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From Cursed Africans to Blessed Americans

– The Role of Religion in the Ideologies of Martin
Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, 1955-1968

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1. Introduction

Even though the American slavery, one of humanities darkest chapters, ended in 1865, black Americans struggled with racism for over fifty years in the 20th century. Not long ago the United States was a country characterized by apartheid. It was a nation where the constitution was routinely overlooked and a society in which hate and discrimination was norm.

I have lived in Miami, Florida, part of the American south, for a total of two years and I have come to realize that race is still a burning issue. It is a topic which when brought up creates discomfort and an issue most people hope to dodge. In contrast to England, another country playing a big part in the slave trade, America seems to have a harder time coming to grips with its multicultural nature. With Barack Obama, a black man, running for president, the answer to the question whether or not America is ready for a non-white head of state is far from obvious.

In order to understand the importance of race, and the United States as a whole, it is imperative to study its history. With this essay I will look at one of the most turbulent eras in American history, the civil rights movement. I will focus on the religious aspect of this movement and centre my study on two of the most prolific characters of the era, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

1.1 Purpose and main thesis

It is no secret that Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X both struggled for the liberation of black people in America. It is also a known fact that even though they shared the same goal, they had radically different views on how that goal would be achieved. Because of their work in the political arena they are both thought of as political figures that helped shape the future of the United States. Their work as religious leaders, however, is often overlooked but as familiarity with their work ensues that role becomes clear. As men of faith, surely religion must have played its part in shaping their views on American life in the 20th century? I intend to *explore the role of religion in the ideologies of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.*

Through the speeches, writings and acts of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, I hope to share light on one of the more subtle aspects of the freedom campaign. The African-American civil rights movement is actually made up out of different movements scattered across a large period of time. One could argue that the movement started during the American civil war and

had its first victory with the emancipation proclamation in 1863. However, I will focus on the later parts of the freedom struggle and this essay will cover the years between 1955 and 1968, the years both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were active. Even though the civil rights movement featured prominent black leaders (including Stokely Carmichael and Elijah Muhammad) I have chosen to focus on Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, simply because in my opinion they had the biggest impact on the American commonwealth and they were both representatives for two of the prominent religious divisions of that time, black Christianity and Nation of Islam.

The role of religion is interesting because African-Americans have had a special relationship with religion since the days of slavery. During slavery different biblical stories were used by slave advocates to legitimize the treatment of blacks. Blacks were taught that they were a cursed people and that the punishment for their ancestors' acts was slavery. I will cover the history of religion and slavery in America (complete with references) in greater detail in chapter five. With the complicated relationship between slaves and religion during slavery, I find it interesting that a large portion of the African-American population was Christian during the time of the civil rights movement. The reason I want to explore the role of religion therefore, is to find out if Martin Luther King and Malcolm X leaned on religion to support their ideologies and to see how the role of religion had changed. If religion was used as a way of legitimizing slavery, how was it employed by the children of those very same slaves some 100 years later? During the civil rights movement blacks were fighting what they viewed as a grave injustice – what function did religion have for two of the black people's most prominent leaders?

My intention is to study the writings, speeches and actions of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to find out to what extent they utilized religious ideas in their overall message. The result might even be of interest for the entire civil rights movement, when considering that X and King perhaps were the most prominent leaders and helped shape a large portion of the freedom campaign.

1.1.1 Thesis

My aim is to answer the following question:

1. As advocates for Christianity and Nation of Islam respectively, how did Martin Luther King and Malcolm X utilize religion in their political agenda?

1.2 Definitions

Before continuing I feel the need to clarify certain notions or concepts that will appear in this essay. First I need to define religion. In this particular essay Clifford Geertz' definition comes in handy, because it covers the role of religion in a society or culture. According to Geertz, religion is:

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.¹

It will become clear that both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X utilized (religious) symbols to create different moods in the American public. To clarify, if King for example speaks on equality between races and refers to what he calls the Christian idea of that all men are created equal, I will refer to that as a "religious idea". I do this because in that particular instance, he uses religion (in this case Christianity) as a way to legitimize his struggle for equal rights. By using the term "religious idea" I therefore refer to beliefs or notions stemming from a religion. For example, in my mind the Golden Rule of the New Testament is a religious idea that Martin Luther King utilizes as a legitimization for the expansion of black peoples' rights. The Nation of Islam notion that the white man is a devil is another example of a religious idea utilized, in this case by Malcolm X, to explain why African-Americans are more entitled to the power positions in society.

By using the term "religious nature" I mean that both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were religious. It is my conviction that if a person is highly religious, especially during the era of the civil rights movement and in America where religion is less private, his or her faith will colour his or her overall outlook on life. To clarify, King's political ideology might have appeared different had he not been a Christian and Malcolm X's ideology changed as he went from a non believer to Nation of Islam-advocate and again when he became a Sunni Muslim.

When speaking of Nation of Islam it is important to note that other than its name it does not share the views of traditional Islam, which will become clear in chapter five (the notion that the white man is the devil and that the Nation's creator Wallace Fard Muhammad is Allah are two good examples on how Nation of Islam differs from traditional Islam.) When speaking of "traditional Islam" I refer to Islam as it appears outside of Nation of Islam. By

¹ Geertz, Clifford, 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 90

“traditional Islam” I refer to Islam as it appears usually, whether it is Sunni, Shi’a, Sufism or any of the other *established* divisions.

As this essay progresses I will refer to a term known as “black Christianity” and I feel the need to define what I mean by this. In this essay black Christianity is simply the type of Christianity being practised in those churches that exist in predominantly black neighbourhoods. These “black churches” have traditionally differed from non black churches in a number of ways, from ritual practises like gospel singing to its social and political role as urban centres and a place of solitude for discriminated African-Americans.² Because of this, there were notable differences between the white and the black church and white and black Christianity during the era of the civil rights movement.

When speaking of King and X’s respective “ideologies” I simply refer to the message they preached and the politics they propagated for. The aim for this essay is therefore to discover how King and X utilized religious ideas to support, legitimize or otherwise impact their overall message or ideology.

Also I feel the need to point out that my intention is by no means to generalize with this essay. When I claim that whites did this or African-Americans did that, I of course do not mean *every* white or *every* African-American. Instead I use those terms when I believe that a significant portion of the people did something or shared a specific view, but I am also aware of the ever present exceptions.

Finally, politics and religion are two terms that will frequently be used in this essay. I have already defined what I mean by religion and in my mind the difference between religion and politics, in this essay, is that the latter is a bigger term, something that involves all of humankind regardless of religious beliefs or ethnicity. For example, a Christian idea, notion or rule only applies to Christians, whereas a rule, notion or idea that does not revolve around faith applies to all human beings in a particular society. To clarify, if I am not a Christian I am not obliged to obey the Golden Rule, but I am obliged to obey the rules of the nation, state or city I reside in regardless of my own beliefs. As this essay progresses it will become clear (mainly in chapter six) that both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King perhaps did not share my view on this, because they were of the opinion that religion or religious ideas are above man made rules, notions and ideas. Because of this, religion and politics become even harder to separate and that is something that will reflect in my choice of theory presented in chapter three.

² Maffly-Kipp, Laurie, *African American Religion, Pt. II: From the Civil War to the Great Migration* <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/aarcwgm.htm>, June 13

1.3 Disposition

Because I cover a certain period in history, I have decided to structure this essay in as much of a chronological order as possible. To avoid jumping back and fourth through time I have chosen not to cover canonical inferences about King and X in a separate chapter. Instead I will continuously refer to secondary literature throughout this essay and in doing so I hope to improve the readability. Even though the language of this essay may resemble that of popular science or even journalism, a traditional scientific approach has been employed in the preparatory work and other than stylistics the result will not differ from a traditional scientific essay.

After a presentation of the theory I will use, I have devoted a few pages to briefly explore the background of the civil rights movement and the linkage between black Americans and religion. I will also present the sources I have used the most and discuss their pros and cons. Chapter six contains the main body of my work and it is followed by some concluding remarks and a complete source reference.

2. Method

My aim is to analyse the speeches and writings of X and King to find out how much religion or religious ideas were used or functioned as foundation or support for their main political struggle. Because my focus is centred on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King I will restrict my analysis and exclusively study *their* message. To achieve this I will mainly analyse first hand sources that will mostly consist of speeches, interviews and writings. I do this because I believe studying first hand material is the best way to form an opinion for oneself regarding the work of King and X. As stated in the disposition chapter, I will refer to secondary sources in chapter six, the main study; because I believe it will help the reader gain a greater overview and understanding of the ideologies of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

2.1 Selection and source criticism

The main sources I will use for this essay are various collections of the *speeches and writings* of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. As a *secondary* source I will use their respective biographies. In *Metode i religionsvitenskap*, covering several methods to use when studying

the science of religion, Lisbeth Mikaelsson writes that biographies are great sources when wanting to learn how religion or religious experiences has impacted a certain person. They are also useful if one wants to learn how a certain person has been impacted by a religious upbringing or what scriptures or religious ideas that have inspired that person.³ I use the biographies to gain an insight of King and X's personal thoughts on the events that shaped the civil rights movement, but as with all sources there are aspects that one need to be aware of.

It is always important to note in what context a biography is published. Biographies are most often accounts of the lives of people being famous for various reasons and as such one must be aware of the different opinions other people have of the person being covered in the biography. In *Metode i religionsvitenskap* Mikaelsson writes that the context is important because it not only shapes the reader's view of the biography but also the writer's. A writer can never create a piece of literature, whether it is fiction or a biography, in a vacuum and as such society's view of the person being covered will undoubtedly shape the outcome.⁴ Malcolm's biography was published in 1965, shortly after his murder. It was written during a time when Malcolm was highly controversial (even more so than now) and by both the American government and his criticsers viewed as a dangerous man. This must surely have shaped the outcome of the book in one way or the other and various speculations surrounds it. Some people, like historian Manning Marable, believe that Malcolm and writer Alex Haley had very different motives with the book and the accuracy of some of the events has been debated.⁵ But when dealing with biographies I find the person's subjective opinion more interesting than an objective account of a certain event. Personal bias is the very reason why biographies are valuable in my opinion. Regardless, I do find X's biography useful because I believe it as an honest account of his life. Even though it covers his poverty- and racism plagued upbringing, his criminal past, his devotion to the Nation of Islam and subsequently his split from the Nation and conversion to Sunni Islam, I still feel as if X was not apologizing or trying to cover up parts of his life and as a result the book is not a tribute to himself as it portrays him as a human being with characteristics, both "good" and "bad". Instead, I believe the aim with the biography was for Malcolm, who was frequently featured in the press because of his controversial statements, to get a chance to explain his stance and do it from his point of view and not a reporter's or an independent writer's.

³ Kraft, Siv-Ellen, 2006, *Metode i religionsvitenskap*, p. 110

⁴ Ibid., p. 113

⁵ Democracy Now, *The Undiscovered Malcolm X: Stunning New Info on the Assassination, His Plans to Unite the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist Movements & the 3 'Missing' Chapters from His Autobiography*, http://www.democracynow.org/2005/2/21/the_undiscovered_malcolm_x_stunning_new, May 16 2008

Martin Luther King's biography was published in 1998, during a time when he was seen as a national hero, and I believe that has played a part in King's exclusively positive portrayal. It consists of a vast collection of speeches, personal letters, notes and diary entries. As such, parts of it are written by King himself but it is important to note that a selection has been made by another person, in this case historian Clayborne Carson. While I view the contents as accurate of King's thoughts (because it consists of his own writings), one must understand that because it is impossible to include all of King's thoughts, the book is a result of Carson's summary of King's life. In some ways I find it somewhat more problematic than X's biography because it leaves out the negative sides of King that must undoubtedly had existed. To give an example, it frequently covers King's relationship with his wife as being ideal, but never mentions the allegations of adultery.⁶ I believe King's overall image as a national hero resulted in the biography being almost exclusively positive in its portrayal of King and for me it was essential to keep that in mind when reading it. At the same time, because King was not involved in the creation of the biography, and it consists of letters, diary notes and other *personal* writings I find it less affected by underlying motives. The reason for this is that some of the notes are from before King was famous and it is not likely that his intention was to publish them, and as such he does not have any reason to talk or write about himself in a flattering light. Malcolm's biography on the other hand was always aimed to be published and because X himself was involved; there is reason to believe that he had a good reason to publish it. Mikaelsson writes that this is problematic because one has to be aware of the motives for the creation of the biography.⁷ Was X, knowingly or unknowingly, exaggerating his own role? Is it an accurate representation of actual events? Or is the book otherwise a result of a distorted self image? Whether his intention was to defend himself or clarify his statements or if he had another motive is difficult to determine. What is clear however is, that Malcolm plausibly had an underlying motive with his biography while King plausibly did not.

