

Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence

James H. Cone

*Union Theological Seminary
Columbia University*

No issue has been more hotly debated in the African-American community than violence and nonviolence. No two persons symbolize this debate more than Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. They represent two radically different responses to nonviolence and violence in the black freedom movement during the 1960s. Their perspectives are still widely discussed and debated today but seldom understood. Martin King's followers frequently misrepresent Malcolm X's views, referring to him as a "messiah of hate" and a "black Ku Klux Klan of racial extremists." Malcolm X's followers distort Martin King's views, often calling him a "twentieth century religious Uncle Tom pacifist"—the best weapon of whites who want to brutalize black people. Any view can be discredited by simplifying it to the level of a caricature.

In this essay, I will present a brief analysis of Martin and Malcolm's views on nonviolence and violence, beginning with Martin's view because Malcolm's perspective was developed largely as a critical response to the white and black media's presentation of Martin's views as normative for the African-American community.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a pastor and civil rights leader and is arguably not only America's most distinguished theologian but also the most influential American in the twentieth century. He was named *Time's* "Man of the Year" in 1963 and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He is the only American with a national holiday in his name alone. With the support of many ordinary people in the black freedom movement, King's practice and thought radically transformed America's understanding of itself and inspired liberation movements around the world. One can hardly go anywhere and not encounter his moral influence.

Martin King is best known as America's preeminent advocate of nonviolence. From the time of the yearlong, triumphant Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott (1955-56) to his tragic assassination in Memphis, Tennessee (April 4, 1968), Martin King embraced nonviolence absolutely. For King, nonviolence was not only an effective strategy of social change; it was the heart of his philosophy of life. There was no limit to his advocacy of nonviolence in conflict situations. He contended that nonviolence was the most potent weapon for both blacks in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and for other oppressed peoples struggling for justice throughout the world. Nonviolence was not only the best tool for solving conflicts within nations; it could also resolve differences between nations. For

King, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by several nations created the situation in which "the choice is no longer between nonviolence and violence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."¹

The roots of Martin King's journey to nonviolence lie in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was born on January 15, 1929. As the son of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., who was the pastor of the prestigious Ebenezer Baptist Church, young Martin was nurtured in the black Baptist tradition of the Christian faith. He followed his father into the ordained ministry in his late teens. The Christian idea of love, as expressed in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his sacrificial death on the cross, was the hallmark of the black religious experience that shaped King's perspective. He combined Christian love with the accommodative and protest philosophies of Booker T. Washington and the NAACP. Together these ideas provided the religious and political resources for King to develop a militant nonviolent philosophy of social change in the context of the black struggle for racial justice in America.

The development of Martin King's philosophy of nonviolence was a gradual process. Initially, his unpleasant childhood experiences with racial segregation had a profoundly negative effect on his attitude toward whites. He was introduced to racial prejudice at the early age of five when the father of his white friend told young Martin that his son could no longer play with him because he was colored. This and other encounters with white prejudice shook King deeply, and thereby made it difficult to love whites as he was taught at home and church. At one point during his early years, he was determined to hate all whites.

Martin King's negative attitude toward whites started to change through the influence of religion, education, and personal encounters with moderate whites in an intercollegiate organization and later at Crozer Theological Seminary (Chester, Pennsylvania) and Boston University School of Theology. At Morehouse College, he read Henry David Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience" and was introduced to a wide range of political and religious philosophies that supported the integration of Negroes into the mainstream of American society. In graduate school, King not only met liberal whites as teachers and fellow students; he also encountered progressive theological and philosophical ideas that reinforced his beliefs about justice and love, integration and the beloved community. He read books and essays about and by Mahatma Gandhi, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Reinhold Niebuhr at Crozer. At Boston, under the tutelage of Edgar Sheffield Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf, King acquired a sophisticated knowledge of Personalism—a philosophy that accented the infinite value of the human person.

A year prior to his completion of doctoral studies, Martin King accepted the call to become the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama—a middle-class church whose membership included many professors and administrators of Alabama State University. When Rosa Parks was arrested (December 1, 1955) because she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, the black community was enraged. In protest, they initiated a boycott of the city

buses (December 5) and asked King to be their leader.

