

## Compare and contrast the role of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in combating the problems of racism and inequality between black and white people

At a Washington press conference in 1964, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X met, separated by a mere difference of opinion. Both men lived in a racially divided country, where their race had the worst jobs, lived in city slum ghettos and were publicly segregated in the North; such conditions were extreme in the South. King compared the 1955 Montgomery Bus boycott, where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, to an incident in his youth when he was forced to stand on a coach for 90 miles, making him “*the angriest I have ever been in my life*”<sup>i</sup>. Malcolm X found that racial discouragement at school and the story of the attack on his home by the Ku Klux Klan before his birth, led him to believe that “*our enemy is the white man*”<sup>ii</sup>. Challenging the establishment provoked race riots in the late 1950s: something that King and Malcolm X became an integral part of.

Born into a Southern middle class family in 1929, Martin Luther King Junior was raised by strict Protestant parents. Martin Luther King Senior was himself the great-grandson of a devout Baptist preacher – adhering to such traditions clearly influenced King’s later speeches, which were renowned for invoking passion in crowds, rather than mirroring Malcolm X’s fury at white intimidation. Heading northwards to college and then university, the inquisitive King became involved with a number of student organisations, leading the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Subsequent desegregation protests led to King’s arrest and the firebombing of his house, highlighting severe, yet periodically acceptable, discrimination. Similarly in

1961 black Freedom Riders started riding on white buses, which led to King taking over control, thus provoking violence from the Ku Klux Klan, among other offenders. King eventually graduated with a degree in divinity and continued the family business as a Protestant Church Minister – in some ways his approach seemed modelled on the work of Gandhi. King seems to have learnt Benjamin Haynes' lessons, like hypocrisy, integrity and morality, which would be defining features in his speeches that provided the moral fibre needed to face the omnipresent racism.

Malcolm Little however was born into a large working class family, also in the South, in 1925. With his father murdered by the KKK and his mother institutionalised soon afterwards, Malcolm Little had a traumatic childhood after suffering mistreatment by white foster parents. Not surprisingly, he quit school thereafter and paralleled King by moving up North, delving into a life of crime as the 'Detroit Red' until his arrest and subsequent imprisonment in 1946. It was during his long jail sentence that he divested his slave surname 'Little', donning his African-American unknown surname, hence the letter 'X'. Along with this came a revelation as Malcolm X discovered the Nation of Islam, self-educated himself and became a Muslim preacher for the Honourable Elijah Muhammad, NOI leader, who taught Malcolm X the importance of being a good Muslim through selflessness, virtue and an absence of alcohol/drugs to ensure a clean lifestyle, thus encouraging him to be his spokesman. Other influences upon Malcolm X's oratory seemed inspired by B.T. Washington and Marcus Garby, a preacher of black separatism and the 'nation within a nation' concept – such underlying factors eventually became part of his solution to racial harmony.

Malcolm X did not actively use religion to give purpose to his arguments, unlike King. Alongside preaching Islam, Malcolm X was a socialist who tried not to let religion dominate his ideas – instead he believed it to be personal and therefore encouraged many religious creeds to put their differences *‘in the closet’<sup>iii</sup>* and interpret his messages individually. However when Harlem Police beat a fellow Muslim in 1957, the NOI managed to hospitalise the Muslim whilst invoking a \$70,000 suit for damages. But in pursuit of personal religious enlightenment, Malcolm X saw both black and white Muslims happily united on his pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon return to America, Malcolm X recognised how he had been manipulated and broke with the Nation of Islam in 1963. His views slightly softened, he started to accept integration through Orthodox Islam, but nevertheless formed the Organisation of Afro-American Unity (who promoted economic, social and political independence). Malcolm X’s speeches ostensibly lacked religious meaning but nevertheless King’s religion gained him mixed support through imagery and church singing. As a trustworthy and devout Protestant, King observed racial behaviour and developed his ideas through metaphors, attracting varied middle class support (although dismissive of his own background), helped by his charismatic, passionate tone and broad vocabulary. After visiting independence ceremonies in Africa and Ghana, King realised *“that non-violent resistance was the most potent weapon available to oppressed people”<sup>iv</sup>*. This featured predominantly in King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech, voiced after the 1963 march on Washington. Nevertheless where King was attracting more Southern support, Malcolm X focused his attention on the North, using his history as a reference to condemn his stereotypical blonde blue-eyed white man for his mistreatment of blacks and to emphasise black superiority, remembered for his ‘Ballot or Bullet’ speech. He promoted Black Nationalism through examples to instil a sense

of belonging in his followers. Using extravagant sarcasm in a witty, blunt and bitter way, he connected well with the lower classes in back alleys and gambling halls.