It is also important to note that there are different categories of biographies. According to Mikaelsson the simplest distinction is between that of an "autobiography" and that of a "biography", where the first is written by the protagonist himself and the second is written by another person.⁸ The interesting thing to note about King and X's respective biographies is that they are both called autobiographies, written in first person; while neither one of them are

⁶ Hsieh, Ynn, The Ticker, *The King You Don't Know*, 2006, <http://media.www.theticker.org/media/storage/paper909/news/2006/02/27/News/The-King.You.Dont.Know-1781579.shtml>, June 15 2008

⁷ Kraft, Siv-Ellen, 2006, *Metode i religionsvitenskap*, p. 115, 117

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2006, *Metode i religionsvitenskap*, p. 108

written by King or X themselves. Of course Malcolm was actively involved in the creation of his biography even though Alex Haley wrote it and therefore one could argue that it is fair to call it an autobiography. King's biography was published three decades after his death, but because it is made up out of letters, speeches and other samples of his own writings, and Claybourne Carson's role was limited to putting it all together, one could again argue that autobiography is a fair title. As seen, there are many issues when studying biographies and that is why I have chosen to include them as secondary sources and not primary ones.

My main sources for this essay are instead the transcriptions of the various speeches made by King and X. *February 1965: The Final Speeches, I Have a Dream*, and *Malcolm X Talks to Young People* are all collections of interviews, speeches and writings made and published by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The contents are highly accurate as I have compared some of the speeches with recordings of them, but it is still necessary to note that the books are a result of a summary of their respective views, and as such some of their thoughts on the freedom struggle are bound to be left out. Again, what has been left out and what has been included is in the hands of the editor and that is the sole problem with these collections. Between the two of them King and X probably made hundreds of public appearances and speeches and because of the level of this essay it is impossible to read or even find transcriptions of them all. The most important speeches are those that are included in the collections and I believe it is fair to assume that how they spoke in those speeches is similar to how they spoke in the ones that are not included. As such I believe these speeches to be highly valuable and an accurate representation of their work and views.

Other sources I have used are Louis A. DeCaro's *Malcolm and the Cross* and James H Cone's *Martin & Malcolm & America*, mentioned previously. DeCaro's book is an impressive study of Malcolm's relationship with Christianity and I regard it as highly valuable since the author has done a thorough research and it covers the potentially revolutionary role of religious ideas. However, DeCaro's study focus on X's personal relationship to Christianity while my intention is to see how that personal relationship translated to his professional work.

Of course I have also made a selection. As stated above, there are many books and studies (some that will be presented in chapter four) covering Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and the civil rights movement. However, I have not found one that exclusively focuses on the religious aspect of their lives or the freedom campaign. The reason I have chosen the titles listed above is that they all touch on the subject of religion. My aim is to analyse the discussion headed by King and X and as such there is no better source than the recordings and transcripts of their respective speeches, because that is where they freely proclaimed their

stances. Because I study King and X's message their respective biography are also good sources, since they contain their own and highly personal thoughts about the civil rights movement and the tribulations they faced. Lastly I will use the second hand sources because they touch on the subject of religion and they explore King and X's relationship with it. Again, the big difference between the second hand sources I have used and this study is that they explore the two leaders' personal relationship to religion while I want to focus on how that personal relationship translated to their public work.

When reading the literature containing the speeches of King and X, I have decided to quote and include those that touch the most on religion or uses religious ideas to convey a message. Because of this essay's level I could not include every speech and the ones that have been left out are the ones that only feature slight references to religion or no reference at all. As such, my goal is not to decide whether or not King and X were mainly religious or political leaders, nor is it to claim that their overall ideology was shaped *only* by religion – rather my aim is to explore *how* they used religion in their work as leaders for the freedom struggle, whether it was for inspiration, legitimization, support or any other reason. It is also not my intention to speak of the speeches I have read as representative of King and X's *entire* body of work. Like most people they were multi layered and I do not hope that this essay with its limited space can do their entire lives and work justice. What I do aim for however, is that this essay will begin to present how King and X utilized religious ideas in their overall ideology.

The Bible quotes presented in chapter five are used to prove that the Bible mentions slavery in a number of passages. Whether *these particular* passages presented in this essay were used by slave advocates or not is not something I intend to discuss. Instead, the reason I use them is to show that there are room for different interpretations when discussing the Bible's views on slavery.

3. Theory: Religion, social tension and rebellion

This essay will mirror my own approach to the literature I have read, in that I started reading *Bruce Lincoln's Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* before shifting my attention to the rest of the literature. Therefore, I will cover Lincoln's theory early and only towards the end of this essay show how it relates to America during the civil rights

movement. I do this because I believe the reader will keep the theory in mind when reading the main body of this work and at the end will see clearly how I believe it all connects.

In his book Bruce Lincoln states that there are four different types of religion that exists in virtually every nation. He criticises other theories on the nature of religion for failing to acknowledge that religion does not exist in a political, social or economical vacuum.⁹ Instead they are all interwoven and often it is hard to distinguish one from the other.

The different kinds of religion are *religions of status quo*, *religions of resistance*, *religions of revolution* and *religions of counterrevolution* and they all have their own characteristics and distinct features. In his study Lincoln applies this theory on various historical societies including the Han dynasty of China and France during the 18th century revolution.

Lincoln states that a society should be seen as a field in which different factions compete for limited resources. There is always a sense of tension as the different social classes compete for the limited power, wealth and prestige available.¹⁰ Lincoln's intention is to show that religion caters to different needs in different social classes or factions and that it is impossible to reduce religion to only have one certain function. Different people lean on religion for support, stability or legitimization during different stages of their struggle.¹¹ I intend to apply this theory on America during the civil rights era because it was a society in which tension was strong between different social classes. Because Christianity had been used to legitimize slavery I find it interesting to see how African-Americans themselves approached religion after their liberation. Is it true, like Lincoln proposes, that the same type of religion, for example Christianity, can have different functions to different people in one society at the same time? And where does Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the religions they represented place in this system? I hope that Lincoln's theory will help the reader gain a better oversight of the different ideologies and organisations presented in this essay. In the following paragraphs I will explain Lincoln's theory in greater detail.

3.1 Religions of status quo

According to Lincoln the main division within the social field is the one between the dominant faction or class and all others. In a society in which one class controls the bulk of

⁹ Lincoln, Bruce, 2006, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, p. 77

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78

wealth, power and influence, dissatisfaction is bound to surface in all other factions. If the dominant class also controls the means of production, holds the most prestigious jobs and institutional positions and basically owns a cultural, political and economical monopoly, chances are that the particular society is characterised by one single ideology. Often this ideology is religious in its nature and it is in the dominant faction's interest to spread it throughout society.¹² In this religious ideology one will usually find some sort of reason as to why the dominant class has the right to own a monopoly of power and wealth.

Eventually the religion of the dominant faction officially or unofficially becomes the state religion, the one religion with which all other religions are measured against. In return for economical support the religion of status quo helps propagate the political message of the dominant faction, effectively making it extremely hard for rivalling religions or political views to get heard or noticed. Thus, the governing class and the religion of status quo exist in a symbiotic state, both benefiting from each other's position in society. The goal, according to Lincoln, is to create an ideological hegemony throughout the state making it easier and less problematic to govern.¹³ Of course, complete hegemony is always an unreachable goal.

3.2 Religions of resistance

In some parts of the population the religion of status quo is bound to face strong resistance. The opposition is fiercest among the people who have the biggest reason to be disgruntled with the religious and political message of the governing class. In these sectors several religious ideas are born that differs from the ideas that the religion of status quo propagate. Along with these rivalling ideas, religious institutions are created in effort to preserve or further spread a new message that appeal to the people that feel left out and alienated.

The creation of a religion of resistance is the result of the unavoidable failure of the status quo religion to appeal to and include every part of a nation's population. Often it is people from the lower classes that identify themselves with the resistance and they all have one thing in common – the refusal to accept the ideology being propagated by the governing faction and its religion.¹⁴ Even though there can only be one religion of status quo at a time, the number of religions of resistance is unlimited, perhaps only dependant on the amount of dissatisfaction amongst the people. While it is true that most members of the resistance come

¹² Lincoln, 2006, p. 79

¹³ Ibid., p. 82

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 83

from the lower classes, the leaders of the resistance are often from the middle class, educated, charismatic and eloquent.

The ritual plays an important part in creating solidarity and bringing the members of resistance closer to each other. The ritual may take different shapes but its main function is to demonstrate the differences between the status quo religion and the opposition.¹⁵

3.3 Religions of revolution

The main difference between a religion of resistance and one of revolution is that the latter opposes the dominant social faction itself and not only its political or religious arm.

A religion of revolution often spawns in a society in decline, or at least in the declining parts of a society. The religion of revolution also develops a new theory of political legitimacy which its members feel is superior to the one being propagated by the status quo. This theory denies the religion of status quo its right to control all aspects of power, influence and wealth and instead states that the rightful holder of these assets is the religion of revolution. In contrast to religions of resistance, one that is based on revolution is typically more militant and more aggressive in its recruitment.

3.4 Religions of counterrevolution

If a religion of revolution successfully replaces the religion of status quo the table turns. Now the original status quo religion becomes a religion of counterrevolution.¹⁶ This part of Lincoln's theory will play no particular part in my study and I will give it no more attention at this moment.

3.5 A divine struggle

I would think that these four different types of religion are outlined pretty roughly. Of course there are variations and some religions might not include all these features while some include all. It is important to keep in mind that these four kinds exist in light of each other and they all affect each other in different ways. For example, a nation could exist with what seems to be only a religion of status quo. In my mind, this does not mean that peace reigns throughout the

¹⁵ Lincoln, 2006, p. 85

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 90

country or that the governing faction has achieved political hegemony. Instead it could be the results of a particularly brutal government that effectively destroys or limits every form of resistance before it has a chance to surface or gain steam.

I have a liberal view on theories and in this study I will use Lincoln's as I apply it on America in the 20th century. However, I view theories as tools that help gain an overview over complicated subjects and as such I will not be afraid to stray from Lincoln's theory if necessary.

4. Previous research

Much has been written about the civil rights movement and often the focus of attention is centred on either Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. During my initial research I came across several books, studies and other sources that dwell on this subject and often their purpose is to identify and outline the main differences between the two civil rights leaders. Good examples on books covering the lives and work of King and X include *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*, where Michael Eric Dyson, professor at Georgetown University, discusses X's influence on black American males and *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, by Pulitzer Prize winner David J. Garrow, covering King's relationship with the FBI and its impact on his faith.¹⁷ Some studies, like George Breitman's *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary* or *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* by Karl Evanzz focus on the murder of the two leaders and the conspiracy theories surrounding them. Others like Taylor Branch's *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* and Raymond Arsenault's *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* aims to place King and X in a larger historical picture. However, most of the studies I have read tend to stress the *political* differences and similarities between the two and ignore or downplay the *religious* aspect of their respective doctrine. They, for example, compare the different views King and X had on violence as a political tool but do not discuss if and how religion impacted, supported or in other ways affected their views and claims. The aim with this essay is therefore to focus more on how religion and religious ideas were used by King and X to legitimize or in other ways affect their overall comments and views on America and its politics.

