

ROBERT PENN WARREN MALCOLM X JUNE 2 TAPE #1

RPW: This is the first tape of a conversation with Mr. Malcolm X June 2nd. From what I have read, which includes books I could find and a good many articles of the Black Muslim position and on yourself, it seems that the identity of the Negro is a key fact that you deal with. Is that true - that impression?

MX: Yes. Not so much in a sense of Black Muslim religion. Both of them have to be separated. The black people in this country are taught that their religion and the best religion is the religion of Islam, and when one accepts the religion of Islam he's known as a Muslim - he becomes a Muslim. That means he believes there's no God but Allah and that Mohammed is the apostle of Allah. Now, besides teaching him that Islam is the best religion, since the main problem that American Afro-Americans have is a lack of cultural identity, it is necessary to teach him that he had some type of identity, culture, civilization before he was brought here. But now, teaching him about his historic or cultural past is not his religion. This is not - it's not religious. The two have to be separated.

RPW: Yes. What about the matter of personal identity as related to cultural and blood identity?

MX: I don't quite understand.

RPW: I mean, I'm trying to get it clear. That is, a man may know that he belongs to, say, a group - this group or that group - but he feels himself lost within that group - trapped within his own de-

iciencies and without personal purpose. That would be personal identity, you see.

MX: Yes, well, the religion of Islam actually restores one's human feelings - human rights, human incentives, human - his talent. The religion of Islam brings out of the individual all of his dormant potential. It gives him the incentive to develop his dormant potential so that when he becomes a part of the brotherhood of Islam and is identified collectively in the brotherhood of Islam with the brothers in Islam, at the same time this also gives him the - it has the psychological effect of giving him the incentive as an individual to develop all of his dormant potential to its fullest extent.

RPW: It's personal regeneration, then, as associated essentially with this.

MX: Yes.

RPW: Sometimes in talking with Negroes in other organizations, other persuasions, I have found that there's a deep suspicion of any approach which involves the old phrase "self-improvement," you see, and to state the matter on objective, impersonal matters such as civil rights, integration, job programs, and not on the question of self improvement or, you might say, the individual's responsibility. You do take a different line.

MX: Definitely. Most of the - or I should say, many of the Negro leaders actually suffer themselves from an inferiority complex, even though they say they don't, and because of this they have subconscious

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 3

defensive mechanisms which they have erected without even realizing it, so that when you mention something about self improvement, the implication is that the Negro is something distinct or different and therefore needs to learn how to improve himself. Negro leaders resent this being said, not because they don't know that it's true but they're thinking - they're looking at it personally, they think that the implication is directed even at them and they duck this responsibility, whereas the only real solution to the race problem in this country is a solution that involves individual self improvement and collective self improvement wherein our own people are concerned.

RPW: Would you tell me or would you be willing to, or do you think it's relevant, some detail of your own conversion to Islam?

MX: Well, that was in prison.

RPW: I know that fact, yes. I understand this was in the interior feeling of the other process.

MX: Yes, well, I was in prison and I was an atheist. I didn't believe in anything, and I had begun to read books and things. In fact, one of the persons who started me to thinking seriously was an atheist - another Negro inmate whom I heard in a discussion with white inmates and who was able to hold his own at all levels, and he impressed me with his knowledge and I began to listen very carefully to some of the things he said, and it was he who switched my reading habits in the direction away from fiction to nonfiction, so that by the time one of my brothers told me about Islam, although I was an atheist, I was open

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 4

minded and I began to read in that direction, in the direction of Islam, and everything that I read about it appealed to me. And one of the main things that I read about it that appealed to me was in Islam a man is honored as a human being and not measured by the color of his skin. At this point I hadn't yet gotten deep into the historic condition that Negroes in this country are confronted with, but at that point in my prison studies I read - I studied Islam as a religion. Also then as I later came to know it, in its connection with the plight or problem of the Negro in this country.

RPW: This is getting ahead a little bit but it seems to apply here. If Islam teaches the human worth of all men without reference to color, how does that fact relate to the message of black superiority and the doom of the white race?

MX: Well, the white race is doomed not because it's white but because of its misdeeds, and the people listen very closely to what the Muslims have always declared, they will find that in every declaration there is the fact that, even as Moses told Pharaoh, you are doomed if you don't do so-and-so, or as Daniel told I think it was Belshazar, or Nebuchadnezzar, you are doomed if you don't do so-and-so. Now, always that "if" was there, which meant that the one who was doomed could avoid the doom if he would change his way of behaving. Well, it's the same way here in America. When the Muslims deliver the indictment of the American system, it is not the white man per se that is being doomed.

