JAMES H. CONE*

America: A Dream or A Nightmare?

> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day . . . sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood . . . This is our hope . . . With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day . . . This will be the day when all God's children will be able to sing with new meaning 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.'[1]
>
> Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963

> No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are victims of Americanism, one of the . . . victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver—no, not I! I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream. I see an American nightmare![2]
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> Malcolm X, April 3, 1964

These quotations represent sharply contrasting views of America by the two most influential black leaders during the 1960s. Martin Luther King, Jr., the unquestioned leader of the civil rights movement, was an integrationist and a Christian minister, who during most of his ministry, saw America as "essentially a dream . . . as yet unfulfilled," "a dream of a land where [people] of all races, of all nationalities and of all creeds can live together as brothers [and sisters]."[3] Malcolm X, the unques-

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[1] "I Have a Dream," a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the historic March on Washington, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963, p. 3. There are several printed versions of this speech. I am using the copyrighted copy now located at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

[2] Malcolm Little, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 26. This speech was originally presented at Cory Methodist Church, April 3, 1964, at a symposium entitled "The Negro Revolt—What Comes Next?," sponsored by the Cleveland chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

[3] Martin Luther King, Jr., "The American Dream," *Negro History Bulletin* 31 (May 1968): 10-17. This speech was presented as a Commencement Address at Lincoln Univer-

tioned spokesperson for the disinherited black masses of the northern ghettoes, was a separatist and a Muslim minister, who viewed America as a realized nightmare, in which black people experience "political oppression," "economic exploitation," and "social degradation" at the hands of white people.[4] Martin King saw America in terms of what this nation could become if black and white people of good will assumed the political responsibility of implementing the freedom inherent in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Malcolm X saw America in terms of this nation's past and current treatment of its people of color—244 years as slaves, followed by a colonized status which offered blacks no economic security, political power, or social respect in a society defined by white supremacy. In the writings and speeches of Martin and Malcolm, we see two Americas: one was based on faith in the American political system and the Christian hope that blacks and whites could work together in the creation of the "beloved community"; the other was based on the past cruelties of American slavery and the present reality of urban ghettoes—a clear indication of white people's refusal to recognize the basic humanity of black people.

Martin's unrealized dream and Malcolm's persistent nightmare: these two ideas of America collided in the 1960s. Today they both stand in judgment over a third idea, of which President Reagan is the symbol and advocate. As I watched some of the televised events before, during, and after the President's Inauguration on January 20, I was confronted with Ronald Reagan's America. For President Reagan, America is a dream that has already been realized. Even though he would admit, at the right time and in the appropriate context, that there are some shortcomings in the U.S., President Reagan deeply believes that America is a land of opportunity for all who are prepared to work hard, trust God, and support a strong defense budget in order to protect the free world from the enemies of democracy and freedom.

Christians and other citizens of all races and political orientations must take President Reagan's perspective seriously because the great majority of U.S. citizens share his view of America. That is why he has become one of the most popular presidents in American history. I was

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sity, June 6, 1961. There are many versions of this address: at Lynchburg, Virginia, March 12, 1961 and at Brooklyn, New York, February 10, 1963. In addition to the historic March on Washington speech, Martin King's Detroit speech, June 23, 1963, also repeated the "I Have a Dream" phrase several times. "My Dream" was also the title of his weekly column in the *Chicago Defender*. Unless indicated otherwise, the quotations in this essay are taken from the June 6, 1961 Commencement Address at Lincoln University and the August 28, 1963 March on Washington address.

[4] These phrases were used often by Malcolm X in many speeches. I have taken them from "The Ballot or the Bullet." See George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

saddened to see talented black artists and even black clergy participating enthusiastically in the inauguration events, proclaiming America as a land of freedom and equality. How could black artists and ministers of the gospel of Jesus allow themselves to be used as symbols of freedom when they must know that Ronald Reagan has done more to reduce the life-chances of the poor than any recent president in U.S. history. I could barely contain my rage as a black artist led the audience with the song, "You're living in America, the home of the dream, just make it what you want it to be."