¹⁷ The Pulitzer Board, *The Pulitzer Prize Winners 1987*, <http://www.pulitzer.org/cgi-bin/year.pl?1545,23>, June 18 2008

Of the material I have used for this essay, two books in particular stand out when it comes to acknowledging the significance of religion. In James H. Cone's *Martin & Malcolm & America* two brief chapters are devoted to the different religious beliefs of King and X. As stated the book's focus on religion is brief and even though it is a great source in getting to know King and X as persons or human beings, it is ultimately covering a larger area than I intend to do with this study. In Cone's own words:

*The best way to gain reliable knowledge about Martin and Malcolm is through a careful examination of the life and thought of each figure in relation to the other and in the light of the two main resistance traditions in African-American history and culture – integrationism and nationalism.*¹⁸

As so, Cone's starting-point is in the political arena while my own is in the religious. Often these two are interwoven and I will surely touch on political subjects as well.

The same can be said of Dr. Allan Boesak's *Coming in out of the Wilderness*. The headline reads: "a comparative interpretation of the ethics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X" and as such I believe it works as a sweeping introduction to the politics and views of King and X. However, it was published in 1976 and much new, like Malcolm X's relationship with Christianity presented in DeCaro's study, has been learnt or been better explored since then. The biggest difference between these two studies and my own is that they cover King and X's *personal* relationship to religion while my aim is to see how that personal relationship impacted their *professional* work as freedom fighters.

5. Background: Africans in America – From slavery to freedom

[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts.

-- Jefferson Davis, president of the
Confederate States of America from 1861 to
1865.¹⁹

Throughout slavery in the United States the Bible was used as a way of legitimizing the treatment of blacks. As evident by the above quotation the idea that slavery was legal and

¹⁸ Cone, James H., 1993, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, London,, p. ix (preface)

¹⁹ Dunbar, Rowland, 1923, *Jefferson Davis: Constitutionalist; His Letters, Papers, and Speeches*, p. 286

established by Holy Scripture was widespread even among government officials. The common view was that Africans were inferior to the white man and as such they should be treated as less than human.

Between the 16th and 19th century millions of Africans were kidnapped or bought from western and central Africa after which they were sold to the highest bidder. The newly made slaves were stripped of their original names and given the surname of the slave master. As the years went by the state of brutal captivity took its toll and the Africans eventually began to lose touch with their origin and their culture. To add fuel to fire the slaves were prohibited to express themselves through music and native and traditional instruments such as drums were outlawed.²⁰

Instead, they were taught that slavery was something that God had condoned. Slave masters frequently searched the pages of the Bible in order to legitimize slavery.²¹ It was a way of proving to the slaves and the opposition in general that slavery was not inhuman. Perhaps the words of Christian Holy Scripture also made it easier for slave masters and other advocates to sleep with a clean conscience at night.

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free. But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.²²

-- Exodus 21: 2-6

It is true that the Bible mentions slavery but one could argue for years if it primarily condones or promotes it. What is clear however is that the Bible through history has been used in a variety of ways and one could find support for or condemnation of almost anything if you put the effort in. Some Biblical passages suggest that slavery is despicable (“Anyone who kidnaps someone and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death”)²³ while others seem to be more favourable. Obviously slave advocates only chose to acknowledge

²⁰ Mitchell, Henry H., 2004, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, p. 4

²¹ Haynes, Stephen, 2002, *Noah's Curse*, p. 99-100

²² Exodus 21: 2-6

²³ Exodus 21: 16

verses that they thought legitimized slavery and the treatment of people from *other* ethnical and cultural backgrounds:²⁴

*Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. You can will them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.*²⁵

-- Leviticus 25: 44-46

As Christianity was the religion of the slave masters the slaves themselves were “converted”. Through Biblical stories such as the Mark of Cain and the Curse of Ham they were taught that Africans were cursed by God and that their rightful place was under the oppression of another race.^{26 27} As more and more slaves were exposed to this dubious “Christian” message, widespread self-hatred emerged amongst the blacks. Frederick Douglass, the former slave and later civil rights fighter, explains this further in his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, first published in 1855:

*I have met many religious coloured people, at the south, who are under the delusion that God requires them to submit to slavery, and to wear their chains with meekness and humility.*²⁸

Perhaps they really were meant to be treated like animals? Perhaps they were cursed because of the actions of their ancestors (as told in the myths of Ham and Cain)? These questions began to emerge in the minds of the slaves and some even began to feel grateful towards their slave masters.²⁹ After all, their masters were kind enough to give them food and shelter in return for labour even though all slaves were cursed. The masters began to look at themselves as Samaritans, kind enough to save the Africans from the savagery and despotism of their native continent. This becomes evident in *The Columbian Orator*, a textbook used in schools, first published in 1797, that among other things contain a conversation between a slave and his master after the slave had attempted to flee:

²⁴ Goldston, Robert, 1968, *Den svarta revolutionen*, p. 47

²⁵ Leviticus 25: 44-46

²⁶ Haynes, Stephen, 2002, p. 99-100

²⁷ Ibid., p. 24-27, 29-33, 40

²⁸ Douglass, Frederick, 1857, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 159

²⁹ Brown, William W, 1849, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave Written by Himself*, p. 82

“I was treacherously kidnapped in my own country, when following an honest occupation. I was put in chains, sold to one of your countrymen, carried on board his ship, brot hither, and exposed to sale like a beast in the market, where you bought me. What step in all this progress of violence and injustice can give a right? Was it in the villain who stole me, in the slave-merchant who tempted him to do so, or in you who encouraged the slave-merchant to bring his cargo of human cattle to cultivate your lands?”

Master: “It is in the order of Providence that one man should become subservient to another. It ever has been so, and ever will be. I found the custom, and did not make it.”

Slave: “You cannot but be sensible, that the robber who puts a pistol to your breast may make just the same plea. Providence gives him a power over your life and property; it gave my enemies a power over my liberty. But it has also given me legs to escape with; and what prevents me from using them? Nay, what should restrain me from retaliating the wrongs I have suffered, if a favourable occasion should offer?”

Master: “Gratitude! I repeat, gratitude! Have I not endeavoured ever since I possessed you to alleviate your misfortunes by kind treatment; and does that confer no obligation? Consider how much worse your condition could have been under another master.”³⁰

As evident by the Jefferson Davis quote earlier, slavery was not wrong in the minds of slave advocates.

The most abominable aspect of the slave trade was fuelled by the idea that Africans, even children, were better off Christianized under a system of European slavery than left in Africa amid tribal wars, famines and paganism.³¹

-- W.F. Page

The exposure of slaves to Christianity may paradoxically have been one of the biggest mistakes of the slavery advocates. When enslaved Africans became literate they were no longer restricted to hearing the words of the Bible filtered through a white preacher’s mouth. Inspired by Biblical stories like the Exodus out of Egypt, slave revolts became more common in the early 1800’s (one example is the infamous revolt headed by Nat Turner) and underground meetings were organised where slaves were free to learn and teach each other of another kind of Christianity – a Christianity in which God fought for the poor and freedom, love and justice were the prominent themes.^{32 33}

³⁰ Bingham, Caleb, 1836, *The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces, Together With Rules, Which Are Calculated to Improve Youth and Others in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence*, p. 240

³¹ Page, W.F, 1997, *The Dutch Triangle: The Netherlands and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1621-1664 - Studies in African American History and Culture*, p. 218

³² EBlackStudies, *Religion and the Black Church Toward a Paradigm of Unity in Afro-American Studies*, <http://eblackstudies.org/intro/chapter10.htm>, May 1 2008

³³ Africans in America, *The Black Church*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3narr3.html>, May 1 2008.

As years passed in the 19th century, calls for emancipation became louder and shook the very foundation of the United States. When the civil war broke out in 1861 freed slaves fled to the north where independent black churches were established. These black churches along with a few white ones took an active role in helping slaves escape and giving aid to those that already managed to flee.³⁴

In the aftermath of the civil war a migration took place as blacks moved to the northern or western states of America in pursuit of a better job, housing or life in general. The black Churches became less politically involved but kept their place as perhaps the most important institution amongst African-Americans.

Things soon went sour and at the turn of the century blacks in the south were no longer slaves but they were almost treated as such, with whole cities being segregated forcing African-Americans to take the lowest paying jobs and send their children to the worst schools. In the north things were not much better and economic hardships combined with crime and racial prejudice turned whole neighbourhoods into roach infested and poverty stricken ghettos. Officially, black people were free but probably every African-American could testify that this kind of freedom was not much different from slavery.

Resentment and dissatisfaction grew and in 1930 the Nation of Islam was founded. It was an organisation that preached that its creator was the incarnation of Allah and that Allah would punish the white race for its crimes. Led by Elijah Muhammad, who was looked upon as Allah's messenger, the Nation was built on dubious claims such as that the white race were devils created by a black scientist named Yakub and that Allah had a space ship circulating earth waiting to destroy every white person on judgement day. After doomsday Allah would help the black people establish a paradise on earth that would exist for ever.³⁵ Muhammad was born in 1897 and is said to have witnessed three lynchings of blacks by white racists before he was 20 years old. In the Nation of Islam he preached that he was the last and greatest prophet and that blacks were the original race on earth and were the rightful holders of earth's power positions. It was an organisation that taught black people to work for political, social and religious independence and the ultimate goal was at different times an exodus back to Africa or a separate state of the United States where African-Americans could live by themselves.³⁶ They were strongly opposed to integration and on occasions worked with white supremacist

³⁴ Rimsa, Kelly, *The Underground Railroad in Indiana*, <http://www.iusb.edu/~journal/1998/Paper11.html>, May 1 2008

³⁵ X, Malcolm, Clark, Steve, 1992, *February 1965 – The Final Speeches*, p. 248

³⁶ Nation of Islam, *The Muslim Program*, http://www.noislam.org/muslim_program.htm, May 16 2008

groups which also lobbied for separation.³⁷ The movement attracted dissatisfied African-Americans and gained popularity towards the middle of the century.

While white racism had existed in America since day one, black resentment, racism and radicalism was growing and it was in this period of time and into this kind of world that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were born.

6. Results: Religion in the ideologies of Malcolm and Martin

This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. There is something at the very centre of our faith that reminds us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter.

-- Martin Luther King Jr.³⁸

I'm a muslim. I believe in the religion of Islam. I believe in Allah, I believe in Muhammad, I believe in all of the prophets. I believe in fasting, prayer, charity and that which is incumbent upon a Muslim to fulfil in order to be a Muslim.

-- Malcolm X.³⁹

It is obvious that neither Martin Luther King nor Malcolm X had any qualms about infusing their political message with their religious ideas. In fact, both men credited their faith for giving them the strength and wisdom needed to lead the freedom struggle even when facing the threats of violence and oppression.

On several occasions (on being in his biography) King described a series of events that in the end gave him the courage to stand up for what he believed in. In late January 1956, only weeks after the bus boycott had commenced, King received one of many death threats. The aggressor explained that if King didn't call off the boycott and leave town his brains would get blown out along with his house. This was the first time King came to grips with the dangers he was facing and he realized that not only was his own life in danger, the lives of his daughter and wife was in peril as well. As a man of faith he turned to God:

³⁷ X & Clark, 1992, p. 128, 211-212

³⁸ King, Martin Luther & Washington, James M., 1992, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*, p. 23

³⁹ X, Malcolm & Clark, Steve, 1991, *Malcolm X Talks to Young People: Speeches in the U.S., Britain, and Africa*, p. 21

*And I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm faltering, I'm losing my courage, and I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage they will begin to get weak."*⁴⁰

Later King explained that he heard a voice that commanded him to stand up for righteousness, justice and truth. The voice promised to stand by him until the end of time and this experience stripped King of his fears and made him ready to tackle the forces of oppression head on.⁴¹

In a similar way, Malcolm X often spoke of how religion had opened his eyes and made him feel obligated to participate in the struggle for freedom. In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* he tells of his first endeavours as a member of the Nation of Islam and how life changing it was. Up until a certain point of his religious life he had only been required to listen to his teacher and acknowledge that he was right. The hard part was learning to pray regularly:

*You know what my life had been. Picking a lock to rob someone's house was the only way my knees had ever been bent before. I had to force myself to bend my knees. And waves of shame and embarrassment would force me back up. For evil to bend its knees, admitting its guilt, to implore the forgiveness of God, is the hardest thing in the world. It's easy for me to say that now. But then, when I was the personification of evil, I was going through it. Again, again I would force myself back down into the praying-to-Allah posture. When finally I was able to make myself stay down – I didn't know what to say to Allah.*⁴²

Religion had obviously a great impact on both men, albeit a quite different one. With King and X both being religious black men in a country where blacks were at the bottom of the pile one could imagine that they would have similar views on the oppression and the oppressors. Though they shared the same goal (the liberation of the African-Americans) they had different methods and theories on how that liberation would be achieved. In the next few chapters I am going to outline the differences between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the respective organisations and views they represented.