Martin King was not committed to nonviolence at the beginning of the bus protest. As white violence became increasingly focused on King personally through police harassment, the bombing of his house, volumes of hate mail, and frequent telephone threats of harm, King, seeking to protect himself and his family from white violence, applied for a gun permit which, of course, was rejected. The threat of violence was so real that armed blacks took turns guarding King's home. King also kept a loaded gun in his house which Bayard Rustin of the War Resistance League nearly sat on during a visit.

The most important factors that influenced Martin King to reject self-defense and adopt nonviolence was his personal appropriation of the faith of his parents and the black church. The decisive point occurred a few weeks after the inauguration of the Montgomery bus boycott, January 27, 1956. He received a nasty telephone call about midnight: "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." Though he was accustomed to receiving about forty threats daily, for some reason that one stunned him, preventing him from going back to sleep. Martin began to realize, as he often said later in his sermons, that his wife and newly born baby daughter could be taken from him or he from them at any moment. He got up out of bed and went to the kitchen to heat some coffee, hoping it would provide some relief. None came. He reflected back on the theologies and philosophies he had studied in graduate school, searching for a way to cope with the problem of evil and suffering but they provided no help in his moment of distress. He was "ready to give up" and tried to think of a way to remove himself from the leadership of the boycott without looking like a coward. Exhausted, he had lost his courage. King decided to take his problem to the God his parents told him about—the One they and other black Christians said could "make a way out of no way." "With my head in my hands," King recalled, "I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed... 'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I'm afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'"

It was in the midst of this crisis of faith that Martin King felt an inner voice saying to him: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and lo, I will be with you always." After that revelatory experience, he said: "I was ready to face anything."

Three nights later, Martin King's house was bombed and people were amazed how calm he was. After finding out that his wife and baby were safe, he walked on his porch to face an angry black crowd with weapons of violence, ready to return an eye for an eye. "Don't let us get panicky," King said. He pleaded with them to get rid of their weapons because "we can't solve this problem through retaliatory violence." On the contrary, "We must meet violence with nonviolence." Turning to the most persuasive authority in the black Christian

experience, King reminded blacks of the words of Jesus: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.' We must love our white brothers...no matter what they do to us."

These are difficult words for any person or community, especially for an oppressed black community, which has lived under the psychological and physical brutalities of white supremacy for nearly four centuries. Black people get tired of turning the other cheek in the face of white brutality. Montgomery blacks accepted King's appeal because he connected it with their belief that there was a divine power in the world greater than the forces of white supremacy.²

It was one thing to love individual whites personally but quite another to use love as a political instrument of social change. It was Gandhi who provided Martin King with the philosophical and political insight of nonviolent direct action. With a deeper knowledge of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and its application in South Africa and India, King became a firm believer and astute defender of nonviolence. Jesus Christ defined the center of King's religious understanding of love and Gandhi showed him how to use love as an instrument to transform society.

King's commitment to nonviolence was also informed by his knowledge of liberal Protestant theology and the philosophy of Personalism, both of which emphasized the oneness and infinite value of humanity. King combined these intellectual resources with black faith and Gandhi, and from these three sources created a distinctive and persuasive perspective on nonviolence.

Martin King not only preached nonviolence during the Montgomery bus boycott, he founded a national organization, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in order to demonstrate the power of nonviolence to achieve justice in every segment of American life. The officers were mostly ministers and its motto was "to redeem the soul of America."

For King, love was the most powerful force in the world, and nonviolence was love expressed politically. Because nonviolence was widely thought of by many people as "doing nothing," King repeatedly emphasized the active dimensions of nonviolence. It was only passive in the sense of refusing to inflict physical harm on others. Nonviolence, therefore, was not a method for cowards—people afraid to suffer for the cause of justice. Nonviolence resists evil but it refuses to commit evil. Even the enemy is a person and must be treated as such. The nonviolent activist does not insult or seek to destroy the opponent but rather seeks to make the enemy a friend. However, even if nonviolence fails to convert the enemy to a friend, it eliminates hate from the hearts of those who are committed to it. Nonviolence bestows courage and self-respect to oppressed people who were once consumed by fear and low self-esteem.

