

DIVINE RAGE

Malcolm X's Challenge to Christians

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Introduction

“We Cannot Let Violence Overcome Nonviolence”

She had not known—Diane Nash recalled, three months after the fact—she had not known in the church that night just how in danger she was.¹ On May 21, 1961, a mob of enraged local white residents surrounded the First Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama. Inside the church, a service was being held in support of visiting civil rights activists, including Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and the Freedom Riders, an interracial group traveling together to challenge segregation in interstate bus travel. Among the Freedom Riders was the twenty-one-year-old John Lewis, his head covered with a bandage after being attacked by another mob at the Montgomery bus station a day earlier.² The around-one-thousand people in the church could hear the gathering mob outside, and they soon realized they had been surrounded. With no protection from the local police, those inside were forced to stay the night, praying they would survive.³ The church’s pastor, Reverend Solomon Seay, led the gathering in singing freedom songs, as King retreated into the minister’s office and spoke on the phone with the United States attorney general, Robert F. Kennedy, for hours, pleading with him to convince his brother, President John F. Kennedy, to send in federal troops.⁴ Nash, despite her self-consciousness about her weak singing voice, sang along with the congregation as they prayed for their lives and for their freedom.⁵ “In the dire danger in which we were that night,” she said later, “no one expressed anything except concern for freedom and the thought that someday we’ll be free. We stayed there until

dawn and everyone was naturally tired, but no one said so ... I don't think I've ever seen a group of people band together as the crowd in the church did that night."⁶

The twenty-three-year-old Nash was, in large part, responsible for the Freedom Rides that had put the gathering in so much danger. The original Freedom Rides, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), had come to a dramatic and violent halt after a mob brutally attacked the Freedom Riders and fire-bombed the Greyhound bus in which they had been traveling, causing them to abandon the rest of their trip through the Jim Crow South. Lewis and Nash were insistent about the need to make an excruciating decision: the Freedom Rides could not be ended by violence. Nash, the leader of the Nashville branch of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), led the charge in organizing Nashville-based volunteers to continue the Freedom Rides.⁷ Neither she nor those she organized were naïve about the dangers facing them. In the 2010 PBS documentary *Freedom Riders*, John Seigenthaler, who had served as assistant to the attorney general, recalled making a phone call to Nash, attempting to convince her to call off the Freedom Rides by warning her of the violence those involved would face. As he raised his voice, asking her if she realized that someone could get killed, she replied calmly: "Sir, you should know, we all signed our last wills and testaments last night before they left. We know someone will be killed. But we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence."⁸

Nash and Lewis were both fierce proponents of the Christian Gandhian philosophy of nonviolent direct action that gave shape to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Their teacher, Reverend James Lawson—the teacher of all of the Nashville-based student leaders—had first been introduced to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's philosophy through the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), whose executive secretary,

A. J. Muste, was a Presbyterian minister, labor activist, and a staunch pacifist.⁹ Lawson, inspired by the tenets of Christian nonviolence, had served a year in prison as a draft resister and conscientious objector to the war in Korea. He then spent three years in Nagpur, India, with Methodist missionaries, with the primary objective of learning more about Gandhi and the movement he had initiated on the ground.¹⁰ Gandhi's teaching of *satyagraha* or soul-force (his word for "nonviolence"), he felt, was the very embodiment of what he most admired in the life of Jesus Christ.¹¹ For Gandhi himself, *satyagraha* was the necessary political counterpart of the "single-minded devotion (*abhyasa*) [to the Truth, i.e., God] and indifference to all other interests in life (*vairagya*)" lauded by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*.¹² It was a political commitment rooted in spiritual discipline:

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 ... So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self.

But on the political field the struggle on behalf of the people mostly consists in opposing error in the shape of unjust laws. When you have failed to bring the error home to the lawgiver by way of petitions and the like, the only remedy open to you, if you do not wish to submit to error, is to compel him by physical force to yield to you or by suffering in your own person by inviting the penalty for the breach of law ... There come occasions, generally rare, when [the civil resister] considers certain laws to be so unjust as to render obedience to them a dishonour. He then openly and civilly breaks them and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach.¹³

Lawson, like others in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, saw in this originally Hindu philosophy a perfect explanation of the “soul-force” of Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection.