⁴⁰ Cone, 1993, p. 124

⁴¹ Ibid., 125

⁴² Haley, Alex & X, Malcolm, 1985, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: With the Assistance of Alex Haley*, p. 263-264

6.1 Martin Luther King and a cry for love

More than anything one could summarize King's message with the word love. King was born in a middle class black Christian family where both the father and the grandfather were preachers. As such, he came in touch with religion at a very early age and his parents made sure his first and early experiences with religion were pleasant. *In The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* he credits his parents with letting him know what love really was:

*It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances. It is quite easy for me to lean more towards optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences.*⁴³

His upbringing in a safe neighbourhood coupled with the love from his parents enabled him to cruise through school and college and he describes the first twenty-five years of his life as being "wrapped up in a Christmas package".⁴⁴ But like all African-Americans during this era King did notice the results of racism. With his native city Atlanta being segregated he quickly began to question the system of oppression that America seemed to be so fond of. He could not understand how America, a mainly Christian country, could oppose the Christian message of love and treat its brothers so awfully. As young as fourteen he won an oratorical contest in the neighbouring city of Dublin, Georgia and even in that speech some of his focal points of his later life were evident:

*We cannot have a nation orderly and sound with one group so ground down and thwarted that it is almost forced into unsocial attitude and crime. We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flout the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule.*⁴⁵

At an early stage of his young adulthood King became enthralled by the power of non-violent resistance. The Sermon on the Mount as told by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew was a big inspiration for King but he was yet to be convinced that non-violent resistance could be used

⁴³ King, Martin Luther & Carson, Claybourne, 1998, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, p. 2-3

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9

as an effective tool in the face of oppression.⁴⁶ It was not until he began to study the work of Mahatma Gandhi in greater detail that he realised that the effectiveness of non-violence is not restricted to individual relationships or individual struggles. Again it was the concept of love that fascinated him:

*Its root meaning is holding onto truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it love-force or soul-force. In the application of satyagraha, I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. For what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself.*⁴⁷

-- Mahatma Gandhi on the concept of
Satyagraha

Martin Luther King interpreted the word Satyagraha as to mean love-force and according to him Mahatma Gandhi was the first individual in history to “lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.”⁴⁸ It was in the teachings and actions of Gandhi that King saw what he thought was the very epitome of true *Christian* resistance. In an article published in the magazine *Christian Century* as part of the series *How My Mind Has Changed* in 1960, King described his absolute conviction in the power of love:

*As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my scepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of non-violence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.*⁴⁹

Once King had interpreted the concept of Satyagraha and applied it on his early campaigns in the civil rights movement, black people and fellow civil rights activists began to question his focus on love. Why was he so concerned with loving someone who obviously hated him? Was it not too much to ask of the African-Americans to love a people that exclusively seemed

⁴⁶ Boesak, Allan, 1976, *Coming in out the Wilderness: A comparative interpretation of the ethics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X*, p. 12

⁴⁷ Gandhi, Mahatma. *Statement to Disorders Inquiry Committee* January 5, 1920 (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol. 19, p. 206)

⁴⁸ King & Carson, 1998, p. 24

⁴⁹ King & Washington, 1992, p. 59

to be either for the discrimination of black folks or indifferent to it? King did not seem to think so. To fight back violently would only give racists an excuse to kill even more blacks. African-Americans only constituted about ten percent of the American population and King believed that they could never win a violent confrontation. As he received continuous criticism he felt the need to address it. In an address at the University of California at Berkley on June 4, 1957 King spoke of the word love and what it truly meant for him. To be able to understand love properly King pointed to the Greek language which has three words to describe it. *Eros* is the kind of love that has come to mean romantic love that exists between two intimate individuals. *Philia* is the kind of love that exists between personal friends and is based on mutual feelings. *Agape* however, is the kind of overflowing love of God existing in the minds of humans.⁵⁰ For King this kind of love is not dependant on the actions or mutual feelings of the receiver, rather it is an unconditional love for God and his creations:⁵¹

*And when you come to love on this level you begin to love men not because they are likeable, not because they do the things that attract us, but because God loves them and here we love the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. It is the type of love that stands at the centre of the movement that we are trying to carry on in the Southland – agape.*⁵²

In that very same speech Martin Luther King did acknowledge that there are people that believe in non-violence but not in God. How do these people position themselves in light of King's definition of God? If one does not believe in God, what reason is there to love mankind, especially the kind that is in the role of the oppressor? King seemed to be convinced that it is hard for a person to believe in non-violence without believing that there is a side of justice that exists in the universe. It is hard to believe in the ultimate goodness of man while at the same time denying that "there is something in the universe that unfolds for justice."⁵³

6.1.1 Hope

In my opinion one of Martin Luther King's trademarks was his utter commitment to non-violence. Even in the final years of his career when he became more disillusioned with America he never abandoned the ideals that had shaped his teachings and actions from day

⁵⁰ King & Washington, 1992, p. 31-32

⁵¹ Cone, 1993, p. 130

⁵² King & Washington, 1992, p. 32

⁵³ Ibid., p. 32-33

one. I believe King perhaps felt that he himself had lived part of the American Dream and as such he never truly lost faith in it, even though the freedom struggle hit many bumps in his final years, with Malcolm X's murder and the Watts riots of 1965 functioning as two prime examples:

*Before this century, virtually all revolutions had been based on hope and hate. The hope was expressed in the rising expectation of freedom and justice. What was new about Mahatma Ghandi's movement in India was that he mounted a revolution on hope and love, hope and non-violence. This same new emphasis characterized the civil rights movement in our country dating from the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956 to the Selma movement of 1965. We maintained the hope while transforming the hate of traditional revolutions into positive non-violent power. As long as the hope was fulfilled, there was little questioning of non-violence. But when the hopes were blasted, when people came to see that in spite of progress their conditions were still insufferable, when they looked out and saw more poverty, more school segregation, and more slums, despair began to set in.*⁵⁴

Even as African-Americans as a people began to feel more disgruntled, King himself never truly lost hope, something that I believe religion and belief in God had a big part in. As a Baptist minister, as a man that had been raised in the black church, King was convinced that God always fought for the poor and the oppressed. For King, Malcolm X's, and later the Black Power movement's biggest problem was their belief that "American society is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within."⁵⁵

Dating back to the days of slavery black churches had a tradition of focusing on certain Biblical stories and using them as inspiration. Countering the Christian message of the slave masters, black churches focused on the Christian message of freedom and equality. The story of Moses' march out of Egypt was often projected on America with white racists being identified as the pharaohs of Egypt while blacks were identified with the liberated Israelites. Former slave and early freedom fighter Frederick Douglass claimed that the song *O Canaan* referred to Canada and the free north in addition to heaven.⁵⁶ If one is truly convinced, as King was, that God is on your side in the heat of battle perhaps it is no wonder that hope is the last thing that leaves. On March 25 1965 Martin Luther King ended the march in Montgomery

⁵⁴ King & Carson, 1998, 328-329

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 328

⁵⁶ Cone, James H., 1987, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church – Where Have We Been and Where are We Going?*, p. 63-64

with a speech where his conviction in the loving and just nature of God was shown. How long would it take for the African-Americans to gain their complete freedom?:

*Not long 'cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, trampling out the vintage where grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on. He has sounded forth the trumpets that shall never call retreat. He is lifting up the hearts of man before His judgment seat. Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him. Be jubilant, my feet. Our God is marching on.*⁵⁷

With his faith in God came his faith in the ultimate goodness of mankind. Earlier I wrote that King urged his fellow African-Americans to love the oppressors simply because God loved them. If God is the epitome of kindness, justice and love, to use King's argument, God would not create a being that is inherently evil. Mankind is capable of evil acts but is not evil by nature. As such, King was convinced that he would achieve change if he could appeal to the moral consciousness of white America. If white America viewed itself as being Christian, surely they must realise that segregation and oppression is unchristian?

*Segregation is a glaring evil. It is utterly unchristian. It relegates the segregated to the status of a thing rather than elevates him to the status of a person. Segregation is nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ Jesus.*⁵⁸

King would learn that the white church was not so easily persuaded.

6.1.2 King and his Christian brothers

From the beginning it seems as if King had counted on the support from the white church. After all they were all Christians, they all shared the same belief and they all searched the words of the Bible for support, comfort and inspiration. But somewhere along that line it seems as if King had forgotten that he himself was not only a Christian – he was a “Negro” Christian. Even today it seems as if mankind has the need to define or describe everything that diverges from the norm. Since Caucasians are the default “race” of mankind (and man the default gender) in the western world, we feel the need to specify when someone differs from the norm. We speak of Barack Obama as a *black* candidate for the presidency and we speak of

⁵⁷ King & Washington, 1992, p. 124

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 24

Hilary Clinton as a *female* candidate. But somehow we never speak of John McCain as a *white man* running for president – he is the norm and the other two are the exception.

For Martin Luther King this was even truer and during the civil rights movement being black was not just a description, it was a state. Even though he might have viewed himself as Christian first, his fellow Christians in the white church (along with most of the white community) viewed him as a Negro first, a Christian second. Because of this, he could never be on the same level as his fellow clergymen in the white church and their lack of support showed it. It seems as if King was in denial of this fact at first but as the battles against oppression grew worse, the support he counted on remained thin. On occasions he addressed the white church and sought its support. He frequently praised the strides that had been made by America from an economical and technological standpoint. But he criticised it for not having made the same strides in the racial conflict. Even though the world had been turned into a single community with the widespread use of telephones, radios and television and with the option to go around the globe on an airplane, America as a nation had yet to be transformed. It had yet to become a community where people showed mutual respect. Simple Christian commands and recommendations such as loving your neighbour was something that Americans did not practice and King recommended that the church took an active role in changing this. For King it was impossible for the white church to stand on the side lines and watch as the black (mainly Christian) people were discriminated against and oppressed. For King, segregation was in contradiction of the Christian way of life because it is a recipe for inequality. It leaves permanent marks in the soul of the oppressor and the oppressed and it depersonalizes the segregated and makes the central Christian gospel of brotherhood impossible. What King failed to realise was that white churches in the Deep South did not necessarily agree with the notion that the treatment of blacks was unchristian.⁵⁹

During the heated struggles in the Birmingham campaign of 1963 where peaceful calls for desegregation were met with firehoses and the sharp teeth of German shepherds, King became extremely concerned with the lack of support from the church. While King was imprisoned for participating in the protests he read an open letter from eight clergymen of the major religions of America entitled *A Call for Unity*. The clergymen called King and his movement extremists, they asked King to call off the demonstrations and they praised the Birmingham police department for their handling of the protests. Normally, he did not respond to his critics (because of the sheer number of them) but this time he became so upset that he had to reply.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Cone, James H., 1993, p. 137

⁶⁰ King & Carson, 1998, p. 187

In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* Martin Luther King addressed the passivity of the white church and criticized it for not playing its rightful part:

*You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects, and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.*⁶¹

