

Malcom at His Finest - A book review

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Malcolm X at Oxford Union: Racial Politics in a Global Era, by Saladin Ambar (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, ISBN 978-0-19-997547-1) 224 pp. Cloth \$29.95.

Every time a new book about my greatest hero Malcolm X comes out, I am reminded of my brother's questions: "Do we really need another book about Malcolm X? How much more can we learn about him?" However, this book, like the late Manning Marable's 2011 tome, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, is an excellent contribution to the literature on the life and times of Malcolm X.

Scholar Saladin Ambar, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Lehigh University, bases the book around Malcolm's visit to Europe, particularly his 30-minute speech at a debate at Oxford Union, not long before his assassination.

Ambar persuasively argues that this debate was a hugely historically significant yet neglected contribution to Malcolm's oratorical oeuvre. Before the speech, Malcolm had traveled internationally, sharpening and broadening his worldview. He had gone from the narrow, dogmatic conception of Black nationalism foisted upon him by the Nation of Islam's (NOI) Elijah Muhammad, to what many scholars consider a global, humanistic worldview.

The author discusses what England was like during the 1960s. Due to immigration, the numbers of Asians and Blacks from the Caribbean and Africa had increased. Malcolm was aware of this and wanted to connect with Blacks in England, France and wherever they lived in the world. According to one of his colleagues, he had planned to travel to the Netherlands for this purpose before his life was cut short in a hail of bullets from NOI members.

The topic of the debate was focused around U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater's famous (or infamous) contention that "Extremism in the defense of Liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of Justice is no virtue." (Since the utterance of this statement, many philosophers have noted that it is based on fallacious reasoning.) Malcolm argued in the affirmative.

Though Malcolm lost the debate in the minds of most of those in attendance, he won many admirers, if not actual converts. More importantly, he was able to demonstrate that he was not the devil that the mainstream U.S. media made him out to be, and that his worldview had been transformed.

Malcolm made it clear that he was still a Muslim, though he rejected the bigoted theology of the NOI. However, he also made it clear that his religion governed his personal life and was not to be forced upon anyone.

Malcolm discussed extremism and the hypocritical double standards that many Whites harbored while bandying the word about. He noted that the bombing of Congolese civilians by the U.S. was "extremism in the defense of liberty for the wrong type of people." Moreover, only when White civilians were killed by Black Congolese in retaliation did the mainstream White media voice sympathy for the victims. Malcolm demonstrated that, clearly, as far as the White press was concerned, the lives of White people were of greater value than Black lives.

Malcolm was even more brilliant on this topic in what I consider to be his most remarkable speech, "Message to the Grassroots" in Detroit in 1963, a few weeks before President Kennedy was assassinated. Then, Malcolm argued that Black people were willing to embrace extreme measures to fight in American wars, yet chose to embrace nonviolence when their churches were being bombed and their little girls were being murdered in Birmingham, Alabama. The implication was obvious: Blacks were allowing the racist U.S. government to

dictate to them when extremism was justified. (And it just so happened that extremism was never justified to defend the legitimate interests of Black people.) Malcolm told his audience in Detroit that if it is wrong to be violent in Alabama, then it is wrong to be violent abroad. But if it is right to be violent abroad, “then it is right, for you and me, to do whatever is necessary, to defend our own people, right here, in this country.”

Like many scholars before him, Ambar discusses Malcolm’s secular side. The author writes:

During the last months of his life, Malcolm was honing his message with respect to Islam. Gone were any strong declarations about the superiority - or even the implicit benefits of his faith as he saw it - in his public addresses. Malcolm was not particularly interested in religious conversion as much as he was interested in political transformation. (p. 109)

Indeed, Malcolm might have been the most important Black secularist of all time. In the aforementioned “Message to the Grassroots” speech he noted the importance of keeping religion out of efforts to unite Black people. In his speech “The Ballot or the Bullet” he told audience members, “If your religion hasn’t done any more for you than it has, you need to forget it anyway.”

Many Whites still complain that too many Blacks are angry, and Malcolm was one of the angriest of them all. However, Ambar makes this profound observation:

[Malcolm’s...powerful...and unique call for recognition of black humanity] asks whites and the world at large, not to embrace black *love*, but rather, black *anger*. It may be easier to legitimate love, but coming to grips with well-earned anger requires a level of empathy, which in turn demands a kind of earnestness that may prove more healing. To deny human fury is to deny the humanity of those who harbor it. (p. 167)

Do yourselves a favor and read this book as soon as possible.