While Ronald Reagan's perspective on America is the dominant view among U.S. citizens, it is the minority view among the nations of the world. This is a very important fact to emphasize, because Americans, white and black, right and left, often talk and act as if their issues are the only ones worthy of serious attention. We Americans must become open to hear what others have to say about the international operations of the U.S. government. As I travel throughout the Third World and talk to people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—especially the poor and their advocates—I am forced to see another America that is radically different from the one proclaimed by Ronald Reagan and his supporters. The Third World poor do not speak of America in terms of freedom and democracy, but primarily in terms of economic exploitation, political arrogance, and military terror. They see America as a giant Frankenstein, a huge military monster that is intent on widening the economic gap between the have and have-not nations in order that the privileged few in each might have more to waste on luxury items, even at the expense of the survival needs of the vast majority of the poor people of the world.

Americans who share that viewpoint are scrambling for resources to combat Reagan's murderous fantasy. They should not overlook two great freedom-sayers and freedom fighters of our recent past: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Their lives and ideas reveal to us not only some significant insights about the America of the 1960s, but even more important, they tell us something about this country today, something that will be useful in our efforts to create a better society and a more humane world.

America as a Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. derived his idea of the American dream from two sources: the American liberal democratic tradition, as defined by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution,[5] and the biblical tra-

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[5] For an interpretation of the impact of the American liberal democratic tradition upon King, see Hanes Walton, Jr., *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

ditions of the Old and New Testaments, as interpreted by protestant liberalism[6] and the black church.[7] From these two sources, during the first-half of the 1960s, Martin King defined what he meant by the American dream, and what must be done in order to make the dream become a concrete historical reality.

According to Martin King, the American dream has been summarized in the often quoted words of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Martin King was deeply moved by this statement, and he quoted it often in order to challenge all Americans to implement an idea of freedom whose historical roots stretch back to the founding of this nation.

There are two concepts in the statement which attracted Martin King to it: its "amazing universalism" and its "divine origin." As Martin said so often, "it does not say some men but it says all men which includes black men. It does not say all gentiles, but it says all men which includes Jews. It does not say all Protestants, but it says all men which includes Catholics." I am sure that if Martin were living today, he would insist that, although it says "all *men*," we must interpret the sexist word "men" generically, that is, as "people" so as to include women. The

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(Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971). Note especially in Walton's book the essay, "The American Liberal Democratic Tradition, and Martin Luther King, Jr." by Samuel D. Cook, pp. xiii-xxxvii.

[6] For an interpretation of the impact of Protestant liberalism upon King, see Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *The Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974). I also recommend the excellent dissertation by Ira G. Zepp, Jr., "The Intellectual Sources of the Ethical Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., as Traced in his Writings with Special Reference to the Beloved Community" (Ph.D. diss., Saint Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore, Md., 1971). A less useful source but an important text is John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984). All three texts are seriously flawed by their authors' lack of knowledge of the impact of the black religious experience upon King.

[7] Unfortunately, the impact of the black church upon King is a neglected aspect of his thought. See my "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church," *Theology Today* XL (January 1984): 409-420; "Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Source of His Courage to Face Death," *Concilium* 163 (1983): 74-79; see also the important essays by Lewis V. Baldwin, "Martin Luther King, Jr., The Black Church and the Black Messianic Vision," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XII (Fall/Spring 1985): 93-108; "Understanding Martin Luther King, Jr. Within the Context of Southern Black Religious History." Paper presented at the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago, December 1984; see also James William McClendon, Jr., "The Religion of Martin Luther King, Jr.," in *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974). Another useful essay is James H. Smylie, "On Jesus, Pharoahs, and the Chosen People: Martin Luther King as Biblical Interpreter and Humanist," *Interpretation* 24 (January 1970): 74-91.

America that Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed about was a nation in which all peoples—blacks and whites, browns and reds, men and women, young and old, Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Arabs—would live together as brothers and sisters.

According to Martin King, the one thing that makes the American form of government different from other, totalitarian regimes is its recognition that "each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state . . . They are God-given." Therefore every person has dignity and worth which must be recognized and respected. The dream that Martin King articulated was not nationalistic; it was universal, that is, grounded in eternity and not given by people.