King denied the claim that the demonstrators were outsiders and extremists and stated that the philosophy of non-violence was as present as ever. He also denied the claim that the protests were untimely, saying that the African-Americans had been told to wait for over a hundred years:

*We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.*⁶²

King's mentioning of the "God-given rights" is interesting because it affirms to us that he holds God's words highest. Even though the law of the south states that blacks are not allowed in certain places God's law states that all men are equal. So which one should people obey? In King's mind the answer is simple:

*A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas: an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.*⁶³

In his letter to his fellow white preachers of the church he frequently refers to the early Christians. He puts himself and the civil rights movement in parity with the Christians who

⁶¹ King & Washington, 1992, p. 85

⁶² King & Carson, 1998, p. 192

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 193

under Roman rule were being persecuted and labelled “disturbers of peace”.⁶⁴ But instead of obeying the laws of the land, the early Christians continued to spread their message and obeyed the laws of God. For King, this was a way of lending legitimacy to the civil rights movement – the white church might not have believed that the treatment of blacks was unchristian, but they could not deny that a man is not wrong for breaking a law if it directly opposes the laws of the Christian God. This was an effective rhetoric because the white clergymen could not possibly deny the historical facts surrounding the origin of their own religion. Furthermore, King likened himself to the Apostle Paul who was imprisoned many times while spreading the word of Jesus.⁶⁵ Someone had to respond to the African-American cry for help in Birmingham and since the white church did not want to lend a hand, King had to do it himself:

*Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.*⁶⁶

The reason that I have devoted a chapter to King’s relationship with the white church is that I believe that it is a very important relationship. Just like today where one can not gain a prominent political position in the United States if one is too critical of the American way of life (and thus appearing “unpatriotic” in the public eye), King would not have gained his mass appeal if his goal was to separate himself from the white church. That is true because the default religion (or the status quo religion, to use Bruce Lincoln’s term) at that time in America was white Protestantism and King, a black and member of a minority, would not acquire his worldwide moral and religious influence if he did not appeal to white Christianity in addition to black.⁶⁷

His letter did achieve many of its goals and several white preachers joined the civil rights movement or became more vocal in its criticism of the segregation. Despite some resistance from southern ministers King managed to convince some clergymen that discrimination and oppression was in direct contrast to the Christian gospel of love, justice and brotherhood.⁶⁸ At

⁶⁴ King & Carson, 1998, p. 201

⁶⁵ Cone, 1993, p. 139

⁶⁶ King & Carson, 1998, p. 189

⁶⁷ Cone, 1993, p. 135

⁶⁸ Ibid., 140-141

least one of the authors of *A Call for Unity*, Joseph Aloysius Durick, became an advocate for civil rights and the Birmingham campaign remains one of the freedom struggle's biggest victories.⁶⁹

6.1.3 King and the black church

If King had to fight for the support of the white church, the black church had been with him since the beginning. The black church had been a place of solitude since the days of slavery and among African-Americans the church was a focal point and base of operation during the civil rights movement. As a young preacher, King continued the tradition of the black church in preaching the words of a loving God that would always stand on the side of the oppressed. It is clear that King was convinced that the church should set an example and lead its people in the struggle for freedom. In 1954, in his first sermon as minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, many things can be learnt about his views on religion. He declared that the church should be involved to the full extent in people's lives and not be relegated to Sunday mornings:

*Today men who were but yesterday ridiculing the Church of Christ are now asking the Church the way to the paradise of peace and happiness. We must somehow give our generation an answer. Dexter, like other churches, must somehow lead men and women of a decadent generation to the high mountain of peace and salvation. We must give men and women, who are all but on the brink of despair, a new bent on life. I pray God that I will be able to lead Dexter in this urgent mission.*⁷⁰

Again he declared himself an advocate for God's gospel of brotherhood and through his words one can sense his utter commitment and absolute belief in the loving nature of Christianity. Again his words and faith in religion gives a better understanding of his belief in the power of non-violence and ultimate kindness of mankind.

I come with a feeling that I have been called to preach and to lead God's people. I have felt like Jeremiah, "The word of God is in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones." I have felt with Amos that when God speaks who can but prophesy? I have felt with Jesus that the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he

⁶⁹ Bass, Jonathan, 1998, "Joseph Aloysius Durick", *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*

⁷⁰ King & Carson, 1998, p. 45

*hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and to set at liberty those that are bruised.*⁷¹

Although white churches in America had a tradition of separating religion and politics, especially when it came to the question of race, black churches were almost forced to view the two as one.⁷² Since the days of slavery black churches had held a prominent role in the African-American society and had actively been involved in various freedom campaigns. For slaves during the 19th century the beliefs in God and life after death were many times the only things worth living for and as such the focus on God's Paradise was still a main theme throughout the black churches during the civil rights movement.⁷³ In general black Christians were convinced that God was on their side and that he would guide them to victory in the freedom struggle, but in King's mind this was not only a good thing:

*I have talked about the fact that God is working in history to bring about this new age. There is the danger, therefore, that after hearing all of this you will go away with the impression that we can go home, sit down, and do nothing waiting for the coming of the inevitable. You will somehow feel that this new age will roll in on the wheels of inevitability, so there is nothing to do but wait on it. If you get that impression you are the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality. We must speed up the coming of the inevitable.*⁷⁴

For King it was a big mistake for the African-American community to be concerned only with religion and life after death. It was a necessity to also pay attention to the problems in this life and as such he continued the black church tradition of combining religion and politics, acknowledging the fact that blacks and whites were equal in the eyes of God but also demanding that they were treated as such in America.

Even though he received overwhelming support from the black church there were some ministers that did not, at least openly, back him up. The fear of white reprisals if they supported King was perhaps the biggest reason but a general fear of change could have weighed in. Some churches were elitist and bragged about their exclusive clientele consisting of doctors, businessmen and lawyers. These ministers, often belonging to the growing black middle-class, were scared that their newly found economical status or institutional position could get destroyed if King's movement had failed and they had been supporters. As a result African-Americans began to deny or stray far from their own cultur, because being a

⁷¹ King & Carson, 1998, p. 46

⁷² Cone, 1993, p. 143

⁷³ Ibid., p. 144

⁷⁴ King & Washington, 1992, p. 24

successful “Negro” in America involved denying the African identity and becoming American (i.e. white).⁷⁵ However, the gainsayers among black ministers were few and King managed to convince many of them that the role of the church was to unite the people regardless of economical factors, social status and even race.

*I say to you that religion must be concerned not merely about mansions in the sky, but about the slums and the ghettos in this world. A proper religion will be concerned not merely about the streets flowing with milk and honey, but about the millions of God’s children in Asia, Africa, and South America and in our own nation who go to bed hungry at nights... It will be concerned not merely about silver slippers in heaven but about men and women having some shoes to wear on earth.*⁷⁶

For King the ultimate goal was integration so that people no longer spoke of a white church and a black one, but rather just the one Christian church.⁷⁷ With the support of black churches and the growing endorsement of white ones he was to have an easier time reaching bigger crowds with his message. But perhaps the main reason that King’s image became more positive in the white church as well as white America was that another force in the civil rights struggle was gaining steam. A force that in the minds of segregation advocates made Martin Luther King and his movement seem like the better of two evils.

6.2 Malcolm X and a promise for justice

*The Muslim’s ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that he never could know. For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slave master name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named ‘Little’ had imposed upon my paternal forebears. The receipt of my ‘X’ meant that forever after in the nation of Islam, I would be known as Malcolm X. Mr. Muhammad taught that we would keep this ‘X’ until God Himself returned and gave us a Holy Name from His own mouth.*⁷⁸

Studying Malcolm X’s career it becomes clear that he had two different ones – one mainly religious and one mainly political. But before I delve deeper into that subject it is imperative to explore his background.

Like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X was born into a religious family. His father was a preacher and follower of the Marcus Garvey movement and his mother taught him the ways

⁷⁵ Cone, 1993, p. 149

⁷⁶ Ibid. P. 148

⁷⁷ Cone, 1993, p. 147-148

⁷⁸ Haley & X, 1985, p. 296

of different religions and recommended that he would give himself to no one but God.⁷⁹ At an early age he would be confronted with the issue of race. His grandmother had been raped by a white man giving Malcolm his light complexion. Malcolm mentioned on occasions that he was favoured by his father because of this while his mother “gave him hell”.⁸⁰ Even though his father was a Baptist preacher Malcolm describes in his autobiography that he from a young age knew that Christianity was not for him:

I would sit goggle-eyed at my father jumping and shouting as he preached, with the congregation jumping and shouting behind him, their souls and bodies devoted to singing and praying. Even at that young age, I just couldn't believe in the Christian concept of Jesus as someone divine. And no religious person, until I was a man in my twenties – and then in prison – could tell me anything. I had very little respect for most people who represented religion.⁸¹

Growing up Malcolm's life seems to have been the complete opposite to that of Martin Luther King. Three of his uncles had been killed by racists and another uncle had been lynched. At the age of six his father was killed in a car accident that Malcolm later labelled as being the works of the Black Legion, a white supremacist group, and his mother was eventually institutionalised after years of harassment from white racists. This led to Malcolm and his siblings getting shipped off to various orphanages and foster homes.⁸²

While living in the town of Lansing, Michigan, Malcolm was a top student in junior high. However, he soon dropped out after one of his teachers told him that his dream of becoming a lawyer was not “a realistic goal for a nigger.”⁸³ After moving to Boston and New York, Malcolm came in contact with the underworld operating as a drug dealer, pimp, burglar, and robber.⁸⁴ In early 1946 Malcolm was sentenced to eight to ten years in prison, charged with grand larceny and breaking and entering.^{85 86}

In prison he became known as Satan for his utter hatred of God, Jesus and religion in general.⁸⁷ However, he soon came in touch with the Nation of Islam whose gospel of the white man being the devil fitted quite well with Malcolm's experiences. For Malcolm almost

⁷⁹ DeCaro, Louise A., 1998, *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity* p. 61, 71

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 70

⁸¹ Haley & X, 1985, p. 83

⁸² Ibid., p. 101

⁸³ Ibid., p. 118

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 197-198

⁸⁵ Brother Malcolm: A Research Site, *Chronology of the Life and Activities of Malcolm X*, <http://www.brothermalcolm.net/mxtimeline.html>, May 8 2008

⁸⁶ Haley & X, 1985, p. 244

⁸⁷ DeCaro, 1998, p. 85

every meeting with white people had been negative, from the insurance company that refused to pay his fathers death to the white supremacist groups that had harassed his family, to the average school teacher, store clerk or police officer who was full of prejudice:⁸⁸

*...the words "the white man is the devil." You tell that to any Negro. Except for those relatively few 'integration'-mad so called 'intellectuals', and those black men who are otherwise fat, happy and deaf, dumb, and blinded, with their crumbs from the white man's rich table, you have struck a nerve centre in the American black man. He may take a day to react, a month, a year; he may never respond, openly; but of one thing you can be sure – when he thinks about his own life, he is going to see where, to him, personally, the white man sure has acted like a devil.*⁸⁹

Malcolm became a member of the Nation of Islam and turned into one of its most successful recruiters in prison, thus beginning his religious career. When he was eligible for parole in 1952 he was released and soon became Elijah Muhammad's right hand man in an organisation that gained popularity in the black communities while beginning to strike fear in the white.