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 5

RPW: It's not blood itself, it's the - there's no blood damnation, then.

MX: No, but see, it's almost impossible to separate the actions - it's almost impossible to separate the oppression and exploitation - criminal oppression and criminal exploitation of the American Negro from the color of the skin of the person who is the oppressor or the exploiter. So he thinks he's being condemned because of his color but actually he's being condemned because of his deeds, his conscious behavior.

RPW: Let's take a question like this. Can a person, an American of white blood, be guiltless?

MX: Guiltless?

RPW: Yes.

MX: Well, you can only answer it this way, by turning it around. Can the Negro who is the victim of the system escape the collective stigma that is placed upon all Negroes in this country? And the answer is "no." Because Ralph Bunch is an internationally recognized and respected diplomat can't stay in a hotel in Georgia, which means that no matter what the accomplishment, the intellectual, the academic or professional level of the Negro is, collectively he stands condemned. Well, the white race in America is the same way. As individuals it is impossible for them to escape the collective crime committed against the Negroes in this country collectively.

RPW: Let's take an extreme case like this, just the most extreme

example I can think of. Let us say a white child of three or four, something like that, who is outside of conscious decisions or valuations, is facing accidental death, you see. Is the reaction to that child the same as a Negro child facing the same situation?

MX: Well, just take the Negro child - take the white child. The white child, although he has not committed any of - as a person has not committed any of the deeds that have produced the plight that the Negro finds himself in, is he guiltless? The only way you can determine that is to take the Negro child who is only four years old - can he escape, though he's only four years old, can he escape the stigma of discrimination and segregation? He's only four years old.

RPW: Let's put him in front of an oncoming truck, and put a white man on the pavement who must risk his life to leap for the child. Let's reverse it.

MX: I don't see where that -

RPW: Some white men would leap and some wouldn't.

MX: It would not - it still wouldn't alter the fact that after that white man saved that little black child he couldn't take that little black child in many restaurants, hotels and places right along with him. Even after the child - the life of the black child was saved, that same white man would have to toss him right back into the discrimination - into discrimination, segregation and these other things.

RPW: Well, suppose that t - let's take a case - suppose that white man is prepared to go to jail to break segregation.

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 7

MX: His going to jail to break segregation still has - if he broke segregation.

RPW: Let's keep it on the individual. This one white man -

MX: You can't solve it individually.

RPW: But what you added toward the one white man who goes to jail - not once, but over and over again, see -

MX: This has been going on for the past ten years. White individuals have been going to jail, segregation still exists, discrimination still exists.

RPW: Yes, that's true. But what is the attitude toward the white man who does this, who goes to jail?

MX: My personal attitude is that he has done nothing to solve the problem.

RPW: What is your attitude toward his moral nature?

MX: I'm not even interested in his moral nature. Until the problem is solved we don't - we're not interested in anybody's moral nature. What I'm boiling down to say is, that a few isolated white people whose individual acts are designed to eliminate this, that or the next thing, but yet it is never eliminated, is in no way impressive to me.

RPW: That is, you couldn't call that man a friend?

MX: If his own race were being trampled upon as the race of Negroes are being trampled upon, he would use a different course of action to protect his rights.

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 8

RPW: What course of action?

MX: I have never seen white people who would sit - would approach a solution to their own problems nonviolently or passively. It's only when they are so-called fighting for the rights of Negroes that they nonviolently, passively and lovingly, ~~also~~ know, approach the situation. But when the whites themselves are attacked, they believe in defending themselves and things of that sort. But those type of whites who are always going to jail with Negroes are the ones who tell Negroes to be loving and be kind and be patient and be non-violent and turn the other cheek. So if I did see a white man who was willing to go to jail or throw himself in front of a car in behalf of the so-called Negro cause, the test that I put to him, I'd ask him, do you think Negroes - when Negroes are being attacked they should defend themselves even at the risk of having to kill the one who's attacking them? If that white man told me, yes, I'd shake his hand - I'd trust in him. But I don't trust any white man who teaches Negroes to turn the other cheek or to be nonviolent, which means to be defenseless in the face of a very brutal criminal enemy. No. That's my yardstick for measuring whites.

RPW: Now, the question - what is defenseless at this point?

MX: Any time you tell a man to turn the other cheek or to be non-violent in the face of a violent enemy, you're making that man defenseless. You're robbing him of his God-given right to defend himself.

