

Professor James Cone

Thank you very much. I am very pleased to be part of this Malcolm X Study Group and have found the group to be very stimulating particularly in my ideas about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. And since I have been doing research on Martin Luther King and Malcolm X for about seven years now, I always find it very difficult to talk about Martin King without talking about Malcolm X or talk about Malcolm X without talking about Martin King. So even today, there will be some reference to Martin King as we talk about Malcolm X because Martin King and Malcolm X belong to two streams of The Black Experience commonly called nationalism and integration. I want to talk particularly something about the background of Malcolm X's theology and thinking largely from within the context of the nationalist perspective as defined by our presence here in the United States.

I want to begin talking about Malcolm with a quotation from Malcolm himself. It's from his autobiography, in which he said,

“People are always speculating about why am I as I am. To understand any person his life from birth must be reviewed. All experiences fuse into our personality everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient.”

No one has pointed out the past and current injustices of American society in relation to its inhabitants of African descent as trenchantly and as truthfully as Malcolm X whether he was speaking to whites at Harvard University or to the Blacks on the streets of Harlem. The force and the veracity of his language compelled people to listen to him. Nothing was more important to Malcolm X than telling the truth about black white relations in the United States and the world. He did not speak a truth that was derived from a university education. Malcolm X spoke a truth that he had lived, a truth that came from the bottom of the Black experience and not from the privileges of the Black middle class. He rejected Martin King's idea of integration and defined his identity as an affirmation of Blackness in opposition to America. “I am Black first,” he said, “my sympathies are Black, my allegiance is Black, my whole objectives are Black. I am not interested in being an American because America has never been interested in me.” In opposition to Martin King's middle class American dream of “we shall overcome,” “Black and white together,” Malcolm X looked at America from the vantage point of what he called “The Negro in the mud,” and invoked the contrasting image of the ??? more to describe the socio-political reality of this nation for the vast majority of Black people. “While King was having a dream” he said about the March on Washington “the rest of us Negroes are having a nightmare.” Now just as Martin King's dream has been grossly distorted by friend and foe alike, Malcolm's nightmare has suffered a similar fate. It is important to note that the distorted images of both persons are largely due to the work of the

same people who regard themselves as friends and admirers of Martin King but not Malcolm. As Martin King is in danger of being romanticized into a saint, Malcolm is often portrayed as a merchant of hate and a formentor of violence. No person's philosophy has been more maligned than Malcolm X. According to his enemies, particularly significant segments in the media, government, church, education, and civil rights establishment, Malcolm X was an extreme demagogue who was destroyed by the violence that he spawned. He was assassinated February 21, 1965. The media unleashed its venom against him. Newsweek called him "an extravagant talker, a demagogue who ??? the slum Negroes and frightened whites with his blazing racist attacks on the white devils, and he called for an armed American Mau Mau." Time said "He was an unashamed demagogue whose gospel was hatred and who in life and death was a disaster to the civil rights movement." Columnist Walter Winchell of The Journal of America referred to Malcolm "as a petty punk who pictured himself as a heroic figure." The National described him "a highly courageous intelligent leader of one segment of The Negro lunatic fringe." It was difficult for the white liberal media to evaluate Malcolm's life and thought without being excessively influenced by their own prejudices. That's why The Saturday Evening Post said of his biography that was forthcoming "If Malcolm were not a Negro, his autobiography would not be little more than a journal of abnormal psychology, the story of a burglar, dope pusher, addict, and jail bird, with a family history of insanity who acquired messianic delusions set forth to preach an upside down philosophy of brotherly hatred. We shall be lucky if Malcolm X is not succeeded by even weirder and more virulent extremists." During his life and immediately following his assassination, the Black media was often as intemperate and equally less informed and prejudiced as the white media in their evaluation of Malcolm. Of course Muhammad Speaks, the official organ of the Nation of Islam, was well known for its vicious attacks upon Malcolm particularly after his break with Elajah Muhammad. ?????, then Director of the United States Information Agency, was greatly disturbed about the high tributes that African and Asian countries paid to Malcolm when he was assassinated. He said he "could not understand all of the thoughts about an ex-convict, ex-dope peddler who became a racial fanatic. ?????, another Black newspaper contended that Malcolm made no contribution to the gains in social justice, he merely caused discord contrary "to the founding fathers of the republic." Now of course, Malcolm's hate and anti-white image is not widely promoted, certainly not as much today as it was during and immediately following his death. His name is increasingly being portrayed in a positive manner today in the Black community, but the earlier voluminous appraisals of Malcolm did their carnage and their effects still linger today. They encourage people not to take Malcolm seriously as a contributor to the Black struggle for justice. His enemies would prefer that he be forgotten. Malcolm therefore suffers today not only from a distorted image but from historical amnesia. There are people, particularly among the young who have never heard of him. Even Black college students still refer to him sometimes as "Malcolm 10." With such wide spread hostile interpretations of Malcolm X, it is important that we at this conference take him seriously and make sure that Malcolm receives his

