Islam in America
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An Exemplary Life for Islam in America

When one hears the name Malcolm X, words like "Black Nationalism", "civil rights", "racial pride" and "militancy" come to mind.[1] These descriptors are certainly accurate, for Malcolm X was an emphatic and powerful voice for equal civil status for African Americans in a post-slavery United States. Words like "Islam", "Muslim", "Mecca", "Qur'an" or "Hajj" are less likely to surface (at least immediately), though they too are accurate and descriptive associations for Malcolm X. The political actions of Afro-Americans and the religious beliefs of Islam meet and are fascinatingly interwoven in the life of Malcolm X. The same dynamic is present in the phrase "Islam in America." Islam of course denotes the religious associations, and America's history is woefully incomplete without a large emphasis on the role(s) of slavery and civil rights within it. Therefore Malcolm X's life narrative is at the crux of Islam in America: bridging together the Afro-American experience and Islamic beliefs. His life synthesizes these realms not only insofar as they were present and shaped it, but in the sense that his two-conversion journey from debauched Harlem hustler to reformed Nation of Islam minister to converted Sunni Muslim faithful in the 1950s and 60s includes key historic, social and intellectual questions that characterize Islam in America as a whole, transcending Malcolm's relatively short life.

These key questions have primarily to do with identity and authority. They pertain to civic and religious identity, and as a consequence must include questions about which authority should determine those identities. African-descended people in America, like all

[1] Indeed, these are among the first descriptions for Malcolm X in the online Encyclopedia Britannica.

the non-Native Americans who eventually made up the majority of the country's population, asked and continue to ask, What does it mean to be an American?, and, Who is an American? More relevant to this paper: can Black Africans and Muslims be "American" and what does it look like for them to be so? These questions weave through the slave trade, segregation, Jim Crow laws, the Black Power movement and the civil rights movement. They were answered in different ways by different groups on both sides. Some, particularly Noble Drew Ali and Marcus Garvey and their followers in the Moorish Science Temple, followed by Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X himself with the Nation of Islam poignantly asked, Do Afro-Americans even *want* to be Americans?

The other key identity and authority questions involve Islam and ask, What is 'orthodox' Islam? and, Who gets to determine what orthodox Islam entails and excludes? Because imported West African slaves' Islam was highly discouraged beneath the white slave-master and mixed together with African tribal religions, it morphed and changed in America through the generations from the 15th century to the 20th.[2]

I draw attention to the identity and authority questions about America and Islam in order to provide a rough framework within which I am working and understanding the material. They may not always be overtly stated in the discussion below.

Malcolm X's childhood and early life as a Harlem hustler parallels the African slave in America's experience before him. The dissolution and displacement of his family by the social workers is like the dispersal and importation of West African tribes and

[2] "What is Islam?" and "Who has authority to determine Islam?" are questions that date from the death of the Prophet Muhammad himself and characterize the tradition today.

families by the slave traders. The attempt of his mother to keep him and his siblings from eating pork is like the attempt of the first generations of Muslim slaves to America to pass down their practices and beliefs. His elementary school experiences in the white boarding school are like the "house Negroe's" domestication under the white man. When he became a hustler, his "slavery" continued. Instead of steel shackles and whips he smoked reefers and conked his hair. Instead of working in the sugar cane fields beneath the eyes of a "massa" he slithered the Harlem streets on this or that hustle wary of the policemen's eyes. Like his ancestors, Malcolm began to forge his civic and religious identity beneath a white Christian hegemony in his childhood and adolescence.

Both Malcolm's experience and the West African slaves' made them feel trapped. Malcolm described his life at this time, saying, "Everything was building up, closing in on me. I was trapped in so many cross turns. West Indian Archie gunning for me. The Italians who thought I'd stuck up their crap game after me. The scared kid hustler I'd hit. The cops" (*Autobiography,* 223). The Muslim slaves in America too experienced feeling trapped. In addition to their ostensible civic slavery the Muslims in the south ". . . faced certain distinct challenges to the preservation of their faith . . ." For, "Although they may have gathered in small numbers and clandestine places to pray, they could neither openly maintain Qur'anic schools (or madrasas), nor have access to Islamic texts", "Additional challenges to Islam include[ed] the fact that it was in competition with other African religions", as well as the onset of a more controlling Christianity, the importation of more non-Muslims which forced Muslims to marry non-Muslims and basic "structural impediments" to passing on Islam to their children (Gomez, 159-161).