6.2.1 Christianity as a slave religion

As X became more familiar with the history of the world he gradually became more anti-white and anti-Christian. Like we discussed above, Malcolm was unsure of religion from a very early age and as he became a member of the Nation of Islam his resentment towards Christianity grew. In fiery sermons he regularly labelled it as being a religion designed to brain wash the coloured people of the world and strip them of their knowledge of history.⁹⁰ He taught that the black man once had been king of the world while the white man was still running around on all fours.⁹¹ With Christianity the white man had come up with an effective method to disorientate African-Americans making them easier to control:

*The devil white man cut these black people off from all knowledge of their own kind, and cut them off from any knowledge of their own language, religion, and past culture, until the black man in America was the earth's only race of people who had absolutely no knowledge of his true identity.*⁹²

⁸⁸ Haley & X, 1985, p. 94

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 279

⁹⁰ Boesak, 1976, p. 16

⁹¹ Haley & X, 1985, p.261

⁹² Ibid., p. 256

Instead, Malcolm preached, the black man was steadily trying to imitate the white. The black man had lost all sense of his own identity so he tried to copy the manners of the people that he looked up to. The biggest problem seemed to be that while the black man was looking up at the white man, the white man was looking down on the black. The African-American effort to become white was a result of Christianity, according to Malcolm and the Nation of Islam. From the days where slave masters taught the slaves that they had been saved from the savage life of Africa, Christianity had produced a sense of worthlessness in the minds of African-Americans and conveyed the idea that redemption could only be achieved in the church:

*My mother was a Christian and my father was a Christian and I used to hear them when I was a little child sing the song "Wash Me White As Snow." My father was a black man and my mother was a black woman, but yet the songs that they sang in their church were designed to fill their hearts with the desire to be white. So many people, especially our people, get resentful when they hear me say something like this. But rather than get resentful all they have to do is think back on many of the songs and much of the teachings and the doctrines that they were taught while they were going to church and they'll have to agree that it was all designed to make us look down on black and up at white.*⁹³

According to Malcolm every race worshipped a God that looked like them. In China they worshipped a Chinese looking God, in India they worshipped Indian Gods and in Christian nations Jesus is depicted as blond and blue-eyed and white America worships him. Malcolm claimed that African-Americans are the only people on earth that did not worship a God that looked like their own kind; instead they opted for the white image of God that had been created by white Christians.⁹⁴

Malcolm X claimed that whites were only interested in converting blacks to Christianity so that they could spread the idea of life after death. While the thought of paradise for many was the only thing worth living for during slavery, black people had no reason to believe in paradise during the 20th century. The Nation of Islam taught that the ideas of heaven and hell were only Biblical metaphors for life on earth. Heaven or hell exists right here. But Christians have tricked African-Americans to believe that they exist in the afterlife and in doing so whites were free to enjoy the paradise on earth while blacks were confined to hell in the poverty stricken ghettos. For Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam nothing exists after death

⁹³ Malcolm X Org., *Black Mans History*, http://www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc_12_62.htm, May 8 2008

⁹⁴ DeCaro, 1998, p. 138

and as such people need to be aware of their condition on earth rather than worrying about heaven or hell in the afterlife:⁹⁵

*The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we die, to wait until death, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're dead, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars here on this earth!*⁹⁶

There are some evident similarities between X's criticism of Christianity and Martin Luther King's criticism of certain black preachers. Of course, King never denied the idea of life after death even though he demanded that the black church was even more involved in improving the lives of African-Americans in the present.

Malcolm X's criticism of Christianity was so profound that he almost turned it into a bad word. If someone questioned his condemnation he would challenge that person to review history and review the role of Christianity in history. It was white Christians that had kidnapped millions of Africans and forced them to work during slavery. It was white Christians that had instigated the two Opium Wars with China during the 19th century.⁹⁷ It was white Christians that had placed most parts of the world under the brutal rule of colonization and exploitation. It was white Christians that had murdered millions of Jews during World War II. It was white Christians that had dropped the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And now it was white Christians that refused to treat its black brothers as human beings and instead reduced them to second class citizens.⁹⁸ For Malcolm and the Nation of Islam this was the only evidence needed in declaring the white man a devil. And they would continue to declare the white man a devil until they started to see some changes:

*What do you want me to call him... a saint? History proves the white man is a devil. If he is not a devil, let him prove it. Let him give justice, freedom and equality to our people.*⁹⁹

For Malcolm it was against common sense for blacks to turn to a religion headed by whites – whites that had caused them nothing but harm throughout history. Instead Islam was the rightful religion of the African-Americans and the only religion capable of delivering freedom

⁹⁵ DeCaro, 1998, p. 86

⁹⁶ Cone, 1993, p. 151

⁹⁷ Haley & X, 1985, p. 273

⁹⁸ Lincoln, C. Eric, 1961, *The Black Muslims in America*, p. 131

⁹⁹ Boesak, 1976, p. 20

and justice. Strangely, as much time and effort as Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam devoted to denounce Christianity, they tried to save parts of it and use for their own agenda. The Bible as we know it today and then had been corrupted by whites. Its original message had been distorted and modified to fit whites but “luckily” the Nation of Islam’s leader, Elijah Muhammad, had the tools to reinterpret the gospel and reapply it on black America. Jesus was used even more though the Nation of Islam obviously denied that he was the son of God. They claimed that the one Jesus prophesied would come after him was none other than Wallace Fard Muhammad, the creator of the Nation of Islam.¹⁰⁰

Aside from the notion of the white man as devil, the idea that stirred up the most emotion was that of a black God. Since Wallace Fard Muhammad was thought to be Allah and he was a black man, the Nation of Islam preached that God was black and of course this was ridiculed by the white church. But in return, Malcolm X became a master at undermining Christian faith and history. He pointed out that Jesus spoke Arabic (even though he spoke Aramaic) and thus even Jesus spoke of God as Allah. X was also sure that Jesus was not blond and blue eyed as pictured in white churches across the country:¹⁰¹

*When we tell you that Allah is a supreme black man, you laugh, because you can't conceive of God as black. But when the white preacher tells you that Jesus had blue eyed and stayed in the ground for three days and got up and went to heaven you believe it. Now, which is more ridiculous?*¹⁰²

Furthermore Malcolm X began to talk about his former self as a Christian. Since he had been a viscous criminal in his earlier years he claimed that he was continuing the Christian tradition of violence and brutality and it was not until he came in touch with Islam that he became righteous and peaceful.¹⁰³

Even though Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam resented Christianity it is evident that they were dependant on it to paint Islam as the polar opposite. They chose parts of the Bible that fitted their own doctrine and discarded the other, thus engaging in a sort of love-hate relationship. For example, the Biblical idea that God would one day pass judgement on humanity was interpreted by the nation of Islam as to mean that God would punish the white man in America for the evils he had committed. Taking on the roles of the Biblical Moses and Aaron (Elijah Muhammad as Moses because he had been in contact with God himself in

¹⁰⁰ DeCaro, 1998, p. 106-108

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 149

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 104

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 115

Wallace Fard Muhammad and Malcolm X as Aaron because he was Elijah's chief protégé and messenger) they projected the image of ancient Egypt on America. Like Moses, Elijah was demanding that America let his people go and if America refused God would step in and doom the entire white race.¹⁰⁴

If Malcolm X was so critical of Christianity how did he view his black brothers that practiced and preached it? For Malcolm, being an Uncle Tom or a “dumb negro” was almost as bad as being a white devil.

6.2.2 Malcolm X and the black church

Just like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X criticized black clergymen for focusing too much on the theme of paradise and not enough on the problems African-Americans faced on earth. But again he took the criticism even further. He claimed black preachers had become tools of the oppression effectively helping white America to keep black America down and in its place. The message of non-violence propagated by King and the black church was a fool's message and the only thing it could achieve was to march innocent people straight to slaughter.¹⁰⁵ Asking the black man to love the white man was like asking a victim to love its offender – it was an unnatural and unfair request:

*For the white man to ask the black man if he hates him is just like the rapist asking the raped, or the wolf asking the sheep, 'Do you hate me?'. The white man is in no moral position to accuse anyone else of hate!*¹⁰⁶

And for Malcolm, black Christian preachers and non-violence advocates were doing their masters bidding. They had their jobs and their houses and did not have to worry about the hardships the larger African-American population were confronted with everyday. Malcolm X made the distinction between the “field negro” and the “house negro”. Ever since slavery the masters had kept slaves (mainly those of lighter complexion, i.e. those that were the spawns of rape) in the house to work as servants. Because the house Negro was treated better than the field Negro he was always looking out for his master, making sure he was alright so that the house Negro could continue to live inside.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Cone, 1993, p. 156-157

¹⁰⁵ DeCaro, 1998, p. 193

¹⁰⁶ Haley & X, 1985, p. 342

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 340

*Back during slavery, when black people like me talked to the slaves, they didn't kill 'em, they sent some old house Negro along behind him to undo what he said. You have to read the history of slavery to understand this. There were two kinds of Negroes. There was that old house Negro and the field Negro. And the house Negro always looked out for his master. When the field Negroes got too much out of line, he held them back in check. He put 'em back on the plantation. The house Negro could afford to do that because he lived better than the field Negro. He ate better, he dressed better, and he lived in a better house. He lived right up next to his master - in the attic or the basement. He ate the same food his master ate and wore his same clothes. And he could talk just like his master - good diction. And he loved his master more than his master loved himself. That's why he didn't want his master hurt. If the master got sick, he'd say, "What's the matter, boss, we sick?" [Laughter] When the master's house caught afire, he'd try and put the fire out. He didn't want his master's house burned. He never wanted his master's property threatened. And he was more defensive of it than the master was. That was the house Negro. But then you had some field Negroes, who lived in huts, had nothing to lose. They wore the worst kind of clothes. They ate the worst food. And they caught hell. They felt the sting of the lash. They hated their master. Oh yes, they did. If the master got sick, they'd pray that the master died. If the master's house caught afire, they'd pray for a strong wind to come along. This was the difference between the two. And today you still have house Negroes and field Negroes. I'm a field Negro.*¹⁰⁸

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Black preachers and non-violence advocates were the house Negroes of the civil rights movement according to Malcolm and they were wrong for asking the white man for help. Instead they should seek separation from white America, since white America did not want anything to do with black America:

*The guilty, two-faced white man can't even decide what he wants. Our slaves fore parents would have been put to death for advocating so-called integration with the white man. Now when Mr. Muhammad speaks of "separation", the white man calls us "hate-teachers" and "fascists"! The white man doesn't want the blacks! He doesn't want the blacks that are a parasite upon him! He doesn't want the black man whose presence and condition in this country expose the white man to the world for what he is! So why do you attack Mr. Muhammad?*¹¹⁰

It is important to note the distinction between segregation and separation. In his Nation of Islam days Malcolm X was anti-segregation but pro-separation echoing the Marcus Garvey movement which goal was for African-Americans to return to Africa.

¹⁰⁸ Malcolm X Files, *The House Negro and the Field Negro*
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znQe9nUKzvQ>, May 10 2008

¹⁰⁹ X & Clark, 1992, p. 27

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 342

While Malcolm X was accusing black Christians of being hypocrites he would soon find out that the man he revered the most, Elijah Muhammad, shared some of those very same “qualities”. As the 1950’s turned to the 1960’s Malcolm became more and more frustrated with the Nation of Islam’s lack of commitment to the civil rights movement. He thought that they were focusing too much on personal rules for its members (rules that Malcolm did not have anything against per se) but not enough on the larger black freedom struggle. Malcolm would eventually find out that Elijah Muhammad himself was breaking one of the most important rules of the Nation of Islam – the act of adultery. Muhammad had several extramarital affairs with his young secretaries, but he claimed that he was just continuing the tradition established by earlier Biblical prophets. This, coupled with Muhammad’s growing focus on money, caused Malcolm X to break with the Nation of Islam and learn more about traditional Islam, something he had been encouraged to do by traditional Muslims when he was abroad in 1959.

6.2.3 Malcolm X as a Sunni Muslim

Elijah believes that God is going to come and straighten things out. I believe that too. But whereas Elijah is willing to sit and wait, I'm not willing to sit and wait on God to come. If he doesn't come soon, it will be too late. I believe in religion, but a religion that includes political, economic, and social action designed to eliminate some of these things, and make a paradise here on earth while we're waiting for the other.¹¹¹

In the above quote one can note Malcolm’s change when it comes to the idea of paradise. As a Sunni Muslim he seemed to have abandoned the notion that an afterlife does not exist. For a long time Malcolm had been viewed as the real brains behind the Nation of Islam and when he left it, his views changed as he was no longer confined to the religious ideas of his former organisation.¹¹² Like I wrote earlier, I believe Malcolm had two careers and his split from the Nation of Islam was the beginning of his mainly political one.