Martin King realized that while government officials, past and present, have proclaimed eloquently the American dream with beautiful words about freedom and equality, they have often enacted laws of slavery and racial segregation that shattered the dream. In relation to its inhabitants of color, America has defaulted on its promise of freedom. "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.' " But Martin King "refused to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt," and he challenged everyone to make the U.S. government cash the check that will bring "the riches of freedom and the security of justice" to all its citizens. The American government cannot continue to exist with the contradiction of "proudly profess[ing] the principles of democracy," and then "practic[ing] the very antithesis of those principles." Slavery and segregation have been strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all people are created equal. This is "America's dilemma," its "schizophrenic personality."

Because King refused to accept America's "anemic democracy," he challenged its citizens to make the American dream a reality. First, he urged Americans to "develop a world perspective." There is no way that the American dream can be realized apart from "the larger dream of a world of brotherhood [and sisterhood], and peace, and good will." We cannot be free in America unless people are free in Central America and South Africa. King said it like this: "we must all learn to live together as brothers [and sisters], or we will all perish together as fools. We must come to see that no individual can live alone; no nation can live alone. We must all live together; we must all be concerned about each other." Martin King became especially critical of the United States after he travelled to India and Africa and saw many homeless and starving people. When he remembered that the U.S. government "spend[s] more than a million dollars a day to store surplus food," Martin said to himself and to the world: "I know where we can store that food free of charge—in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of people who go to

bed hungry at night." Martin King believed deeply that all "life is interrelated." We are all (black and white, poor and rich, men and women, communists and capitalists) interdependent, and no person or nation can be free or at peace without its bestowal upon humanity as a whole. Martin expressed the interconnectedness of life by saying:

> We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world, no [person] can be totally rich even if he has a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people cannot expect to live more than twenty or thirty years, no [person] can be totally healthy . . . Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

At this point in his oratory on the inter-relatedness of life, Martin King often quoted the famous passage from John Donne: "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

For Martin King, there was nothing more tragic for the American dream than the continued existence of segregation, based on the false idea of inferior and superior races. He saw segregation as a double contradiction. Because it contradicted America's democratic faith, King challenged politicians to enact desegregation laws in all aspects of the society. Because it was a contradiction of Judeo-Christian faith, he called upon religious leaders to rid this nation of its chief moral dilemma by creating the "beloved community," an integrated society. There was nothing more disturbing to Martin King than for white Christians to tolerate segregation in their churches and in the society. He spoke of them as "the Un-Christian Christian[s]."[8]

King realized that dreams would remain dreams unless people of good will developed a method for implementing them in the society. That was why he, along with other black ministers, organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in January of 1957. The stated aim of SCLC was to achieve "full citizenship rights, equality, and the integration of the Negro in all aspects of American life."[9] For Martin King, the problem of segregation was much more than a political problem; it was a *moral* problem. "America," he said, "must rid herself of segregation not

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[8] Cf. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," *Ebony*, August 1965, pp. 77-80.

[9] *This is SCLC* (Leaflet: Southern Christian Leadership Conference). This leaflet has gone through several editions, and the copy I have was reprinted in August Meier, Elliott Rudwick, and Francis L. Broderick, eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 302-306.

alone because it is politically expedient, but because it is morally right!"[10]

King tied the philosophy of nonviolence, as defined by Gandhi and Thoreau, with Jesus' idea of love, as interpreted by black and liberal white Protestants. The two ideas together constituted a theory of nonviolent direct action which King thought could "save the soul of America."[11] He believed that American politicians were destroying the moral fibre of the nation by failing to enact desegregation laws, but that Christian ministers were even more at fault. Instead of being uncompromisingly prophetic in their denunciation of segregation and in their support of integration, "all too many have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows."[12] In his classic "Letter From Birmingham Jail," King expressed his disappointment with white religious leaders, especially those in the South. "I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it's the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: 'Follow the decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother.' "[13] The failure of the white clergy to be morally prophetic on the race issue "greatly disappointed" King. He accused them of "sleeping through a revolution"[14] content to "stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities."[15]

Though King gave many addresses on his idea of the American dream, his most memorable statement is his "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963. In the traditions of the prophetic black church and the optimism of liberal Protestantism, Martin King stated his dream with the persuasive oratory of a political philosopher and the sermonic power of a prophetic black preacher.

> Let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire; let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York; let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania; let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado; let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let

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[10] Ibid.

