America from finding comfort and security in an attitude of silence, complacency, and benign neglect toward the plight of Black people.



NOTES

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1. James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1986), p. 167; and "James Cone Interview: Liberation, Black Theology, and the Church," *Radix Magazine* (September/October, 1982), p. 9.
2. Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (New York, 1973), p. 74.
3. *Ibid.* Typical of such scholars are Peter I. Paris, *Black Leaders in Conflict: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Joseph H. Jackson, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 9 ff.; and Jim Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1971), pp. 374-379. Bishop makes the incredible claim that Martin Luther King "never admired Malcolm X, or Elijah, or any of the other militants whom he called 'the crazies'."
4. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (New York, 1983), p. 190.
5. James Baldwin, "Malcolm and Martin," *Esquire*, LXXVII (April, 1972), pp. 94 and 201; and John A. Williams, *The King God Didn't Save* (New York, 1970), p. 77. Williams claims that in a conversation he had with Malcolm X in Lagos, Nigeria early in 1964, "it was apparent that the distance that seemed to have existed between himself and King was small indeed, although he never gave up the idea of self-defense for blacks. Malcolm was even willing to sing 'We Shall Overcome,' just as long as all who were singing had 45's firmly in hand." The notion that Malcolm and King were moving closer together is also expressed in works such as Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967), pp. 442, 548, and 563-564; David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1970), p. 272; Louis E. Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man* (Los Angeles, Ca., 1968), pp. 10-11 and 131; John Morgan, "Malcolm X's Murder," *New Statesman* (February 26, 1965), p. 310; Wilson J. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, Pa., 1982), pp. 224 and 229; and *Jet* (March 11, 1965), p. 12.
6. Lewis, *King*, p. 125.
7. *A Letter* from Elijah Muhammad to Martin Luther King, Jr., March 19, 1958; and *A Letter* from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Elijah Muhammad, April 9, 1958.
8. *A Letter* from Malcolm X to Martin Luther King, Jr., July 21, 1960.
9. *A Letter* from Maude L. W. Ballou, Secretary to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Malcolm X, August 10, 1960.
10. *The New York Courier* (July 22, 1960), pp. 1 ff.; and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston, 1973), p. 163.
11. Lincoln, *The Black Muslims*, p. 146; Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. by George Breitman (New York, 1965), p. 4.
12. Lincoln, *The Black Muslims*, pp. 153-175.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
14. Williams, *The King God Didn't Save*, p. 77; Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1982), p. 252; and Robert P. Warren, "An Interview with Martin Luther King, Jr.," in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (March 18, 1964), Tape #2, p. 7.
15. Lincoln, *The Black Muslims*, p. 161; Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, pp. 251-252; Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, pp. 12-13; Louis E. Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World* (Westport, Conn., 1963), p. 174; Malcolm X, *The End of White Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X*, ed. by Benjamin Karim (New York, 1971), pp. 68, 109, 116-117, 135, and 140; "Emancipation II," *America*, CVIII (June 1, 1963), pp. 790-791; and Kenneth B. Clark, ed., *Three Interviews: King, Malcolm, Baldwin* (Middletown, Conn., 1985), pp. 42-47.
16. Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 4 and 379; "King Views Malcolm As Tragic," *New York Amsterdam News* (March 28, 1964), pp. 1 ff.; and "Interview with Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Playboy*, XII (January, 1965), pp. 73-74.
17. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, pp. 16-17.
18. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, pp. 253-254; Clark, ed., *Three Interviews*, pp. 23 and 25; and Warren, "An Interview with Martin Luther King, Jr.," Tape #2, p. 7.
19. Warren, "An Interview with Martin Luther King, Jr.," Tape #2, pp. 5-6.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Lewis, *King*, p. 211; and "Malcolm X Denies Sect Pelted Martin Luther King," *New York Post* (July 1, 1963), pp. 1 ff.
23. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 306.
24. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Statement Regarding Riots in Rochester and New York City," Unpublished Document (July 27, 1964), p. 1. Martin Luther King never meant to suggest that the major blame for these riots rested with Malcolm X and other black nationalists. He held that "the conditions of poverty, social isolation and the conditions of despair" were primarily responsible for blacks turning to violence in the ghettos, a point also made over and over by Malcolm X. In light of such conditions, King argued that it was "folly" and "unrealistic" to expect "any Negro leader in America today to keep the civil rights struggle nonviolent."
25. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 252n.
26. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, p. 16.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17; and Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man*, p. 80.
28. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, pp. 16-17 and 95.
29. A Letter from Miss Dora McDonald, Secretary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Mr. Frank Clark, November 26, 1962.
30. A Letter from Frank Clark to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., December 4, 1962.
31. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, p. 16.
32. *Harper's Magazine* (June, 1964), pp. 54-61.
33. Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1969), p. 261; and Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Nightmare of Violence: Regarding the Death of Malcolm X," Unpublished Document (February 26, 1965), pp. 1-3.
34. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 51; and A Letter from Miss Dora McDonald to Mr. Frank Clark, November 26, 1962.
35. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 172; and Clark, ed., *Three Interviews*, pp. 10-11. For an interesting reference to the importance of the Malcolm/King dialectic, see Colin Morris, *Unyoung, Uncolored, Unpoor* (Nashville, 1969), pp. 90-91.
36. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 172.
37. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), pp. 86-87.
38. Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Statement on Malcolm X," Unpublished Document (March 16, 1964), p. 1.
39. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, p. 142.
40. King, "A Statement on Malcolm X," p. 1.
41. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, p. 95.
42. Lewis, *King*, pp. 125 and 271-272. The Lewis account of what happened during this chance encounter is different from that of Peter Goldman. For another account which agrees with Lewis, see Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, p. 141.
43. Lewis V. Baldwin, "Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.: What They Thought About Each Other," *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter, 1986), pp. 406-412.
44. A Letter from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Mr. Abram Eisenman, April 3, 1964; and A Letter from Mr. Abram Eisenman to Martin Luther King, Jr., April 9, 1964.
45. Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, p. 167.
46. "Interview with Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Playboy*, pp. 73-74; and David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), p. 392.
47. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 51.
48. Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, p. 17; and Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, pp. 11-17.
49. Quoted in Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, p. 17.
50. Malcolm X, *The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard*, ed. by Archie Epps (New York, 1968), p. 181.
51. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, pp. 58-63.
52. Lewis V. Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'Beloved Community' Ideal and the Apartheid System in South Africa," *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Winter, 1986), pp. 211-222; and James H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Third World," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (September, 1987), pp. 455-467.
53. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, p. 212; and Baldwin, "Malcolm and Martin," p. 201.
54. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, p. 212; and King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 260.
55. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 197; Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, p. 212; and Lewis V. Baldwin, *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Jr. on South Africa*, An Unpublished Manuscript, pp. 1, 6, and 11.
56. King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 261-262.
57. Clark, ed., *Three Interviews*, pp. 12-13.
58. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 51.
59. "A Telegram from Malcolm X to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," St. Augustine, Florida (June 30, 1964).
60. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History* (New York, 1970), pp. 43-44; and "Rockwell Gets Warning from Malcolm X," *The Militant* (February 1, 1965), p. 8.
61. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History*, p. 44.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Alvin Adams, "Malcolm X 'Seemed Sincere' About Helping Cause: Mrs King," *Jet* (March 11, 1965), pp. 28 ff.; Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 341; and Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, pp. 230-231. Goldman reports that the people of S.N.C.C. felt left out of the Selma campaign, and that "their invitation to Malcolm had an edge of provocation to it."
64. A Transcript of Testimony in *Williams vs. Wallace*, Unpublished Document (March, 1965), pp. 74-75; and David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, Conn., 1978), pp. 111-112, 272 n5, and 278 n43.
65. Adams, "Malcolm X 'Seemed Sincere'," pp. 28-30; Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, p. 341; and King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 259-260.
66. King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 259-260.
67. Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 392.