The biggest problem for the Nation of Islam, according to Malcolm, was that it existed in a vacuum. Even though it called itself a Muslim religion it was never acknowledged by the Muslim world as a real Muslim organisation and as such it existed in a religious vacuum. It was never truly engaged in the civil rights movement, even though the organisation was labelled as political, as its members were not permitted to take part in politics. As such it was also in a political vacuum and caused frustration for its members. Because the organisation by

¹¹¹ X & Clark, 1992, p. 22

¹¹² DeCaro, 1998, p. 205

its very radical nature attracted people that wanted action and change, many of those members became disgruntled when the Nation of Islam never actually participated in the freedom struggle. This caused the split and Malcolm and a few other members departed and formed a new organisation called Muslim Mosque which adopted orthodox Islam as its religion.¹¹³

This split greatly impacted Malcolm's ideology. He denounced his former religion as being racist and stated that he did not believe that anyone or any race was inherently evil. His pilgrimage to Mecca and visits to countries in Africa opened up his eyes and made him see that whites, blacks and every colour of race on earth practiced Islam in the name of brotherhood.

*So when I got over there and went to Mecca and saw these people who were blond and blue-eyed and pale-skinned and all those things, I said "Well," but I watched them closely. And I noticed that though they were white, and they would call themselves white, there was a difference between them and the white one over here. And the basic difference was this: in Asia or the Arab world or in Africa, where the Muslims are, if you find one who says he's white, all he's doing is using an adjective to describe something that's incidental about him, one of his incidental characteristics; so there's nothing else to it, he's just white. But when you get the white man over here in America and he says he's white, he means something else. You can listen to the sound of his voice – when he says he's white, he means he's boss. [Laughter and applause]... This was what I saw was missing in the Muslim world. If they said they were white, it was incidental. White, black, brown, red, yellow, doesn't make any difference what colour you are. So this was the religion that I had accepted and had gone there to get a better knowledge of it.*¹¹⁴

*I find many white Americans here [in Africa] smiling in the faces of our African brothers like they have been loving them all of the time. [Laughter and applause] The fact is, these same whites who in America spit in our faces, the same whites who in America club us brutally, the same whites who in America sic their dogs upon us, just because we want to be free human beings, the same whites who turn their water hoses upon our women and our babies because we want to integrate with them, are here in Africa smiling in your face trying to integrate with you. [Laughter]*¹¹⁵

These experiences made a lasting impact on Malcolm X and greatly influenced his views from there on in. Victims of oppression were not exclusively black and racists were not exclusively white:

¹¹³ X & Clark, 1992, p. 164-165

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 84-85

¹¹⁵ X & Clark, 1991, p. 12

It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of Black against white, or as a purely American problem. Rather, we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter. The Negro revolution is not a racial revolt. We are interested in practicing brotherhood with anyone really interested in living according to it.¹¹⁶

Furthermore one can notice a change in his view on human beings. As he travelled the globe the Nation of Islam idea that white people were inherently evil began to seem more ludicrous and it seems as if he began to direct his criticism more towards the American system than the average white person. A discussion with a white American ambassador in Africa further convinced him that the interracial brotherhood he had witnessed in the Muslim world could work in America too:

I told him, 'What you are telling me is that it isn't the American white man who is racist, but it's the American political, economic, and social atmosphere that automatically nourishes a racist psychology in the white man'. He agreed... The discussion with the ambassador gave me a new insight – one which I like: that the white man is not inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly.¹¹⁷

Although he still believed most white people in America were racists or hypocrites, he now knew that it was impossible to condemn an entire race. This was a monumental change that may have prevented further violence in America. Since Malcolm and the Nation of Islam had had a commanding voice in the black community, one can only imagine the potential for disaster if Malcolm would have continued to talk about white devils once he left the Nation. It is also obvious that this change of mind could not have occurred if he had stayed under Elijah Muhammad's tutelage. His newfound experience with traditional Islam and traditional Muslims showed him that the Nation of Islam was wrong in preaching racial hate and separation. To make sure no one mistook him for a racist (which people did and do anyway) he openly denied being one:

I don't believe in any form of racism. I don't believe in any form of discrimination or segregation. I believe in Islam. I am a Muslim. And there's nothing wrong with being a Muslim, nothing wrong with the religion of Islam. It just teaches us to believe in Allah as the God. Those of you who are Christians probably believe in the same God, because I think you believe in the God who created the universe. That's the one we believe in, the one who created the universe, the only difference being you call him God and I – we call him Allah. The

¹¹⁶ X & Clark, 1992, p. 177

¹¹⁷ Haley & X, 1985, p. 489

*Jews call him Jehovah. If you could understand Hebrew, you'd probably call him Jehovah too. If you could understand Arabic, you'd probably call him Allah.*¹¹⁸

Malcolm even turned to Martin Luther King and began to promote unity and brotherhood because black people faced the same struggles regardless of religion.¹¹⁹ This newly found love for brotherhood, which I credit Malcolm becoming a Sunni Muslim for, resulted in him discovering the connection between the oppressed African-Americans and the oppressed Asians, Latin Americans and Africans. He began to see that people all over the world were facing the same problems and that they could achieve their common goal of freedom and respect if they came together and cooperated. There was no longer any reason for the black man to turn to the American government for help, the same government that, according to Malcolm, was controlled by racists. He even claimed that South Africa was more deserving of his respect because at least its government was honest in its Apartheid politics, whereas America was instigating wars in other countries in the name of freedom and democracy when it could not even grant its own citizens those very same things. The civil rights bills that had been passed down as a result of the work of Martin Luther King did not mean anything in reality. The lives of black people were still not “worth two cents” and as such, black people needed to stop talk about *civil* rights and instead raise the issue to that of *human* rights. Malcolm believed that by reaching out through the UN to other Muslim countries and nations consisting of oppressed coloured people, African-Americans could get the help they needed.¹²⁰ For Malcolm, the whole third world, along with the Negro population, was facing the same problems. It was a sort of neo-colonisation that was designed to further exploit the coloured people of the earth. The Vietnam War and the Congo crisis only strengthened his thesis:

*The colonial powers didn't leave. But what did they do? When ever a person is playing basketball, if you watch him, if the players on the opposing team trap him and he doesn't want to get rid of or throw the ball away, he has to pass it to someone who's in the clear, who's on the same team as he. And since Belgium and France and Britain and these other colonial powers were trapped – they were exposed as colonial powers – they had to find someone who was still in the clear, and the only one in the clear insofar as the Africans were concerned was the United States. So they passed the ball to United States. And this administration picked it up and ran like mad ever since. [Laughter and applause]*¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Haley & X, 1985, p. 83

¹¹⁹ Cone, 1993, p. 194

¹²⁰ X & Clark, 1991, p. 22, 57

¹²¹ X & Clark, 1992, p. 160

As far as he was concerned the white man in America had never helped the black man out of good will and he never would. It was Hitler, Stalin and Tojo that had helped the black man, because until America was in the midst of World War II it did not even let African-Americans join the army or work in factories. But when America was pressured, that was when black people could start to better their position in society.¹²²

X's views changed after he became a Sunni Muslim but the one thing that he would never give up was his promotion of self-defence at any cost. The idea that African-Americans should fight the oppression with love was still ridiculous to Malcolm, especially since black people did not even love themselves. Since the days of slavery the whites had projected the image of Africa as negative to the rest of the world. They taught that that Africa was a continent of jungles, savages in trees, cannibals and unintelligent people. This caused the world's population, including African-Americans, to look down upon Africans, which in turn had unfortunate consequences for the black man in the United States:

*Because those who oppress know that you can't make a person hate the root without making them hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. And since we all originated in Africa, you can't make us hate Africa without making us hate ourselves... We hated the African characteristics. We hated our hair. We hated our nose, the shape of our nose, and the shape of our lips, the colour of our skin... And you call me a hate teacher? Why, you taught us to hate ourselves. You taught the world to hate a whole race of people and have the audacity now to blame us for hating you simply because we don't like the rope that you put around our neck. [Applause] When you teach a man to hate his lips, the lips that God gave him, the shape of the nose that God gave him, the texture of the hair that God gave him, the colour of the skin that God gave him, you've committed the worst crime that a race of people can commit.*¹²³

While violence was a foolish defensive strategy to Martin Luther King, love was foolish to Malcolm. He regularly stated that he was a man of peace but that it was impossible to have a conversation of peace with someone who knew only hate. America would never respect black people unless black people put their feet down and demanded respect "by any means necessary." According to Malcolm, white people defended themselves violently (as seen in the so called defence of democracy during the Vietnam War) and it was unfair to demand of African-Americans to do it non-violently. In a heated panel discussion broadcasted live over

¹²² X & Clark, 1992, p. 166-167

¹²³ Ibid., p. 157

WINS Radio on February 18, 1965, a few days before his murder, Malcolm explains this further:

Malcolm X: Well, sir, when Russia put missiles in Cuba, the only thing that made Russia get her missiles out of Cuba was when America pointed missiles right back.

Interviewer: Are you suggesting revolution?

Malcolm X: No, I'm saying this: that when you respect the intelligence of Black people in this country as being equal to that of whites, then you will realize that the reaction of the Black man to oppression will be the same as the reaction of the white man to oppression. The white man will not turn the other cheek when he's being oppressed... So all I'm saying is this: I absolutely believe the situation can be changed. But I don't think it can be changed by white people taking a hypocritical approach, pretending that it is not as bad as it is, and by Black leaders, so-called responsible leaders, taking a hypocritical approach, trying to make white people think that Black people are patient and long-suffering and are willing to sit around here a long time, or a great deal of a long time, until the problem is better.¹²⁴

The question is still up whether or not Malcolm X actually *promoted* violence, but he at least claimed that he did not. During a seminar in Audubon Ballroom in Harlem 1965, just days before his death, he was asked why black people did not just form their own Ku Klux Klan and start performing terrorist acts against whites:

No, no, don't let them manoeuvre you into forming anything that can be compared with the Klan. See, it is true we're the target of brutal, criminal treatment from the Klan. Now, we don't need a Black Ku Klux Klan. All we need is Black people who believe in the brotherhood of man and who will fight anyone who threatens the brotherhood of man. Now, the Klan is a threat to this brotherhood and we are legally within our rights to defend ourselves from the Klan... And we can do it. You've been in the army. They taught you all those tricks. [Laughter] Well, use them. [Laughter and applause]¹²⁵

While he did not promote violence in offence he promoted it in defence and that is what has contributed to his divided legacy. While he promoted violence in defence one can argue that it was only because he felt that the government could not or would not provide the protection and support the African-American community needed.¹²⁶

Malcolm's views were still going through a period of change and development at the time of his murder and it is impossible to speculate accurately on what form his ideology would take in the end. Undoubtedly his conversion from Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam made a

¹²⁴ X & Clark, 1992, p. 218-219

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 141

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 115

profound impact on both African-American culture and his own views on race and oppression.