[11] This is an often used phrase to describe the moral meaning of the civil rights movement.

[12] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait*, Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 90.

[13] Ibid.

[14] See "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" presented at the Sixty-first General Convention of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity, Sheraton Jefferson Hotel, St. Louis, Missouri, 12 October, 1964. See a similar printed version in 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 9 April, 1968, *Congressional Record* 114: 9391-9397.

[15] King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 90.

> freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia; let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee; let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.
>
> And when this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring . . . from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'

Caught up in the ecstasy of the moment, many Americans of all races left Washington, D.C. that August convinced that the beloved community of integration would soon be realized. But we all know that Martin King's dream was deferred by the "white backlash," the rise of black power, the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the "unraveling of America."[16] We are now living in Ronald Reagan's nightmare and once again compelled to ask, with Langston Hughes,

> *What happens to a dream deferred?*
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> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> Or does it explode?[17]

During the second-half of the 1960s, Martin King's dream exploded in the urban ghettoes of American cities and on the battlefields of Vietnam. He was forced to acknowledge that his dream had been turned into a nightmare.[18] Martin King's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet as

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[16] See the excellent text, Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

[17] Langston Hughes, *The Panther and the Lash* (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 14.

[18] On many occasions, Martin King talked about his dream of 1963 being turned into a nightmare. See especially his "Christmas Sermon on Peace," delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, December 24, 1967. In that sermon he said: "In 1963 . . . in Washington, D.C. . . . I tried to talk to nation about a dream that I had had, and I must confess . . . that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare, just a few weeks after I had talked about it. It was when four beautiful . . . Negro girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama. I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I moved through the ghettoes of the nation and saw my black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity, and saw the nation doing nothing to grapple with the Negroes' problem of poverty. I saw that dream turn into a nightmare as I watched my black brothers and sisters in the midst of anger and understandable outrage . . . turn to misguided riots to try to solve

he was struggling to implement the dream, supporting the garbage workers of Memphis while he also prepared for his second march on Washington, D.C.

America as a Nightmare: Malcolm X

During the time that Martin King was confidently preaching his American dream, Malcolm X offered a challenging critique of him by proclaiming that America, for the vast majority of blacks, was not a dream but a nightmare. What was the source of Malcolm's judgment? Unlike Martin King, who based his view of America upon the liberal idea of freedom and the biblical hope that it can be realized, Malcolm X based his view of America upon the historical fact of slavery, the current reality of segregation, and this country's refusal to recognize the humanity of black people. No promise of equality, no beautiful word about freedom and justice can serve as a substitute for the bestowal of basic human rights for all people. And because the United States refused to recognize the dignity and worth of black people in its laws, Malcolm could only see the country from the perspective of the nightmare of slavery, the terror of the lynch mob, and the inhumanity of overcrowded rat-infested urban ghettoes in which blacks were forced to live. When a nation by its laws and customs denies the humanity of a portion of its inhabitants, then those inhabitants must deny their allegiance to that nation and insist that their dignity be respected. That was why Malcolm said: "No, I am not an American . . . I am one of [America's] victims . . . ." American democracy is nothing but "disguised hypocrisy." The first task of any people is to insist that their humanity be respected. That was why Malcolm said, with all the passion and rhetorical power he could muster:

> We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being, in this society, on this earth, in this day which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.[19]

Malcolm refused to accept the idea of "second class" citizens. There are slaves and there are citizens—nothing more and nothing less. Black people are nothing but 20th century slaves.

While Martin King spoke from the perspective of faith and the hope that black and white people of good will could create a just and humane society, Malcolm X spoke from the perspective of history, seeing no hope

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that problem. I saw that dream turn into a nightmare as I watched the war in Vietnam escalating . . . Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams . . . ." See Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 75-76.

