



## THE LIBERATION ETHICS OF MALCOLM X: SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

Among the many and greatly valued gifts and good of the legacy of El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, none is more important than his role as a moral teacher and the liberation ethics that formed the core of his teachings and shaped the essential character and course of his life's work and struggle in the world. As a moral teacher, Min. Malcolm X makes a critical contribution to a broader and more ancient ethical conversation than the Islamic space in which he crafts and speaks his special message to his people and the world.

Indeed, Malcolm comes into and contributes to a culturally-grounded and ethically focused conversation which is both ancient and current. It is one that reaches as far back in writing as the ethical texts and discourse of ancient Egypt with their emphasis on respect for humans as bearers of dignity and divinity, concern and care for the vulnerable and the moral obligation to speak truth to power and to the people and to struggle against *isfet*, i.e., evil, falsehood and injustice in the world. And this ethical conversation, in which Malcolm enters, is also as current as the contemporary Black Freedom Movement with its emphasis on human dignity, civil and human rights, freedom, racial, social and legal justice, and the responsibility to struggle against oppression, unfreedom and injustice in society and the world.

Malcolm contributes greatly to this ancient and ongoing conversation, honoring the social justice and social struggle tradition in which it is rooted. And as a Muslim, he is concerned that Muslims around the world respect and support our struggle and the struggles of other oppressed peoples of the world, if they "hope to make

the principles of the Quran a living reality". But Malcolm is first concerned with how we, ourselves, can conceive and live a morally good life, and a life free from domination, deprivation and degradation imposed on us.

Thus, he also calls on us to engage in an inclusive and transformative struggle to radically change ourselves and society, in a word, to "wake up, clean up and stand up". Asked what are our people to wake up to, he asserts "Wake up to their humanity, their worth and their heritage". Here, as I read Malcolm, he is talking about our identity and status as bearers of divinity and dignity, as representatives and expressions of the Divine and as possessors of an inherent worthiness defined by our ancestors of Kemet as *shepesu*, dignity.

Clearly, Malcolm, in all his teaching, reminds us that key to our identity and dignity is our history and culture which he calls heritage here. For Malcolm, as Kawaida contends, there is no dignity in denial of one's identity as a distinct people with a distinct history and culture which is an equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world. This is why he stresses as indispensable and most instructive the study of history and a cultural revolution to free our minds and "recapture our heritage and our identity, if we are to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy". Also, for Malcolm, a critical consciousness requires both expanded knowledge of the world and a liberational logic. Thus, he answers a letter from a brother in captivity saying "study hard where you are. Train your mind to think; weigh things well and analyze them for yourself".

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Malcolm asks us to strive also for moral grounding, a moral vision and set of values that not only represent a deep and determined commitment to good, but an equal dedication and determination to struggle to change the oppressive conditions of life which undermine and erode the good. He wants us to seek and speak a truth that enlightens and frees. Moreover, he wants us to be just to ourselves and each other. And he wants us to engage in an ongoing self-corrective and self-constructive process that yields “a moral discipline that makes it easy to walk the path of truth and righteousness” and strengthens us in the overall liberation struggle.

Thus, Malcolm tells and teaches us that we are to avoid destructive vices and embrace and practice virtues that strengthen us as persons and a people. And in this moral striving and grounding, the practice of unity becomes a compelling moral obligation. For both our defense and development as persons and a people depend on it. Thus, Malcolm teaches, “We must come together and hear each other before we can agree. We must agree before we can unite. (And) We must unite before we can effectively face our enemy” and oppressor.

And this righteous struggle is what he calls for when he challenges us to stand up and engage in transformative struggle which he understands as both an internal and external struggle for freedom, justice, equality and good in the world. Thus, for him, this righteous struggle becomes a central way of worship. For he understands

that ritual is not the whole of religion, that righteous practice is also prayer and that the ultimate test and testimony of one’s faith is the relentless fight waged to achieve a good world in which we all are free, flourish and come into “the fullness of ourselves”. And Malcolm believed we should be ready and willing to make the sacrifices and take the steps necessary to wage the liberation struggle. Thus, he states, “When I say ‘by any means necessary’, I mean it with all my heart, my mind and my soul”.

The following Quranic verses (9:44; 3:146) speaks clearly of Malcolm when it says “those who believe in Allah and the Last Day will never ask permission of you to be excused from struggle with their wealth and lives”. And “they never lost heart because of anything which befell them in the way of Allah, nor did they weaken, nor did they lower themselves. And Allah loves the steadfast”. So it is with the moral teacher and martyr for his people, El Hajj Malik. Let it be said a million times. He did not ask to be excused from struggle to preserve his meager wealth or because of threats to his life. Say too, he never lost heart because of whatever happened to him or weakened or humbled himself before the oppressor. Indeed, he struggled with strength, dignity and determination for good in the world and called on us to do likewise. This is the real meaning of his battle cry “freedom by any means necessary”: which is to give all we’ve got and do all it takes to achieve the good world and live a righteous and worthy life.

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