68. *A Personal Interview* with Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, Atlanta, Georgia, May 7, 1987; and Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, p. 391.
69. *A Personal Interview* with Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, May 7, 1987.
70. "A Transcript of a Press Conference with Martin Luther King, Jr.," Los Angeles, California (February 24, 1965), pp. 1-2 and 6.
71. "A Telegram from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Mrs Malcolm X," Faith Temple Church in Harlem, New York (February 26, 1965).
72. "A Transcript of a Press Conference with Martin Luther King, Jr.," Los Angeles, California, p. 6; "King and Roy: On Malcolm's Death," *New York Amsterdam News* (February 27, 1965), p. 27; and King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. 259-262.
73. King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 261.
74. King, "The Nightmare of Violence," pp. 2-3.
75. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Statement Regarding the Death of Malcolm X," Unpublished Document (February 21, 1965), p. 1.
76. King, "The Nightmare of Violence," pp. 1-3. Apparently, King had carefully studied the life of Malcolm X, probably using C. Eric Lincoln's work on the Black Muslims as a source. It is highly unlikely that he had had a chance at this point to read Malcolm X's *Autobiography*, which was issued in published form sometime after the Muslim leader's death.
77. In the film, "El Hajj Malik El Shabazz: Malcolm X," Part II, which covers Malcolm's visit with Mrs. Coretta King in Selma, Alabama in January, 1965, Malcolm plainly stated that he was "for a society which practices love and brotherhood." This part of Malcolm's speech at Brown's Chapel A.M.E. Church is often ignored by scholars who are determined to portray the black nationalist as a demagogue. However, we must emphasize that Malcolm did not share Martin Luther King's deep optimism regarding the possibility of the realization of a truly integrated society of love, justice, and brotherhood in history. See Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 197.