*The religion of Islam itself is a religion that is based upon brotherhood and a religion in which the persons who believe in it in no way judge a man by the colour of his skin. The yardstick of measurement in Islam is one's deeds, one's conscious behaviour. And the yardstick of measurement that was used by Elijah Muhammad was based upon the colour of the skin.*¹²⁷

Many African-Americans followed Malcolm to traditional Islam and today various studies have confirmed that more than a third of all Muslims in America are of African-American ancestry.^{128 129} In 1975, after the death of Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam also converted to Sunni Islam but its reputation is still shady at best and it is still labelled a hate group by Southern Poverty Law Center.¹³⁰

6.3 White Christianity as a religion of status quo

The United States has throughout its history mainly been a Christian country. So called Christian values have traditionally shaped the nation and this was especially true during slavery and the civil rights movement.¹³¹

In his theory, Bruce Lincoln states that a religion of status quo develops in a country where there is one class or faction that is dominating in controlling wealth, power and influence, and it is evident that the whites were dominant during this era. The dominant faction creates religious institutions (in this case churches) that help propagate for their ideology. While churches and Christianity were used to legitimize slavery up until the 19th century, they were not mainly used to advocate segregation during the 20th. Instead, as evident by the letter *A Call for Unity* covered earlier, they called for patience among the blacks and thus worked to keep the situation stagnant. According to Lincoln the goal of a religion of status quo is to create a religious and political hegemony and it does not take resistance lightly. As evident by the extreme frequency of police brutality, terrorist acts by white

¹²⁷ X & Clark, 1992, p. 185

¹²⁸ About, *African-American Muslims: Today*,
<http://islam.about.com/library/weekly/aa012601c.htm>, May 12 2008

¹²⁹ Wood, Daniel B., *The Christian Science Monitor, America's Black Muslims Close a Rift*,
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0214/p03s01-ussc.html>, May 12 2008

¹³⁰ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Active U.S. Hate Groups*,
<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/map/type.jsp?DT=3>, May 12 2008

¹³¹ Haynes, 2002, p. 10-12, 78-79

supremacy groups and the white church's reluctance to act in defence of its black Christian brothers; resistance in America during the freedom struggle was not popular amongst the dominant faction. As such, I believe white Christianity and white America during the civil rights movement can be labelled as a religion of status quo.

6.4 Martin Luther King and black Christianity as a religion of resistance

In Lincoln's definition of a religion of resistance he states that it is usually made up out of members of low social status and second class citizens. Black people were clearly viewed as second class citizens by the dominant faction during this time. A religion of resistance consists of people that feel left out by the politics and ideology of the status quo religion and African-Americans were clearly disgruntled with their situation in America. According to Lincoln the message of resistance is in direct contrast with parts of or the whole ideology of the status quo and Martin Luther King's message of integration and brotherhood were in direct contrast to the segregated South and the prejudiced and racist North.

Another characteristic of a religion of resistance is that while its members are from the lower social classes its leaders are normally from the middle class. Even though Martin Luther King was black and thus automatically a member of the lower social class he was at least considered a member of the African-American middle class and thus fits the description of a resistance leader. As stated in chapter three, the ritual plays an integral part in the resistance because it creates a feeling of unity and brotherhood. The black church was well known to feature fiery sermons and gospel music and I believe the demonstrations, sit-ins and freedom walks headed by King worked as rituals in that they created a unified front against the oppression. As such, I believe the movement headed by Martin Luther King and black Christianity in general can be labelled as a religion of resistance.

6.5 Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam as a religion of revolution

In contrast to Martin Luther King and his criticism of America, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam were not exclusively opposing the *ideology* of the religion of status quo – they were also opposing its members. X frequently criticized America but the Black Muslim notion of the devil white man fits the description of a religion of revolution in that it denounces the dominant class as a people.

Lincoln states that a religion of revolution need to develop a justification that legitimizes the own group's right to hold power instead of the dominant faction's. The Nation of Islam preached that the black man was the Original man on earth and that he was the rightful holder of the world's prime positions. Furthermore, Malcolm's message and the Nation of Islam fit the description of a religion of revolution in that they developed in the declining parts of society – the crime and poverty plagued urban ghettos. Another feature of a revolution is that the movement recruits members from all parts of society and the Nation of Islam recruited everything from prisoners and students to various professionals and celebrities like Muhammad Ali. As such I label Malcolm X's ideology during his Black Muslim days and the Nation of Islam as a religion of revolution.

6.6 Themes

The aim with this essay has been to discuss the role of religion in the ideologies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. By analyzing the speeches and actions made by King and X, the movements most prolific profiles, I have sought to determine to what grade religious ideas and religious thoughts helped shape the struggle for freedom. The question I intended to answer was:

- As advocates for Christianity and Nation of Islam respectively, how did Martin Luther King and Malcolm X utilize the religious teachings in their political agenda?

I noticed that while religion, and Christianity in particular, primarily was used during slavery as a way of legitimizing the treatments of blacks, it was used in a more uplifting way by King and X, during the civil rights movement. As representatives for black Christianity, the Nation of Islam and Sunni Islam they both claimed to work for the betterment of African-Americans. But is it possible to credit their use of religious ideas with changing anything specific or would these changes occur regardless? I believe that it is a complicated question but I am convinced that by infusing their political message with religious ideas and leaning on religion for support and legitimization, King and X played a prominent role in changing the landscape of America during the civil rights movement – from a practical point of view in that references to religion appealed to the many religious African-Americans, to a psychological view in that King and X's rhetoric helped alter deep rooted negative notions. To help convey

this I would like to establish a few, main, themes or issues that were present in America during the freedom struggle and that I believe King and X helped solve.

6.6.1 Reverse justification

It is clear that slave- and segregation advocates have used Christianity and the Bible to legitimize racism throughout history. The idea that blacks were cursed and doomed to slavery was devastating for African-Americans because it made them believe that they had no rights and that they should be grateful to their former slave masters for saving them from the savage and lawless Africa.

Beginning during the days of slavery, however, newly converted slaves became more familiar with the stories of the Bible. They found a Christian message of love, justice and equality that had previously been denied to them and from there on in African-Americans held on to that message. During the civil rights movement the idea that blacks were entitled to equality was spread by both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and it undoubtedly created a sense of legitimacy in the minds of both whites and blacks. Blacks understood that they were entitled to the same respect whites received and whites had a harder time legitimizing segregation and racism when the words of God were no longer on their side.

*We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong the Supreme Court is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.*¹³²

-- Martin Luther King after being elected head of newly found protest group, the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955.

6.6.2 Self-hatred

Along with the Christian idea of blacks as doomed conveyed by the slave masters, self-hatred began to develop amongst the African-Americans. In the 20th century, prior to the emergence of the civil rights movement, it was common for black people to straighten their hair, attempt

¹³² King & Carson, 1998, p. 60

to bleach their skin and otherwise echo the white racist idea of black as something inferior. As evident by the several quotes in this essay Malcolm X was a frequent criticiser of African-Americans who were ashamed of their origin and instead tried to resemble white people. Even though hair straightening and other superficial procedures can seem innocent they were part of a bigger, wide spread problem in the African-American community – self-hatred. Sander L. Gilman professor at the University of Chicago defines self-hatred as the result of a negative stereotype of a certain group that the group itself accepts as a reality. The one who is labelled as a deviate attempts to find out why he or she fits the negative stereotype and tries to come up with a way to prove that he or she does not. But the more one tries to identify with the norm instead of the own group, the farther away from acceptability one seems to be.¹³³

The religious ideas adopted by King and X and used in their overall political message helped provide the cure for self-hatred since King signified the beauty of both Africans and African-Americans. Malcolm, in his Nation of Islam days, even claimed blacks were better than whites in every way, a statement that screams racism today but was something fresh for millions of blacks during the early 20th century who had heard the complete opposite for 400 years of slavery and oppression. I believe that the religious idea of black as something equal (or in Nation of Islam's case something superior) to white helped instigate the black is beautiful movement in the early 1960's where a new sense of Black Pride was spread across America and later other countries with large black populations. This newly found pride is evident not only in the teachings of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X but also in other cultural figures such as James Brown (who had a huge hit in 1968 named *Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud*) and Muhammad Ali (who's outspoken nature regarding black beauty and the Vietnam War were seen as controversial and unorthodox coming from a black athlete).

6.6.3 Involvement in current affairs

To me African-American history is characterised by alienation. During slavery blacks were largely dependant on whites because of the nature of their bondage and up until the civil rights movement little had been done, by either blacks or whites, to change this. Of course there were exceptions but in general blacks were not allowed to participate in or have any influence over economics, politics or social developments. The sole field of involvement was

¹³³ Gilman, Sander L, 1990, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, p. 2-3

religion and as long as blacks were free to worship God and have a place in heaven, it was common for blacks to believe whites were free to rule on earth. I have already showed the criticism being offered by both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X on this issue and I believe their critique opened up the eyes of African-Americans. No longer would the black people count on the possible goodwill of whites, instead they would go out and bring about change non-violently (King), violently (X) or by whatever or any means necessary (X in his later years). Now blacks wanted to become more involved in all facets of society, they wanted to control their own businesses and own their own houses.

This idea was made possible because of the new sense of entitlement fuelled by the religious legitimization. African-Americans were just as much children of God as whites were and this meant that they were free to think, act and help shape the American society. And they were not to be dependant on either whites or God to do it:

The idea that man must wait on God to do everything has led to a tragic misuse of prayer... God gave us minds to think and breath and body to work, and he would be defeating his own purpose if he allowed us to obtain through prayer what can come through work and intelligence.¹³⁴

-- Martin Luther King in his sermon *The Answer to a Perplexing Question*.

6.6.4 King and X as complements

Even though Martin Luther King and Malcolm X often were each other's polar opposites with regards to their views on the freedom struggle, I believe that they complimented each other quite well. While King perhaps captivated the biggest audience (and definitely the biggest white audience) with his message of mutual love, Malcolm's by-any-means-necessary-rhetoric captured the essence of black people's frustration. They were both needed.

Today, King is viewed as a hero throughout the world and in the United States streets are named after him and Martin Luther King Day is celebrated as a federal holiday on the third Monday of January. Malcolm X's reputation is understandably shadier and his name has been used in propagating purposes by everyone from Black Panthers and Pan-Africanists to integration activists and anti-racists. It is important to note that both men, and both ideologies, can only be understood in light of history. I believe the only reason some people tend to be

¹³⁴ Gallagher, Anita, Executive Intelligence Review, 2002, *Book Review: Martin Luther King, Jr.: Still Preaching in 2002*, http://www.larouchepub.com/eirtoc/2002/eirtoc_2902.html, May 19 2008

forgiving when it comes to Malcolm's earlier racist statements is that they existed as a response to a racist political system. Religion also played a big part in reshaping Malcolm's view and his cry for brotherhood in the waning years of his life were directly inspired by Sunni Islam. Representing Black Christianity and Islam respectively, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were both integral voices in the civil rights movement and they both share credit for bringing freedom to African-Americans. They also existed in light of each other – while Malcolm X would never gain his political influence if Martin Luther King had never first paved the way, King's doctrine of love and equality appeared more appealing when the other choice was Malcolm's more non-violent message:

I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult. I really did come thinking I could make it easier. If the white people realise what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King.¹³⁵

-- Malcolm X

7. Concluding remarks

I would definitely encourage further studies of religion and the civil rights movement as much is still undiscovered. One aspect that is rarely discussed is that of women's place in the struggle. While it is impossible to deny the positive impact Martin Luther King and Malcolm X has had on race relations in America, they were still largely blind when it came to equality between sexes. Malcolm X stated that blacks only got a chance once America was pressured during World War II but he failed to notice the similarities with the women of Europe who bettered their situation at the same time and because of the same reasons. As much as King propagated for brotherhood he was still a product of his time and an acceptor of patriarchal values.

As this essay comes to a close, the one thing I believe is undisputable is that religion and politics are often two sides of the same coin. This is especially true when viewing the civil rights movement. With a history many times based on hate it is no wonder that race is such an uncomfortable topic in America. Even though religion gave guidance and helped free African-Americans during the 20th century, the issue of slavery is still more than a scar – it is an open wound.

¹³⁵ King, Coretta Scott, 1969, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 256

Deep rooted self-hatred still exists in the black community. I have witnessed myself how blacks sometime treat their brothers and sisters of lighter complexion better, while ridiculing those of darker. White racism may be condemned in public but institutionalized racism still exists. At the same time it is evident that some blacks are disgruntled with history and the present and aim their frustration at whites. It is a shame that the work of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King was cut short before it was completed and it is interesting to speculate on how they would view current affairs if they were still alive. Would Malcolm still have been convinced of the lack of racism in Islam after the events in Darfur, and would King have expanded his message to include feminism during the 1970's? I think it is clear that their voices are missed, especially in the black community, because today no one discusses race even though it is obviously an issue. You can not sweep something under the rug and not expect to see a bulge.

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