Malcolm's brother, Reginald's statement to Malcolm in jail perhaps most explicitly likens him to his ancestors:

> "You don't even know, the white devil has hidden it from you, that you are of a race of people of ancient civilizations, and riches in gold and kings. You don't even know your true family name, you wouldn't recognize your true language if you heard it. You have been cut off by the devil white man from all true knowledge of your own kind. You have been a victim of the evil of the devil white man ever since he murdered and raped and stole you from your native land in the seeds of your forefathers . . ." (*Autobiography,* 255).

Malcolm's oppressed childhood and adolescent debauchery forms the phase of his life before his first conversion and mirrors the early presence of the imported Africans in America. As a child he lived as a Black, Garveyist minority among a white, Christian majority, much like the imported Africans lived as African, Muslim minorities among a white, Christian majority. As an adolescent he lived as a poor, Black, powerless criminal in a city ruled by rich, white, powerful criminals much like the imported Africans lived as enslaved, African, rebellious leaders among rich, white, powerful slaveholders. Therefore, although he himself was never an ostensible "slave", until his first conversion, he endured experiences representative of early African Americans.

Once Malcolm X joined the Nation of Islam, his life entered a second phase parallel to the post-slavery Black American's processes of establishing independent and autonomous communities and culture in the U.S. Malcolm learned about history and slavery, about where his ancestors came from and what they experienced in the U.S. In the same way, many of the protonationalist communities and organizations of the 20th century rallied around a constructed history and recognition of the U.S.'s slavery past. He left the confines of jail, got sober, cleaned up, and got a job – civilizing actions that the

Moorish Science Temple, the Ahmadiyya movement and (Malcolm's own) Nation of Islam promoted or required for their membership.

Malcolm spoke of his discovery about his ancestors' slavery in shock and revulsion, speaking of how "slavery's total horror . . . made such an impact on [him] that it later became one of [his] favorite subjects when [he] became a minister of Mr. Muhammad's. The world's most monstrous crime, the sin and the blood on the white man's hands, are almost impossible to believe" (*Autobiography* 270). This helped him to understand his history and civic identity in America – something that the first imported Africans knew all too well. Regarding his and the American Negroe's religious identity, Malcolm made it clear that they were under a hegemonic and false-to-their-true-selves religion. He made his disapproval clear saying:

> . . . [The] white slavemaster's Christian religion has taught us black people here in the wilderness of North America that we will sprout wings when we die and fly up into the sky where God will have for us a special place called heaven. This is white man's Christian religion used to *brainwash* us black people! We have *accepted* it! We have *embraced* it! We have *believed* it! We have *practiced* it! And while we are doing all of that, for himself, this blue-eyed devil has *twisted* his Christianity, to keep his *foot* on our backs . . . (*Autobiography* 298).

After his first conversion, Malcolm rebelled strongly against Christianity as a viable religious option for the black man. The NOI's origin myth and insistence upon the white man as devil along with the fact that the white man's religion was Christianity provided him with abundant ammunition to reject Christianity and champion Islam as it was taught by Elijah Muhammad.[3] He could speak very strongly to the "unchurched", those who

[3] Much like Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple, Malcolm and the Nation of Islam touted an alternate version of the black man's history which included the deluding of the black race to a white "devil". This alternative origin myth provided support for Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism, as well as building racial pride. Unlike the MST, the NOI actually supported complete separatism, whereas the MST's ID cards actually stated very bluntly that the holder was a citizen of the U.S.A.: "This is your Nationality and Identification Card for the Moorish Science Temple of America, and Birthrights for the Moorish Americans, et., we honor all the Divine Prophets, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius. May the blessings of the God of our Father Allah, be upon you that carry this card. I do hereby declare that

"eschewed social convention", "stood apart" and who found themselves to be "'other than Christian' in religious matters but also in opposition to mass political culture. [these people's] persona in civil society is characterized by the rejection of all conventional sacerdotal and secular hierarchies" (Dannin, 16). Not only did Malcolm himself exemplify this group, but many of his contemporaries and followers, as well as the Negroes who listened to his father existed in this cultural category. According to Gomez:

> In the early twentieth century, people of African descent in North America were virtually assailed with competing visions of deliverance from all sides. There were numerous organizations springing up here and there with nationalist, pan-Africanist, and uplift philosophies, now filtered through the idiom of religion, then expressed as a much more transparent critique of political economy (Gomez 271).