RPW: Let's take a concrete case again on the question of defenselessness, just to be sure I understand you, if, say, in the case of Dr. Aram Henry in Mississippi, Beloxie, Mississippi, his house has been bombed and shot through and that sort of thing. Well, he is armed. I've been in his house. I know he's armed. His guards are sitting there with arms in their hands at night, and everybody knows this. Now, I can't see how anyone would ask him not to defend himself, see. If defense is literally defense, as it's taken in ordinary legal terms, or a mounted aggression for purposes of defense is another thing in a society - do you see what I'm getting at? A man sitting in his own house - (talking together) is one thing. A man who goes out and performs an act of violence as - it's some sort of idea of long range defense.

MX: I think that a Negro should reserve the right to execute any measure necessary to defend himself - any way, any form - necessary to defend himself, he should reserve the right to do that just the same as others have the right to do it.

RPW: Or political assassination, for instance?

MX: I don't know anything about that. I wouldn't even answer a question like that. But I say that the Negro, when they cease to look at him as a Negro and realize that he is a human being, then they will realize that he is just as capable, has the right to do anything that any other human being on this earth has the right to do to defend himself.

RPW: But there are millions of white people who would say right away

that the Negro should have - any Negro should have the same legal rights and defense that a white man has.

MX: And I think you'll find also that if the Negro ever realizes that he should begin to fight for real for his freedom, there are many whites who will fight on his side with him. It's not a case of where people think he'll be the underdog or be outnumbered, but there are many white people in this country who realize that the system itself as it is constructed is not so constructed that it can produce freedom and equality for the Negro, and the system has to be changed. It is the system itself that is incapable of producing freedom for the twenty-two million Afro-Americans. It's like a chicken can't lay a duck egg - a chicken can't lay a duck egg because the system of the chicken isn't constructed in a way to produce a duck egg, and just as that chicken system can't produce - is not capable of producing a duck egg, the political and economic system of this country is absolutely incapable of producing freedom and justice and equality and human dignity for the twenty-two million Afro-Americans.

RPW: You don't see in the American system the possibility of self regeneration then?

MX: No. There's nothing -

RPW: Of change?

MX: No. The American system itself is incapable - is as incapable of producing freedom for the Afro-Americans as the system of a chicken is of producing a duck egg.

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 11

RFW: You don't see any possibility of gains or better solutions through political - Negro political action or economic action?

MX: No. Any time that the Negro becomes involved in mature political action, then the resistance of the politicians who benefit from the exploited political system as it now stands will be forced to put - exercise more violent action to deprive the Negro of his mature political action.

RFW: Do you think that Adam Clayton Powell's political career has been one of mature political action? He thinks highly of you - speaks to me highly of you.

MX: Adam Clayton Powell's entire political career has to be looked at in the entire context of the American history and the history and the position of the Afro-American or Negro in American history, and then when - when you take all of these factors combined you can see where Adam Clayton Powell is a remarkable man and has done a remarkable job, in fighting for the rights of black people in this country. On the other hand, he probably hasn't done as much as he could or as much as he should because he is the most independent Negro politician in this country. There's no politician in this country of national stature who is more independent of the political machine as Adam Clayton Powell is.

RFW: Dawson is a pure victim of it, of course - in Chicago - Congressman Dawson.

MX: Yes. I don't know too much about Dawson, but from what I've heard he's more - he has no independence of action when it comes to

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 12

the political machinery - in Chicago.

RPW: But is that line - is his - Adam Clayton Powell's line a line of what you'd call mature political action? Or has that been frustrated?

MX: In my opinion, mature political action is the type of action that enables the - that involves a program of re-education and information that will enable the black people in the black community to see the fruits that they should be receiving from the politicians who are over them, and thereby they are then able to determine whether or not the politician is really fulfilling his function, and if he is not fulfilling his function they then can set up the machinery to remove him from that position by whatever means necessary. To me political action involves making the politician who represents us know that he either produces or he is out, and he's out one way or another.

RPW: There's only one way to put a politician out ordinarily - to vote him out.

MX: Well, I think that the black people in this country have reached the point where they should reserve the right to do whatever is necessary to see that they exercise complete control over the politicians in the politics of their own community by whatever means necessary.

RPW: Just to go back to the matter of your conversion - some details of that - was it fast or slow - as simple a matter as that - a flash of intuition?

MX: It was fast. I - strange as it may seem, I turned - I took an about-turn over night.

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 13

RPW: Really over night - just like that?

MX: Yes. And while I was in prison, it wasn't the most - I was indulging in all types of vice right within the prison, and I never was ostracized as much by the penal authorities while I was participating in all of the evils of the prison as they tried to ostracize me after I became a Muslim.