King believed that only moral means could achieve moral ends, because "the end is preexistent in the means."³ Violence, therefore, was "both impractical and immoral."⁴ As a ten-percent minority in the richest and most powerful nation in the world, it was ludicrous to think that blacks could achieve freedom through

violence. Even though most blacks were not morally committed to nonviolence, King persuaded them to adopt it as the best strategy for achieving justice.

The practical arguments for nonviolence were for those who could not accept it morally. From the Montgomery bus boycott (1955) to the Selma March (1965), Martin King inspired African Americans to hold firmly to nonviolence in their struggle for justice. The success of the student sit-ins (1960), the Freedom Rides (1961), Birmingham demonstrations (1963) and the March on Washington (1963) provided King with the opportunity to demonstrate the power of nonviolence in destroying legal segregation in American life. The triumphant march from Selma to Montgomery was the climax of the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Bill (1965) were its major political achievements.

It was much easier to advocate nonviolence when there were concrete victories and few serious challenges to its advocacy. Malcolm X was the most effective critic of King and nonviolence. But he was a marginal figure in the southern-based Civil Rights Movement. After the Watts riots in Los Angeles (August, 1965) and the rise of Black Power (June, 1966), King's views on nonviolence were seriously challenged by young movement activists who became disillusioned with the relevance of nonviolence for bestowing self-esteem and eliminating poverty in the black community of the urban ghettos of the North. They turned to Malcolm X's Black Nationalist self-defense philosophy as an alternative to Martin King.

Martin King was forced to defend nonviolence among critics who were captivated by the legacy of Malcolm X powerfully expressed in the rise of Black Power. King met his critics head-on and challenged them to prove that Black Power was more effective than nonviolence in achieving real results. Though many black militants rejected King's views on nonviolence and integration, they admired his courage and respected his commitment to principle.

Martin King's stature in the white community continued to increase as long as he persuaded blacks to hold firmly to nonviolence. But they rejected him when he applied his views to America as a nation. King's opposition to America's war in Vietnam won him few friends in government and the society at large. Most whites acknowledged that King was an expert on civil rights as long as he urged blacks to be nonviolent in their struggle for justice. They told King to stick to civil rights and leave peace issues between nations to the elected politicians and their advisors. The idea that a black preacher's views on America's foreign policy should be taken seriously was ludicrous to most whites, especially to President Lyndon B. Johnson who saw himself as the Negro's best friend in government. What right did King have to criticize America and its President when they have done so much for the Negro?

Between 1966 and 1968, King struggled against an American public who resisted further advances in civil rights and resented his claim that America was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."⁵ King's political optimism

in the early phase of the Civil Rights Movement was transformed into a tough religious hope, derived from his deep belief that "unearned suffering is redemptive."⁶

King's faith in nonviolence was first and foremost an unshakable religious commitment. Although he preached the strategic value of nonviolence, the essence of King's belief was his acceptance of it as a way of life, "because of the sheer morality of its claim."⁷ Thus even in defeat, nonviolence still wins. This is so because the universe is moving toward justice. No person or nation can prevent its ultimate realization. This faith sustained the later King in his struggle to achieve economic justice for garbage workers in Memphis as he was preparing for the Poor People's Campaign to pressure the federal government to withdraw from the war in Vietnam and to intensify instead the War on Poverty. An assassin's bullet ended King's life while he was standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. But his hope still lives on in those who today fight for justice.

When we turn to Malcolm X, we hear a different voice from that of Martin King, one that whites and some blacks found most disturbing to their religious and political sensibilities. Malcolm X was a Muslim minister and Black Nationalist leader, who was the most formidable race critic in American history. More effectively than anyone else, he exposed the racist hypocrisy of American democracy and the ethical contradictions of white Christianity. His unrelenting and uncompromising critique of America and Christianity was bold and devastating. Few people could listen to him and not be challenged by the cogency of his analysis.

Malcolm focused his criticism on the failure of white people to treat black people as human beings. That and that alone was the heart of his critique. There was nothing fancy or sophisticated about it. Just plain talk—telling the truth about the crimes against blacks that whites did not want to hear about and few blacks had the courage to confront.