Lawson left India firmly convinced of the capacity of a non-violent mass movement of civil disobedience to produce not only revolutionary political change, but, more profoundly, an entire way of being grounded in love and the recognition of each person’s divine dignity: *the beloved community*.¹⁴ Lawson, along with other veterans of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, especially Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley, were instrumental in converting the most visible leader of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr., into a committed disciple of Gandhi. Rustin, too, had spent time in India, and saw in Gandhian non-violence a model of an “anticolonial” and “confrontational” popular movement that had the potential to attack racial injustice at its root in the United States.¹⁵ When Rustin first met King, then a twenty-eight-year-old minister and recent PhD who had been selected as the spokesperson for the Montgomery bus boycott, King had, Rustin said later, “very limited notions about how a nonviolent protest should be carried out.”¹⁶ It was in engaging in the struggle itself, Rustin said, in actually living out the commitment demanded by campaigns of nonviolent direct action that King came to an understanding of Gandhi’s philosophy.¹⁷

The same was true for Nash, who, despite the intense violence, incarceration, and danger she and other SNCC activists faced, assented to the core concepts of Christian Gandhian nonviolence wholeheartedly and uncompromisingly: “We have decided that if there is to be suffering in this revolution (which is really what the movement is—a revolution), we will take the suffering upon ourselves and never inflict it upon our fellow man, because we respect him and recognize the God within him.”¹⁸ For her and for the other Nashville-based students of

Lawson, nonviolence was more than a successful tactic; it was divine revelation. SNCC's statement of purpose proclaimed this core belief: "We affirm the philosophical or religious idea of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society."¹⁹ The profound courage demonstrated by the Freedom Riders testifies to the radical nature of this creed, as does the extraordinary success of campaigns of sustained nonviolent direct action to end legal segregation in the South. While the civil rights movement of the 1960s is often portrayed as a "moderate" or "reformist" movement, it was in fact, as Clayborne Carson has argued, a profoundly radical and truly mass movement unlike anything that had been seen in the United States for decades.²⁰ Dorothy Zellner, a white staff member of SNCC, summarized succinctly the revolutionary character of the movement: "I tell people that we probably, for those brief years, are the only Americans who ever experienced racial equality ... Not because we weren't racial, because everybody knew and was conscious of that, but because the context was, if you're going to be with us you're going to take a bullet."²¹

Black against Babylon: The Rise of Black Power

By the mid-1960s, however, the mood of many in the movement had changed. The tactics espoused by civil rights activists had proved remarkably effective in inspiring the racial sympathies of northerners for Black people in the South, and had facilitated a number of significant legal victories, most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Measurable change for the lives of Black people living in the northern

ghettos, however, was absent. Efforts for desegregation both in the South and the North (e.g., school desegregation) continued to face adamant white resistance and violence. The sympathy of northern whites for the desegregating protestors of the South often did not carry over into a desire to dismantle the barriers to social and economic well-being of Black people in their own cities, and police brutality continued unabated. A number of assassinations of and attacks on Black leaders exacerbated a feeling of despair and frustration. Participants in the movement had become uncertain of its founding principles as suspicions grew that calls to universal love and reconciliation masked the power relations that perpetuated racism, or, worse, actually undercut recognition of Black humanity. In 1964, the Black Baptist minister and scholar Joseph R. Washington Jr. criticized the civil rights movement's philosophy of nonviolence in its insistence that protestors act not in a human, but in a "superhuman" manner in response to violence: "When a pregnant woman is kicked in the streets of Birmingham, dignity [according to the philosophy of nonviolence] demands that neither she nor anyone else protect either her or the unborn innocent child. At this point nonviolence loses any claim to being human and takes on superhuman qualities."²² These critiques became gradually more mainstream and more strident. Calls to remain non-violent, argued Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), had "misled some into believing that a black minority could bow its head and get whipped into a meaningful position of power ... From our viewpoint, rampaging white mobs and white night-riders must be made to understand that their days of free head-whipping are over. Black people should and must fight back."²³

Figures like Lewis and Nash had become, by the mid-'60s, a "minority" within SNCC,²⁴ something made eminently clear when Lewis was replaced as chairman of SNCC by Stokely Car-

michael, who represented both the more militant and the more northern (Carmichael was born in Trinidad and raised in New York) shift in emphasis for the movement.²⁵ Unlike Lewis and Nash, Carmichael's initial "allegiance to nonviolence rested more on practical than on moral considerations."²⁶ It would be a mistake, however, to characterize Carmichael's approach as secular and pragmatic as opposed to the spiritual vision of activists like Lewis, Nash, Lawson, King, and Rustin. Carmichael's increasing valorization of armed self-defense and Black separatism was not a *rejection* of the spiritual grounding of the earlier civil rights movement. It was, instead, an embrace of an alternative spiritual vision.