[19] A tape in the author's possession of Malcolm X entitled "By Any Means Necessary."

that an appeal to conscience would lead white people to treat blacks and others as human beings. In the language of a street orator, Malcolm said:

> Don't change the white man's mind—you can't change his mind, and that whole thing about appealing to the moral conscience of America—America's conscience is bankrupt . . . Uncle Sam has no conscience. They don't know what morals are. They don't try and eliminate evil because it's evil, or because it's illegal, or because it's immoral; they eliminate it only when it threatens their existence.[20]

So Malcolm's image of America was quite different from Martin King's. Malcolm's perspective is one that many whites and a large number of middle class blacks do not like to take seriously, often dismissing his words as the rhetoric of a racist demagogue. But Malcolm was no racist demagogue! Rather, like King, he was a prophet of the black community who told the truth about the black condition in America in clear, forceful, and uncomplicated language. When accused of being an extremist, he replied sharply: "Yes I'm an extremist. The black race in North America is in extremely bad condition. You show me a black [person] who isn't an extremist and I'll show you one who needs psychiatric attention."[21]

There is no way to understand Malcolm's image of America as a nightmare without knowing what pained him. Black people jammed-up in ghettoes, dying from filth, rats, dope, white liberals blaming the victims, and black leaders urging them to be nonviolent with no protection from the American government—that was what hurt Malcolm. On one occasion, Malcolm showed Alex Haley a newspaper clipping of a black baby who "had been bitten by a rat." In a moment of deep anger, Malcolm said: "Now just read that, just think of that a minute! Suppose that was *your* child! Where's that slumlord—on some beach in Miami!"[22]

As much as he wanted to achieve black unity, especially following his break with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm could not hold back the sharpness of his tongue as he spoke about an American nightmare in the black community of the poor.[23] His impatience with the black middle-class civil rights leaders and his disdain for white liberals were directly related to his solidarity with and love for poor blacks in the ghettoes. He perceived both groups as being insensitive to black hurt. He also claimed that they actually contributed to black suffering, physically and mentally, by making the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look

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[20] Little, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 40.

[21] Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 394.

[22] Ibid., p. 395.

[23] Cf. Vincent Harding, "The Religion of Black Power", in *Religious Situation: 1968*, ed., Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p.16.

like the victim. How could the desire for integration give poor blacks self-respect when it meant becoming like the people who caused their poverty? How can we urge blacks to love whites when they don't love themselves? Self-respect, dignity, and somebodyness—that was what Malcolm taught in place of love of and integration with white society.

Here we see that Malcolm understood the problem of black self-hate more clearly than did Martin King. King grew up in Atlanta's black middle class. He never had to live in the filth of a northern ghetto; he had never been a hustler and a criminal like Malcolm. Consequently his thoughts about freedom and how to achieve it were derived from the black middle class integrationist tradition and the Protestant liberal theology of the white schools he attended.

Malcolm X spoke of self-love and black unity, because he saw so much black self-hate in the ghettoes: drugs, prostitution, and blacks killing and robbing each other. And as long as blacks want to be like whites, they will hate and kill each other while being passive and nonviolent toward whites. This was why he insisted on the right of self-defense.

> It is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutality . . . When our people are being bitten by dogs, they are within their rights to kill those dogs. We should be peaceful, law-abiding—but the time has come for the American Negro to fight back in self-defense whenever and wherever he is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked.[24]

In addition to the right of self-defense, Malcolm felt the goal of loving your enemy was insane, and he could not understand why Martin King advocated it.

> The only revolution in which the goal is loving your enemy is the Negro revolution. It's the only revolution in which the goal is a desegregated lunch counter, a desegregated theater, a desegregated park, a desegregated public toilet; you can sit down next to white folks—on the toilet. That's no revolution. Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.[25]

Like Martin King's, Malcolm's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet at the age of 39. But unlike Martin King whose birthday has been made a national holiday, Malcolm X is seldom remembered and respected by the society that destroyed him. I would claim, however, that, for the health of this nation, we need to hear Malcolm's analysis of America as a nightmare as much as Martin's American dream. From the black perspective, America cannot be understood without both, and neither of them can be correctly understood without a knowledge of the other. In fact these two very different men, before they died, acknowl-

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[24] Malcolm Little, "A Declaration of Independence," in *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 22.
[25] Malcolm Little, "Message to the Grass Roots," in *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 9.

edged the validity of each other's insights.