RPW: Why was that?

MX: Well, the prison systems in this country actually are exploited and they are not in any way rehabilitated. They are not designed to rehabilitate the inmates, though the public propaganda is that their function. But most people who work in prisons earn money through contraband - they earn extra money by selling contraband, dope, things of that sort, to the inmates, and - so that really it's an exploited -

RPW: This was a matter of defending their commercial interests or economic interests and not a matter of fear of the Muslim movement, is that it? Or both?

MX: It's both. They have a fear of the Muslim movement and the Muslim religion because it has a tendency to make the people who accept it stick together. And I had one warden tell me since I've been out - and this is an inmate in prison - prisoner in New York -

Warden Fay up at Green Haven - Fay -

RPW: Baynes?

MX: Fay - F-A-Y - in 1959 or 8, along in there, I visited an inmate in prison and he told me that he didn't want anybody in there trying to spread this religion. I asked him at that time if it didn't make

a better inmate out of the Negroes who accepted it, and he said yes. So I asked him then what was it about it that he considered to be so dangerous, and he pointed out that it was the cohesiveness that it produced among the inmates. They stuck together. What you did to one you did to all. So they couldn't have that type of religion being taught in the prison.

RPW: Just a matter of maintaining their own control then?

MX: Yes.

RPW: Has there been any change in your religious beliefs since your break last fall?

MX: Well, I have gone through the process of re-evaluating, giving a personal re-evaluation to everything that I ever believed - that I did believe while I was a member and a minister in the Black - in what we call the Black Muslim movement.

RPW: May I ask how you've come out of that evaluation?

MX: Well, first I might say that when a person - a man separates from his wife, at the outstart is the physical separation but it's not a psychological separation. He still thinks of her and - in probably warm terms, and - but after the physical separation has existed for a period of time it becomes a psychological separation as well as physical, and he can then look at her more objectively. My split or separation from the Black Muslim movement at first was only a visible separation. In my heart it was still there and it was impossible for me to look at it objectively. After I made my tour into the Middle East and Africa and visited Mecca and other places, I think that the

separation became psychological as well as physical, so that I could look at it more objectively and separate that which was good from that which was bad.

RPW: Well, what did you find, if I may ask, good and what bad in this re-evaluating?

MX: Well, I think now I - it's possible for me to approach the whole problem with a broader scope - much broader scope. When you look at something through an organizational eye, whether it's a religious organization, political organization or civic organization, if you look at it only through the eye of that organization you see what the organization wants you to see, but you lose your ability to be objective. But when you aren't affiliated with anything and then you look at something, you look at it with your eye to the best of your ability and see it as it is.

RPW: For an example, what specific thing do you now see as it is and not through organizational eyes?

MX: Well, I think I look at the problem of the twenty-two million Afro-Americans as being a problem that's so broad in scope that it's almost impossible for any organization to see it in its entirety, and because the average Negro organization especially can't see the problem in its entirety they can't even see that the problem is so big that their own organization as such by itself can never come up with a solution. The problem is so broad that it's going to take the inner working of all organizations - going to take a united front of all

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 16

organizations, looking at it with more objectivity, to come up with a solution that will stand.

RPW: Would you work then with SCLC - Dr. King's organization?

MX: Well, even as a Muslim - a minister in the Muslim movement I always said that I would work with any organization, but I can say it even with more honesty now. Then when I said it I was - made the reservation that I would work with any organization as long as it didn't make us compromise our religious principles. Now, I think that the problem of the American Negro goes beyond the principles of any organization, whether it's religious, political or otherwise. The problem of the Negro is so criminal that many individuals and organizations are going to have to sacrifice what they call their organizational principles if someone comes up with a solution that will really solve the problem, because a solution they want - they should accept the solution but if it's a solution they want as long as it doesn't interfere with their organization, then it means they're more concerned with their organization than they are with getting a solution to the problem.

RPW: I'm trying to see how it would be possible to work with Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence, you see.

MX: Well, see, now, violence with Dr. King is only a method - that's not his objective.

RPW: So it's not his objective?

MX: Well, his objective I think is to gain respect for Negroes as

Malcolm X - Tape #1 - p. 17

human beings, and nonviolence is his method. Well, my objective is the same as King's. We may disagree on methods, but we don't have to argue all day on that. Let's forget the methods or the differences in method. As long as we agree that the thing that the Afro-American wants and needs is recognition and respect as a human being.

RPW: This is the end of Tape#1 of a conversation with Mr. Malcolm X
- proceed.

(end of tape)