

The anti-slavery movement of the early twentieth century

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The anti-slavery movement of the early twentieth century took the form of the Civil Rights Movement, which influenced and was influenced by various other such movements for rights and equality. The history focuses much on Martin Luther King, when there were many others who were actively involved in movements for the same cause. Their writings, speeches and letters create the scope for comparison among them and show that though the means were different in many cases, the end was almost the same. The differences had cultural, religious, personal and social reasons, which are clearly visible in their leaders.

Three such famous works are the “ Letter from Birmingham Jail”, “ The Ballot or the Bullet”, and “ Race and Identity in America” by Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Glenn C. Loury respectively. While they all worked for gaining Civilian Rights for the Blacks, they are largely different in their approach and methods. This paper looks into the possible similarities and the evident differences and their relevancy to their leaders.

In the first place, there is an interesting comparison between the “ Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “ The Ballot or the Bullet” in terms of the underlying beliefs that drive the movement led by the two different leaders of the time. They show an acute connection between the two authors: Martin Luther King and Malcolm x: both were religious leaders and thinkers and so were their philosophies of their civil disobedience movements. Both of them agree that God is the supreme justice and that any person born on earth is entitled to personal dignity and worth, which is God-given. Both converge in yet another idea about human rights. They feel that it is something to be

claimed as they feel that they are not just human-rights but are God-given. Both of them considered that the black should be given the right to vote and that politics is to be used to a certain extent up until it helps realise a moral end. However, they differ in a few areas. There are strong disagreements between them on the concept of non-violence.

Letter from Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King is a response to the charges against his non-violent movement or retaliation. The local clergymen had charged his actions as extremism, as one that is not to be continued rather stopped immediately. Contrary to their opinion, the demonstrations staged by Martin Luther King were purely non-violent in nature and were aimed at creating tension and pressure that make the oppressor give the rights that have been long due. He explains in detail about the basic rights that have been denied to the black and the injustice meted to them by delaying justice. He is, however, against force or deliberate disobedience of law: " In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy" (Martin Luther King). He cites popular philosophers, the actions of faithful people in Biblical days and the decisions of Early Christians. His arguments are put forth efficiently addressing the Birmingham Clergy reasoning out the intentions of the civil rights demonstrations.

On the other hand, Malcolm X, in his speech " The Ballot of the Bullet" encourages the use of force to bring down the powerful " uncle Sam". While Martin Luther says, " you speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist", and indicates that he is not an

extremist and in no way would he encourage it, Malcolm X says: " If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out—time has run out!" (Malcolm X). All whites and the government are depicted as Uncle Sam, liable to be punished. Unlike Martin Luther, he acts like a political instigator and a powerful orator driving people to action involving force and hatred for the oppressor. He advocates Black Nationalism, which in turn is yet another form of segregation or separationist tendency.

Though both Malcolm and Martin Luther King agree upon the idea that it is unwise to sacrifice oneself under the brutal and unjust oppression, both differ in their attitudes about the other purpose of sacrifice. For Martin Luther, sacrifice is a higher path to gain freedom, but for Malcolm it is not. To a certain extent, their religious beliefs explain this difference; however the basic difference is rooted in their political philosophies. If not freedom, then bullet is the concept of Malcolm. But, Martin Luther believes that non-violent civil disobedience like that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but the context being a higher moral law at stake. Also, he agrees with Malcolm in the concept of time, that the blacks cannot wait or kept waiting for long and that action is required. But, the inevitable action in such an extreme wait is what differs between them.

Similarly, Glen C. Loury, in his *Race and Identity in America* agrees upon certain elements that appear in both Martin Luther's and Malcolm's. Identity and individuality plays a major role in self-estimate. It is part of enjoying the citizenship and basic human rights. In addition, he feels that being a black,

the personal identity is of critical interest and that one cannot deny his/her blackness and pass as a white. He, as much as Martin Luther, is concerned about the black identity which is being a 'nobody' than being a human. Very much similar to Martin Luther King's, he says "Who am I, then? Foremost, I am a child of God, created in his image, imbued with his spirit, endowed with his gifts, set free by his grace"

This is more of divine justice and sense of equality; similar to both the other leaders, Loury too displays strong belief in God's principle of equality and justice and opens his article with the verse from Acts "Then Peter opened his mouth and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." He insists on the individual dignity and God's righteousness against the justice given by the Whites.

In the light of the comparison, there should be reasons for the personal beliefs and the approaches each took toward Civil Rights Movement. In the case of Martin Luther King, who had a chance to get formal education, became fluent in the ideology of non-violence propagated by Gandhi, stands in stark contrast with Malcolm X, who experienced survival on the streets and gullies, unlike Martin Luther King. The latter had a bitter experience that made him fight for power than mere equality. But, the former was more sophisticated in thoughts and actions that he spoke of equality and not power. He talked of humanity and not authority. So, no doubt they both had a slightly different end, though they moved a social change towards Black emancipation. The latter went a step further in the anticipation of Black Power.

When looked at from the outside, Malcolm X's advocacy of militant action was a call for the Black people to stick together to fight the Whites for social justice. However, unlike Martin Luther King's proposal, this cause segregation between the whites and blacks though ensured rights for the blacks. While segregation survives, equality would be a distant dream.

All the three texts, when juxtaposed with each other serve to illuminate one another with their unique references to the contemporary political, social and economic scenario. Also, each author displays specific ideologies and convictions regarding the kind of action against racial discrimination. In addition, they reflect their understanding of Metaphysics and epistemology along with their religious beliefs.

I think that, with my interest in philosophy and religion, as well as the recent research in social activism as part of this course, I would be able to do justice to the comparison of these texts in a fair light of the contemporary political, social and religious philosophies.