Following the Selma March and his move to Chicago in the Fall of 1965, Martin saw clearly the limitations of his earlier analysis and began to speak more forcefully, without any reference to Malcolm but definitely influenced by him, of the need for black self-esteem[26] and "segregation as a temporary way-station to a truly integrated society."[27] At the same time, several months before his assassination, Malcolm toned down his criticisms of black civil rights leaders, went to Selma and told Mrs. King that "I want Dr. King [who was in jail at the time] 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 realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King."[28]

It is clear that they were moving toward each other and were not nearly as far apart as many interpreters have suggested. Their movement toward each other should be a clue to us that Martin's birthday should not be celebrated without due attention to the life and thought of Malcolm. Indeed, if Americans of all races intend to create a humane future, one that is not simply based on the political and theological ideas in the dominant culture, then we must listen to both Martin and Malcolm, and other Third World people *too*—here and abroad.

What Can We Learn From Martin And Malcolm?

We must not romanticize Martin and Malcolm. As all humans, they had their strengths and weaknesses. Our task is to evaluate them critically by seeing them always in relation to each other. They are each other's necessary corrective, for each spoke a truth about America that cannot be rightly comprehended without the other. In my concluding remarks, I would like to point out some important things that Martin and Malcolm teach us about the black struggle for freedom, which are also important lessons for other communities as well.

1) Malcolm X taught us that there can be no achievement of black freedom independent of our affirmation of blackness: black self, black action, black culture, and black past. Although this point was never ab-

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[26] The best sources for King's affirmative emphasis on black power and pride are his unpublished speeches on the "Pre-Washington Campaign," recruiting poor persons for the Poor People's March to Washington. See especially his addresses at Clarksdale, Miss. (March 19, 1968), p. 7; Eutaw, Ala. (March 20, 1968), p. 3; Albany, Ga. (March 22, 1968), p. 5f. These and other speeches are found at the King Center Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

[27] See "Conversation with Martin Luther King," *Conservative Judaism* XXII (Spring 1968):8.

[28] Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 256.

sent in Martin King, it did not receive its proper emphasis until he saw the depth of black self-hate, especially as revealed in the riots of the northern ghettoes and the subsequent rise of black power. Knowledge of and respect for one's history and culture leads to unity among the people. This is a point that Martin and Malcolm taught in their speeches and demonstrated with their lives. Malcolm realized, before Martin, that black unity must come before any talk about integration with whites. When Martin saw that for most whites integration meant "tokenism," that is, blacks without power joining whites *with* power, he began to speak strongly in support of the values of black power. Both Malcolm and Martin came to realize that there can be no freedom for blacks prior to our solidarity with each other.

2) Martin and Malcolm teach us that the achievement of black unity must lead us to reach out to people of other cultures. Martin extended what he had said about the integration of blacks and whites in America to the relations between nations, especially regarding the U.S. and Vietnam. That was why he could not separate the issues of freedom of blacks in the U.S. from peace in Vietnam. With Malcolm it is revealing that after his break with the Black Muslims, he spent more than half of his remaining eleven months in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, searching for the religious and political directions in his attempt to develop a program of black liberation. From his international experiences, he received a new vision of freedom that included the human rights of all.

As important as black nationalism is in our struggle, it cannot be the ultimate goal. The beloved community must remain the goal for which we are striving. On this point, Martin was right and Malcolm was wrong. If European history and culture teach us anything, it is the danger of perceiving the world only from the viewpoint of one culture, as if other peoples' histories do not count. We see this narrow, elitist, racist attitude in the foreign policies of nations, the activities of churches, and in the curriculums of educational institutions. Whether Europeans are discussing a nuclear freeze or doing theology, they often act as if other people's viewpoints do not have to be taken seriously. If blacks or any other people define their freedom struggle in terms of the superiority of their culture over others, they will experience a similar fate as whites. A healthy respect for one's culture does not mean disdain for others. On the contrary, genuine respect for one's culture *necessarily* leads to a similar respect and love for other cultures. Martin King was right: we are bound to each other—not just blacks with blacks or whites with whites or Mexicans with Mexicans, but all races of people are one human family, made in the image of God for freedom.

3) Martin and Malcolm teach us the importance of courageous, intelligent, and dedicated leadership. The black community in particular, and

poor people generally, are in dire need of such leaders. Too many of their leaders merely talk about freedom for all while gathering the benefits of freedom only for themselves and other middle class people of their group.

