



TEACHING TOLERANCE

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
TOLERANCE.ORG

VIOLENCE PREVENTION // RECONSIDERING MALCOLM X

Handout II: The Language of Resistance

Along with Malcolm X's charisma came lots of controversy, especially because of the way the media portrayed his views on violence. Read the following statements, taking into account how similar or different the ideas presented are from the views of other religious or political leaders.

“There is nothing in our book, the Koran, that teaches us to suffer peacefully. Our religion teaches us to be intelligent. Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. That's a good religion.”

— *Message to the Grass Roots, speech, November 1963, Detroit, published in Malcolm X Speaks, Chapter 1, 1965*

1. What do other holy books say about violence? Do religious texts offer contradictory messages about violence? On what scripture did Martin Luther King Jr. base non-violent resistance?
2. What is your personal belief about responding to violence?
3. With what values in this statement do you agree or disagree?

“if violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it is wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it is wrong for America to draft us, and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country.”

— *Speech, November 1963, New York City*

1. Consider the logic in this statement. If Malcolm X believed the Vietnam War was wrong, would that mean he believed all violence was wrong? If he believed it was not right to draft Americans to fight in the nation's defense abroad, would it be right to “do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country.”
2. What do you think Malcolm X believed was the root of violence in the United States? What point does he make by comparing the Vietnam War to anti-black violence?
3. Does self-defense always require violence? Can you protect or defend yourself and others without perpetrating violence?

“I believe in the brotherhood of man, all men, but I don't believe in brotherhood with anybody who doesn't want brotherhood with me. I believe in treating people right, but I'm not going to waste my time trying to treat somebody right who doesn't know how to return the treatment.”

— *Speech, December 1964, New York City*

1. What kind of strategy for dealing with disrespectful people can you derive from this statement? Do you agree?
2. Does this statement advocate any kind of retaliation toward disrespectful people? Explain.

3. Can you have brotherhood of all men if you refuse to engage with a disrespectful group? Why or why not?

They called me “the angriest Negro in America.” I wouldn’t deny that charge. I spoke exactly as I felt. “I believe in anger. The Bible says there is a time for anger.” They called me “a teacher, a fomenter of violence.” I would say point blank, “ at is a lie. I’m not for wanton violence, I’m for justice. I feel that if white people were attacked by Negroes—if the forces of law prove unable, or inadequate, or reluctant to protect those Whites from those Negroes—then those white people should protect and defend themselves from those negroes, using arms if necessary. And I feel that when the law fails to protect negroes from Whites’ attack, then those negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves.”

(The Autobiography of Malcolm X, chapter 19, 1965)

1. What distinction does this statement make between violence and justice? Are there differences between demanding justice, advocating self-defense and condoning violence? If so, what are they?
2. What precedents in other famous historical speeches, such as “liberty or death,” can you think of that justify protecting and defending your rights?
3. Do you think hearing Malcolm X’s anger necessarily made people want to commit violence? Can you describe a time when hearing about someone else’s anger and indignation made you angry enough to stand up for a cause?

“You can’t separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.”
— *Prospects for Freedom in 1965, New York City, published in Malcolm X Speaks, Chapter 12, 1965*

1. How does lack of freedom disrupt peace? Give examples.
2. Does lack of freedom mean people are subject to violence, or does it justify violence on the part of those lacking freedom? Explain your interpretation and what you think the statement implies.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

1. What similarities and differences do you see between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.?
2. if King and Malcolm X had survived, do you think they would have worked together? Did their two groups have consistent values? Why or why not?
3. How do you think Malcolm X wanted people to react to his words? What do you think he wanted people to do?
4. Does Malcolm X’s language seem similar to other famous speakers you know about? is there an American tradition of this kind of speech?

RESOURCES

The telegram MLK sent Betty Shabazz after assassination <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/primary-documents/Telegram-to-Mrs-MX-full.jpg>

Letter to Martin (<http://www.brothermalcolm.net/mxwords/letters/lettertomartin.gif>)

Malcolm X Papers Project (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/>)

Malcolm X quotations page (http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Malcolm_X/)

adaptation of pamphlet “Why i embraced islam” (http://www.colostate.edu/orgs/MSa/nd_more/m_x.html)