due. And it is within that context that I want to say a word about the origin of his thinking and how he understood himself. Now the experience of oppression forces a people to ask a question of their identity—Who are we? Now how a people answer that question determines their relationship to each other and also determines their response to the society that refuses to recognize their humanity. Oppression destroys people who ?????? devalues history and the culture of the victim and declares that they have no identity save that defined by slavery. Now as the victims are confronted by an assault on their humanity they are presented with a choice—surrender to the value system of the slave master or fight for the right to be who one is as defined by their past before slavery. Now of course, the choice is never so neatly defined. History is much more complex and ambiguous but this brief analysis is useful in clarifying the dilemma of African American-African who have been enslaved and segregated in America for nearly 400 years. No one stated the problem as sharply as did DuBois. “Here then is the dilemma,” said DuBois, “What after all am I, am I American or Negro? Can I be both, or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American.”

Now Martin King and other integrationists answered the question unquestionably by affirming the American side of their identity, but the Black nationalist, Malcolm’s tradition, has been equally as adamant in affirming the African side of theirs, because integrationists have been the dominant spokespersons for the freedom movement. The nationalist perspective in American, as Martin in relation to Malcolm, has not been given its proper due. The claim of all Black nationalists, past and present, is that Black people are not primarily Americans. “We are” said Malcolm “Africans who happen to be in America. We were kidnapped and brought here from Africa against our will, we didn’t land on Plymouth Rock, it landed on us.” Our significance and purpose, therefore, as a people is not determined by the Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, or even the white man’s religion of Christianity. We are defined by our resistance to America and its documents of freedom, and by our determination to create a society based on our history and culture. The rejection of America and an acceptance of Africa sometimes symbolizes Blackness is the central difference between nationalism and integrationism and it penetrates the very psychic depths of the personality of Black people. This difference in emotional relations to America often leads to sharp differences regarding the definition of freedom and you can see it especially in relation to Martin and Malcolm and also regarding the means by which one might achieve that freedom. You can see that in relation to Martin and Malcolm. For Malcolm freedom is not people pleading and begging for integration into the white man’s society, rather it means separation wherein Black people can rule themselves and define themselves. Freedom is political, cultural, economical, religious, cultural independence of a people. No people can be free who are the slaves of others. It is from this tradition and from this context that Malcolm’s thinking must be understood. Martin King didn’t say I am an American, I love America no matter how alienated he’d become, but Malcolm will

say I love Africa I love Black people. Malcolm's thinking therefore is defined by a love that comes out of his own experience, namely The Black Experience, and the source of the authority for that thinking comes from there. That's why he can develop what I would call "a new logic" a new way of looking at the world, which is defined not by his faith in a God in the Christian tradition, but by his analysis of history.

There is a logic of history. That's why Malcolm can say "The time we are living in and are facing now is not an era where one who is oppressed is looking toward the oppressor to give him some system of _____ logic or reason. What is logical to the oppressor isn't logical to the oppressed. And what is reason to the oppressor isn't reason to the oppressed. Black people in this country are beginning to realize what sounds reasonable to those who exploit us doesn't sound reasonable to us. There just has to be a new system of reason and logic devised by us who are at the bottom." That's why Malcolm can say "Don't let any body who's oppressing you lay down the ground rules. Don't go by their game. Let them know it's a new game." The new game that Malcolm was developing is a way of thinking that emerges from the bottom of the Black experience and not from the top.