It is well known that neither Martin nor Malcolm benefited financially from the movements they led, and each paid the ultimate price—death. But they were more than just courageous and dedicated leaders; they were also intellectuals, fiercely committed to the continued development of their minds through a disciplined program of study. Martin King began the development of his mind through formal education, acquiring the Ph.D. in theology by the age of 26; he continued his education during his movement days by attracting the best minds around him, holding many retreats with his staff, debating the issues of nonviolence, civil disobedience, black power, and Vietnam. Malcolm began his intellectual development with a program of reading that he began in prison and continued until his death. Both Martin and Malcolm realized that no people can achieve freedom as long as their leaders are ignorant about how the economic and political systems of the world came into being, and how they function today.

One of the chief functions of the leader is to teach the people how to organize themselves for the purpose of achieving their freedom. Organizing for freedom requires thinking about the meaning of freedom and developing a method to implement freedom in the society. Instruction of the young is very important because they are the bearers of the future.

One of the most serious weaknesses of Martin and Malcolm was their tendency to be too charismatic in their leadership styles, thereby encouraging their followers to bestow on them a messianic image. People began to think that Martin or Malcolm alone would save them, rather than seeing the need for their own involvement in the struggle. A good leader works him/herself out of a job by teaching others to do the work of liberation that was initially begun by professionals. Unfortunately, Martin and Malcolm were not very effective in training others to carry on their work.

4) The most important contribution of Martin and Malcolm was their example of fidelity to the truth and their refusal to give up in despair in the face of difficult and stressful situations. When Malcolm was forced to break with Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, he did not lose hope. Instead, he searched deeply for a religious identity beyond Elijah's narrow sectarian views and for a political identity grounded in Africa. Malcolm's hope was derived from the universalism of his religion, the politics of the Third World, and the African-Americans he loved. Malcolm refused to turn his back on his people even when they rejected him. His last days were spent on the run, knowing that many people wanted to see him dead. But he refused to become paralyzed by the certainty of his end. He spent his last days trying to avoid death as he attempted to

develop his new vision of freedom and an organization to implement it. Ironically he was killed by the blacks he loved because he refused to remain boxed into a narrow, nationalism determined exclusively by color.

The central motif of Martin King's theology, during his later years, focused not on love as some interpreters have claimed, but on hope. It was a hope grounded in the black Christian tradition, reinforced by his personal faith, that the God of Moses, the prophets, and Jesus does not leave the little ones alone in bondage. Though King began his ministry with much dependence on the theological ideas he learned at Crozer Seminary and Boston University, the crisis of faith created by the Montgomery bus boycott caused him to realize that education alone is not enough to sustain one in times of trouble. One night, January 27, 1956, King received an ugly telephone call, threatening his life and the life of his family. This was not unusual because he received about 40 such calls daily; but for some reason this one caused him to lose his courage, and he wanted to find a way to withdraw quietly from the movement. He went to the kitchen and prayed:

> Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think that the cause we represent is right. But, Lord, I must confess that I am weak now; 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." At that moment, Martin said he heard an inner voice saying to him: "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you even until the end of the world.[29]

The "kitchen experience," as it might be called, represented Martin's appropriation for his personal life the black faith that he had been taught as a child. It was this faith that sustained him from Montgomery to Memphis, enabling him to carve out hope amid wretched circumstances. When many of his friends and supporters rejected him because of his opposition to President Johnson's war policies, he responded, "I don't care what white person or Negro criticizes me, [because] I must take this stand because it's right." According to the black religious experience, "if you are right, God will fight your battle."[30] God did not promise that we would not have troubles or that freedom would be easy to achieve. Rather God promised that we would not be left alone in struggle. That is the faith and the hope that sustained Martin King, enabling him to say:

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[29] "Thou Fool," a sermon preached by King at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, August 27, 1967, Chicago, pp. 13-14. Martin King made several references to this experience. See *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 134f. and *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 112f.

[30] "Standing By the Best in an Evil Time," a sermon by King preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, August 6, 1967, p. 7.

I tell you, I've seen the lightening flash. I've heard the thunder roar. I've felt sin-breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul, but I heard the voice of Jesus saying, 'Still to fight on.' He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me. Never to leave me alone.[31]

[31] "Thou Fool," p. 14.