Whites enslaved blacks for 244 years, segregated them for another 100, and lynched them all along the way whenever and wherever whites had a mind to demonstrate their absolute power over blacks. How could American whites exclude blacks and other people of color from the political process and yet say that this nation is the land of the free? How could white Christians treat blacks as brutes, and still claim love as their central religious principle? With rage, humor, and devastating logic, Malcolm had a field day exposing these political and religious contradictions.

Malcolm's articulation of the gap between the American creed and deed angered many whites because he spoke forcefully and bluntly, refusing to sugarcoat the truth about the crime whites committed against blacks. He not only spoke out passionately against the brutality and cowardice of the Ku Klux Klan but also against the structural and hidden violence of the American government. "Stop talking about Mississippi," he railed. "America is Mississippi!"⁸ To understand Malcolm's perspective on violence, it is necessary to view it within the

political and religious context of America's nearly four centuries of racist violence against blacks and its white Christian justification and tolerance.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, May 19, 1925, Malcolm lived when America was defined by overt racist violence. Segregation was the law of the land, the KKK was marching, lynching was commonplace, and the government, educational institutions, and the churches routinely practiced and openly taught that blacks were inferior—both mentally and physically. No black person could escape the physical and psychological violence of white supremacy.

Malcolm's father Earl Little, a Baptist preacher and follower of the Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey, was a special target of white hate groups. While Malcolm was still in his mother's womb, the KKK paid the Little family a visit and forced their move from Omaha to Lansing, Michigan, where at the age of four Malcolm witnessed the burning down of their home by a white hate group called the Black Legionnaires. Malcolm called the event "the nightmare night in 1929."⁹ Two years later, Malcolm claimed that the same group killed his father, leaving the family fatherless and soon penniless. Unable to cope, Malcolm's mother, Louise Little, had a mental breakdown and was hospitalized in Kalamazoo.

The Little children were placed in foster homes. After Malcolm's white eighth grade teacher told him that a lawyer was "no realistic goal for a nigger,"¹⁰ he became disillusioned, despite being at the top of his class. He dropped out of school and went to Boston and then to New York where he became a dealer in drugs, prostitution, numbers running, and con games. He described himself as "a predatory animal" who "deliberately invited death."¹¹ Before he reached his twenty-first birthday, Malcolm was arrested for armed robbery and sentenced to eight to ten years at a Massachusetts prison in February 1946.

While in prison, Malcolm had two profound conversions: intellectual and spiritual. Through the example of an inmate, he discovered the power of the intellect. He became a voracious reader, disciplined thinker, and skilled debater. In 1948, under the influence of his family, Malcolm became a member of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam (NOI) and its most effective recruiter and articulate defender. The NOI reversed the value-system of white America by making everything black good and everything white evil. It substituted black supremacy for white supremacy. While Malcolm accepted the theology of the NOI, it was its Black Nationalist philosophy, emphasizing black self-respect and self-defense, which inspired his intellectual imagination and fueled his religious commitment. He enjoyed giving whites the same medicine they dished out to blacks. Unlike Martin who had no taste for violence in any form, Malcolm viewed retaliatory violence as a necessary response to criminal acts. That is the only language criminals understand, he contended. To love someone who hates you is to speak a language they do not understand, like speaking French to a person who only knows German. Malcolm learned this eye-for-an-eye principle on the streets of Boston and New York where survival depended on doing to others *before* they did it to you. He also learned it from reading American history, which is replete

with genocidal acts against the Native people of the land and wherever this nation decided to raise the American flag. That was why Malcolm said that the white man made the mistake of letting me read his history books.

Malcolm was released from prison in August 1952 and quickly became the most influential minister in the NOI—second only to the Messenger, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, as Malcolm and other followers called him. Malcolm was appointed to head the prestigious Temple Number 7 in New York and became the NOI's national spokesperson, lecturing and debating white and black intellectuals at America's most prestigious universities.¹² He distinguished himself as the most feared, controversial, and articulate race critic in America. Since the overt racist violence of the southern conservatives was obvious and effectively exposed in the media by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X focused his critique on the covert racist violence of northern white liberals.