Since Malcolm lived during this time in Afro-American history, he dealt very directly with these religious idioms and participated himself in critiquing the political economy: he proselytized Islam as it was understood by the NOI to black church goers after Sunday services and critiqued the popular civil rights jargon of his time (*Autobiography* 318, 378). He rejected integration and embraced separation as articulated by Elijah Muhammad (*Autobiography* 358).

The third and shortest phase of Malcolm X's life after his second conversion represents the meeting and denouement of the passage from African American slavery and Black American "Islam" to "orthodox" Sunni Islam. Before he went on the Hajj, Malcolm mentioned that he had been confronted by Arabian, Middle Eastern or North African Muslims visiting the U.S. who, though critical of his racist comments and unorthodox practice of Islam, encouraged him to be exposed to "true Islam." Though Malcolm admitted that he resisted the idea at first, he eventually admitted that more

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you are a Moslem under the Divine laws of the Holy Koran of Mecca, Love Truth Peace Freedom and Justice. "I am a Citizen of the U.S.A." (Dannin 27).

knowledge of his religion made sense (*Autobiography* 430). Among his many observations and reactions to his "exposure" to Islam among white and black Muslims alike, Malcolm decided that orthodox Islam ". . . is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem" and that "America needs to understand Islam" (*Autobiography* 454). He not only decided that Islam was the answer to the race problem in the U.S., but also gained a new insight into how Afro-Americans could realistically separate and become equal. This insight included the idea that Afro-Americans "might remain in America, fighting for [their] Constitutional rights, but that philosophically and culturally [they] badly needed to 'return' to Africa – and to develop a working unity in the framework of Pan-Africanism" (*Autobiography* 465-466). Not only did Malcolm see an answer for African Muslims, but he experienced a seemingly race-transcendent, *human* identity that he clearly relished:

> In the Holy World, away from America's race problem, was the first time I ever had been able to think clearly about the basic divisions of white people in America, and how their attitudes and their motives related to, and affected Negroes. In my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being (*Autobiography*, 482).

In this final transition, Malcolm loosed his NOI racism and thereby opened up a channel for contemporary and future Afro-Americans to acquire civic and religious identity. Malcolm became a kind of bridge himself that connected African-Americans to Sunni Islam. In acknowledging Malcolm's model story, Gomez even posits that "Indeed, had there been no Malcolm, Fardian Islam's ascendant position vis-à-vis conventional Islam may well have continued indefinitely" (Gomez 365-366). This bridge that Malcolm exemplified combined two "factions" that Dannin recognized in the Muslim revivalist

communities at the time, those of the "new Americans (Arab Muslim immigrants) and the new Muslims (African-American converts)" (Dannin, 66).

In fact, not only did Malcolm X build a bridge, but from the Sunni Muslim revivalist point of view (in this case, Hamid), "Poole's jive organization [i.e. the Nation] was nothing until Allah decreed that Malcolm should join it and work for it. Malcolm built Poole's organization, and –in Malcolm's own words—the only result of this was that Elijah Poole became insanely jealous of him" (Dannin 71). According to Hamid here, Malcolm was the only good thing about the Nation and effectively "redeemed" it somewhat in Sunni Muslim eyes. Given the conflict between Arab Muslim immigrants and African-American converts, Malcolm and his life became the missing piece, a bridge that enabled a possible solution by example.

It becomes clear then, after a comparison of each stage of Malcolm X's life with larger epochs in the Afro-American experience that his life is at the crux of perhaps *the* most important transition for Islam in America. According to Gomez:

> Minister Malcolm was largely responsible for changing the intellectual climate among African American Muslims, such that orthodoxy became much more palatable, precisely because he was both the leading spokesperson for black nationalism and pan-Africanism, and, as the most dynamic representative of Islam in North America, was best situated to attempt a reconciliation of religious divergence. Malcolm represented the maturation of a process initially articulated by Noble Drew Ali and developed by Elijah Muhammad, a process whose beginnings are at least indirectly related to the presence of enslaved (and free) African Muslims in colonial and antebellum North America. As such, he constitutes a critical link facilitating the passage from an unconventional Islam to one in conformity with a more ancient tradition (Gomez 332).

Malcolm accomplished this through addressing and redressing his civic and religious identities – identities with which every Muslim can arguably sympathize if not empathize – because of their sheer breadth and resonance with the Muslim experience in the U.S.