"How is this beautiful race of people, black people, gonna survive Babylon?" Carmichael asked his audience in February 1968, at a Black Panther Party (BPP) rally, following SNCC's merger with the BPP.²⁷ Babylon, the empire that invaded, conquered, and held captive the population of the Kingdom of Judah in the sixth century BCE, was the preferred name of Black nationalists for America.²⁸ For Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Black nationalist religious group the Nation of Islam, the ancient destruction of Babylon, which, according to the Bible, fell due to its wealth, pride, and corruption,²⁹ was an event that could only be fully witnessed in the imminent fall of the modern-day Babylon, America.³⁰ Elijah Muhammad's language, and especially the language of his most famous protégé, Malcolm X, now animated the imagination of the movement in the way that the words of Gandhi and King had done for the proponents of Christian nonviolence. "That nation that is doomed to be judged by God is America," Malcolm X had proclaimed in a 1961 sermon at the New York Church of God.

It's Uncle Sam who today is guilty for the crime that he has committed against these twenty million black people.

If God condemned Pharaoh for enslaving those people, and God condemned Nebuchadnezzar for enslaving those people in Babylon, and a man here today more vicious than Nebuchadnezzar ever was, more vicious than Pharaoh ever was, has enslaved our people and brutalized our people in this house of bondage for longer than four hundred years. And if you think that God judged Pharaoh for what he did, and that God judged Nebuchadnezzar for what he did, and God is going to forgive the [pounds fist on the podium] American white man who has brutalized you worse than anybody ever has, I say you got the wrong understanding.³¹

Carmichael, a few years later, spoke with the same fire and the same religious references. “When Moses crossed the Red Sea he left some people behind,” he preached in 1966. “We are going to leave some Uncle Toms behind.”³²

Behind these words of Muhammad, Malcolm, and Carmichael is the legacy of what is sometimes called Black messianic-nationalism.³³ From Marcus Garvey’s African Orthodox Church, to the Moorish Science Temple of America, to Black Hebrew Israelites, to the Shrine of the Black Madonna, to (most prominently of all) the Nation of Islam, these religious groups—always marginal to the Black American experience, but also highly influential on Black political thought—reject “Negro’ identity as an oppressive white creation” and advocate instead for “the substitution of a new ethnic identity predicated on a belief in the unique spiritual importance of Black people.”³⁴ The social scientists who coined the term, Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, listed the “core features” of messianic-nationalism as:

- (1) belief in a glorious Black past and subsequent “fall” from grace;

- (2) vocal opposition to and criticism of American society and whites in general;
- (3) anticipation of divine retribution against the white oppressors;
- (4) assertion of Black sovereignty through the development of various rituals and symbols, such as national flags, anthems, and dress, and a separatist economic base as well as, plus at least in some cases, an interest in territorial separation or emigrationism; and
- (5) chiliastic and messianic expectations of a new golden age for Black people.³⁵

These groups, throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, proclaimed God's rage against white America and foretold that God would manifest the mental and spiritual "resurrection" of their people.³⁶

Malcolm X, drawing on this long tradition, offered an alternative vision to that of the beloved community shared by Nash and other believers in a nonviolent revolution. Malcolm instead saw in the global, armed anticolonial resistance of non-white peoples a manifestation of God's righteous wrath: "It is the rise of the dark world that is causing the fall of the white world," he asserted in a 1963 speech.