Malcolm X considered the strive for voting rights trivial until later in his career, but instead incorporated separatism into the 'nation within a nation' idea, so as to improve everyday life for blacks – if they did not want to return to African roots, then they should at least have their own land, businesses, towns and black government (coincidentally the Black Panthers' programme provided advice, health clinics and paid jobs for young blacks). Since white support was discouraged, he began touring Africa and the Middle East in 1964, in search of other black populations. King became a celebrity through good relationships with white empathisers, as the media espoused his cause, unlike Malcolm X. Birmingham, Alabama 1963 saw changing tactics, where non-violent protests against segregation were broadcast via SCLC manipulation of the media, discouraging some pro-segregation business leaders and leading to similar Southern demonstrations, providing impetus for another Civil Rights Bill that year. King's aims united all Americans under the same flag through integration, but focused on gaining black voting rights, which he hoped to achieve with some help from President Kennedy.

King's influential relationship with President Kennedy secured him a political foothold that allowed for the passing of major race relations bills. When a group of black students had previously tried to get served food at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensborough they were arrested, along with King, who Kennedy rescued from four months hard labour. Malcolm X however had to rely upon the Black Panthers group and lower class urban youths bent on black revolution that “*destroys*

*everything in its way*'<sup>2v</sup>. Dissimilar to Malcolm X, King aimed to get civil rights first so that subsequent legislation would improve everyday life for blacks legally. One way to orchestrate this, which appears to flaw King's non-violent policies (where a Memphis strike turned violent), was to shock by provoking violence from white police, as has been the case in many filmed incidents of King, who used the 1965 Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery in this way. The 1964 Freedom Summer Project, for example, registered black voters and educated black schoolchildren, bringing a lot of publicity to Mississippi, where there were 750 whites out of 1000 volunteers. Malcolm X however used displays of defiance to scare off white attackers. This made him a role model for some young black organisations living in the ghettos but distanced him from the rest of the world, most of whom deemed him a racist, extremist and a hindrance to gaining civil rights.

Yet civil rights were achieved for blacks in the end, despite both leaders being shot in 1968 (King by white extremists; Malcolm X by black NOI extremists). Both were unpopular with certain groups during their day but generally the support they gained more than compensated for this. Civil Rights Acts illegalised discrimination in public places in 1964; banned literacy tests for black voters in 1965; and stopped racial discrimination with regards to home finance in 1968. King was thought to have been the initiator behind these successes and is therefore remembered as the greater man, yet Malcolm X developed links with the South American, Asian and African Third World Liberation movement and worked closely with the Black Panthers to improve life for blacks. Malcolm X may be viewed as having failed in his objectives because his ideas were too extravagant and made King appear a safer alternative. Yet nowadays blacks incorporate cultural aspects of their heritage into their lifestyles

within an integrated community. White influence guarantees that King is remembered, but Malcolm X's position has been under appreciated and forgotten by some. Barack Obama, the new American president, has been compared to both characters and now sits a black man in the White House.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted by Martin Luther King, cited in Clayborn Carson (ed), *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr*, New York (1998). Taken from p15, John A. Kirk, *Martin Luther King JR*, Pearson Education Limited (2005).

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted by Malcolm X, p354, A. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Penguin Books (1965).

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted by Malcolm X, taken from the website:

<http://famouspeeches.blogspot.com/2008/02/famous-speeches-malcolm-x-message-to.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> Cited in Ibid, pp132, 134. Taken from p38, Kirk, *Martin Luther King JR*.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Malcolm X's Cleveland speech in April 1964. Taken from p89, B.J. Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, Pearson Education Limited (2004).