

**Maosuf Togmah**

**Program:** Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

**University:** Boston College

**Texts:** *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, and James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

**Bio:** Maosuf was born in Ghana and moved with his family to the U.S when he was 10 years old. He is an alumnus of the class of 2019 Freedom & Citizenship program at Columbia University and recently graduated from Democracy Prep Charter High School in Harlem. This fall, he will be heading up to Massachusetts to attend Boston College where he intends to major in Computer Science. During his leisure time, he likes to watch episodes of *Ramy* on Hulu and Hasan Minhaj's *The Patriot Act* on Netflix.

**Profile:** When Maosuf applied for the Teagle Humanities Fellowship, he wrote of his background as an immigrant from Ghana and a first-generation college student. These meaningful identities helped him make poignant connections to *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. When reading the novella, Maosuf imagined himself in Gregor Samsa's position and found that he could empathize with "the level of loneliness [Samsa] must have felt after essentially being disowned by his family." Maosuf connected Samsa's feelings of alienation to the tensions that can often develop within immigrant families. As he pointed out, sometimes first-generation, immigrant college students face pressures to follow specific paths.

After reading *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* with his mentor, Angie Neslin, Maosuf found himself reflecting on the ways in which religion has historically intertwined with race in America, as either a means of division or a force of unity. Having grown up in Ghana, he approached the subject with his own particular viewpoints and experiences. In Ghana, Maosuf writes, "I never had to question whether or not I was good enough to do anything based on the complexion of my skin." Even religious differences did not bring conflict, though he was a practicing Muslim in a Christian majority country:

"Never in my ten years in Ghana did I feel out of place because I was outnumbered by the Christian population. When Muslim members of the neighborhood make their way to their weekly Friday prayers, you'll hear the Christian people telling them "pray for me ooo." Likewise, when Christians make their way to church on Sundays, you'll have their Muslim neighbors telling them to also "pray for me ooo!!!" This mutual respect for each other's religious beliefs is one of the reasons why being a Muslim in Ghana wasn't really that big of a deal."

"In contrast to Ghana where religion is a unifying force, even amongst people who practice different faiths," Maosuf writes, "in the United States now more than ever religion has become a dividing force." In reading James Baldwin's essays "Down at the Cross" and "My Dungeon

Shook,” Maosuf used Baldwin’s experiences with organized religion to provide an example of religion as a mechanism of divisive power. Maosuf detailed Baldwin’s association with Christianity, which he gave up after the church blessed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Afterwards, Baldwin explored Elijah Muhhammad’s Nation of Islam, but Maosuf noted how Baldwin recoils at its separatism and vilification of white people. In both cases, religion became a divisive rather than unifying force.

Based on his personal experiences in Ghana however, Maosuf believes religion can indeed unite people, and he was gratified to find an illustration of that ideal in Martin Luther King Jr., who, in his speech “Give Us the Ballot,” declared: “we must not become victimized with a philosophy of Black supremacy. God is not interested merely in freeing Black men and brown men and yellow men, but God is interested merely in freeing the whole human race.” Maosuf considered Dr. King’s use of religious language during the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March as “one of the best examples of religious leadership during a time of social injustice”:

“Dr. King exhorted tens of thousands of followers to ‘march on ballot boxes until all over Alabama God’s children will be able to walk the earth in decency and honor.’ This religious language that he used was very effective in mobilizing thousands of people to come out and march for voting rights, ultimately leading to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act... Dr. King used his religious power to organize a march that resulted in the restoration of voting rights to millions of Americans.”