Malcolm's attack on white liberals was persistent and brutal. He exposed their link to the creation of the urban black ghetto where drugs, poverty, crime, unemployment, and bad housing are its defining characteristics. While Martin King praised white liberals for their support, Malcolm castigated them for their hypocrisy—professing to be for integration while creating *de facto* segregation in schools, housing, and other segments of American life. When blacks manage to move in a white community, the liberals are the first to leave.

No issue angered Malcolm X more than what whites said about violence and nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement. They urged blacks to follow Martin King—embrace nonviolence and reject violence in any form. Malcolm could hardly contain his rage as he pointed out the contradictions between what whites advised blacks to do to get their freedom and what they did to attain their own. Patrick Henry did not practice the virtues of nonviolence. George Washington was no pacifist. When whites feel that their rights have been violated, they do not advocate turning the other cheek or kneeling down to pray. Because whites did not apply to themselves the same moral logic they urged upon blacks, Malcolm regarded them as the worst hypocrites on the planet.

Malcolm did not advocate violence; he advocated self-defense. He believed that the right of self-defense is an essential element in the definition of humanity. Whites have always recognized this principle for themselves but not for blacks. This kind of racist thinking infuriated Malcolm. If whites have the right to defend themselves against their enemies, why not blacks? Malcolm used provocative language to express his rage. "If you want to know what I'll do, figure out what you'll do. I'll do the same thing—only more of it."¹³ He contended that blacks should use "any means necessary" to get their freedom and whites should be prepared for "reciprocal bleeding." He did not regard such language as violent. He called it intelligence. "A black man has the right to do whatever is necessary to get his freedom that other human beings have done to get their freedom."¹⁴

Malcolm regarded nonviolence as a ridiculous philosophy, one that whites would never embrace as their own. He never understood why Martin King adopted it. How could blacks be regarded as human beings if they do not defend themselves? Everything in creation has a right to defend itself except the American Negro. It pained Malcolm to see black women, men, and children being beaten, kicked, and attacked by dogs. If the government does not protect black people, they are within their right to protect themselves, he contended.

In contrast to the portrayal of Martin King as a promoter of love and nonviolence, the media portrayed Malcolm as a preacher of hate and violence. They also, along with the FBI, were effective in creating dissension within the NOI, especially between Malcolm and Muhammad. In December 1963, Muhammad suspended Malcolm purportedly for saying that the assassination of President Kennedy was a case of the "chickens coming home to roost."

Three months later, Malcolm bolted from the NOI. He made a pilgrimage to Mecca, became a Sunni Muslim, adopted the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, and rejected the racist ideology of the NOI.

Malcolm also went to Africa to connect the black freedom movement in the U.S. with liberation movements around the world. "It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of blacks against whites, or as a purely American problem," he said at Barnard College. "Rather we are today seeking a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter."¹⁵

While Malcolm's separation from the NOI and subsequent experience in Mecca and Africa had a profound effect on his philosophy of freedom, causing him to reject the racist ideology of Elijah Muhammad, he did not relinquish his self-defense philosophy and his radical critique of white supremacy. For Malcolm white America remained a racist nation and Christianity white nationalism.

The animosity between Malcolm and the NOI deepened. They firebombed Malcolm's house one week before a team of assassins murdered him, as he was about to speak at the Audubon Ballroom, February 21, 1965. It was widely said that Malcolm died by the violence he fomented. But it is more accurate to say that he died exposing white violence and fighting for the freedom of African Americans and other oppressed peoples throughout the world.

Both Martin and Malcolm were thirty-nine when they were assassinated. Ironically, the blacks Malcolm loved killed him. They could not tolerate Malcolm's truth. It was too powerful, too profoundly human, transcending race and other reactionary limits.

A lone gunman killed Martin. He symbolized white America's inability to tolerate any black person who refuses to stay in his/her place. Staying in an assigned place is something that neither Martin nor Malcolm could do. Their spirits were too powerful to be contained or restrained. In this sense, Martin and Malcolm followed the path of Jesus the Galilean whose rebellion against the place assigned him led to the cross.