As the white man loses his power to oppress and exploit the dark world, the white man's own wealth (power or "world") decreases. His world is on its way down; it is on its way out ... and it is the will and power of God himself that is bringing an end to the white world ... Judgment day is the final hour when God himself sits in the seat of justice and judges these white nations (or the white world) according to the deeds they committed and the seeds they sowed when they themselves sat in the seat of power.³⁷

Even after departing the Nation of Islam in 1964, Malcolm X retained the apocalyptic worldview of his earlier speeches. “I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing,” he told an interviewer in January 1965, soon before his assassination the following month. “I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice, and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation.”³⁸ As South African theologian Willa Boesak has argued, it is impossible to understand the political demands made by Malcolm X without taking into account his theological worldview: for Malcolm, “resolving God’s wrath requires a thorough redress of the wrongs blacks have had to suffer.”³⁹ The delay of this justice had, for Malcolm, an expiration date: the overdue bill would be collected if it were not paid. He continued to describe, as he had for years, though previously in more explicitly religious terms, the Black struggle as part of “a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.”⁴⁰ Soon, people would have to choose what side they were on.

For many who had witnessed the horrors of white violence in the Jim Crow South or the degradation and injustices faced by Black urban communities in the North, Malcolm’s words gave voice to what they barely dared say, or hope. As the 1960s went on, more and more longed for the fall of Babylon he and Muhammad before him had preached. The message would ignite a period of revolutionary fervor in American politics that no one could ignore—echoes of which can still be heard today.

Martin versus Malcolm: A Theological Debate

What would it mean to see Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, on one hand, and Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, on the other, as providing competing religious frameworks for

Americans engaged in the struggle for justice? It would, at the very least, challenge the way in which the civil rights and Black Power movements are usually portrayed. As Kerry Pimblott has recently argued, the standard narrative about Black organizing in the second half of the twentieth century contrasts the “centrality” of Black churches for the movement from 1955 to 1965 with a “secularizing” and especially non-Christian turn in the rise of Black Power from 1966 onward. Pimblott demonstrates to the contrary both that the role of Black churches was more ambivalent than typically understood for the earlier civil rights movement, and that Christian institutions continued to engage in different ways with the later Black Power movement.⁴¹ The portrayal of the Black Power movement as largely secular or even anti-religious also does not take into account how, in the words of Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, the Nation of Islam “dominat[ed]” the discourse on Black nationalism that gave birth to Black Power.⁴² The fact that most Black Power advocates were not Muslim made no more difference than that most civil rights era Gandhians were not Hindu. Malcolm X, by adapting the Nation of Islam’s Black nationalist mythology into a theology of anti-colonial struggle undertaken by the non-white world majority, offered a new and galvanizing spiritual worldview for many disillusioned with the Gandhianism espoused by earlier movement leaders. While some activists would follow Malcolm X out of Christianity to Islam, others would adapt Malcolm X’s theology to different religious and cultural contexts. The emergence of Black liberation theology during this time is only one among many examples of religious figures and communities grappling with the challenge posed by Malcolm X, and it is not the only example of Christians doing so.

The importance of viewing the differences between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X as religious, however, goes beyond reframing our understanding of political movements

in the 1960s and 1970s. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.—and their respective advocates—inspired one of the most important theological debates of the twentieth century, over the relationship between religion and violence. While the religious thought of Martin Luther King Jr. has frequently been treated seriously and analyzed, this has not always been true for Malcolm X. Historically, scholars have underemphasized the religious character of Malcolm X's life and thought, as Louis A. DeCaro Jr. has argued, preferring to interpret Malcolm X “primarily from a political perspective.”⁴³ More recently, scholars of religion and especially African American Islam have devoted attention to Malcolm X as a religious thinker and even as a theologian.⁴⁴

In this book, I aim to trace the transformative role of Malcolm X on American politics and religion, including his influence on Christian theology and communities. The chapters that follow will explore the remarkably wide-reaching impact of his theology on activists, scholars, artists, and others of all backgrounds. Beginning with his mysterious encounter with a non-white God beside his bed in his prison cell during the earliest days of his conversion, his ministry in Harlem, and his embrace of Sunni Islam, the book then turns to his spiritual influence after his death on the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power movement, Black liberation theology, and other revolutionary struggles. It tells the stories of Malcolm himself and of those who have been shaped and challenged and transformed by his religious thought. In the pages to come, my hope is that the voices of these figures—sometimes thrilled, sometimes horrified, sometimes prophetic, sometimes enamored, sometimes heartbroken—come through in all of their distinctness, charged with the power and pain of the movements they represent.