

Introduction

Towards an Understanding of the Political Theology of Malcolm X

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Malcolm X put a hex on my future someone catch me
I'm falling victim to a revolutionary song.

– Kendrick Lamar, “HiiiPoWer”

21 February 2020 marked the fifty-fifth year since the assassination of Malcolm X (1925–1965).¹ His lifework and activist legacy nevertheless still inspire a range of movements around the globe. His various names, photographs, video clips, and soundbites are often summoned and expressed in popular culture, radical politics, social and civil rights mobilization, religious narratives, and so on. For instance, during the completion of this special issue a true crime six-part docuseries, *Who Killed Malcolm X* premiered on Netflix. In the series, the filmmakers Phil Bertelsen and Rachel Dretzen follow the amateur historian and investigator Abdur-Rahman Muhammad as he points out considerable inconsistencies in the official story of the

1. The authors wish to thank the leadership and administrative staff at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul for their facilities and assistance in organizing the workshop. The necessary financial support for the meeting was provided by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University and the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at Uppsala University. The workshop and this special issue would not have been possible without the critical and committed engagement of its esteemed participants, all of whom deserve our appreciation. Professor Aminah McCloud and Judge Anthony E. Simpkins have made valuable comments and contributions to the discussion that only improved the quality of the articles. Special thanks to Joel Kuhlin for inviting us to speak at the symposium “From Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz – The Legacy of an American Icon” at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, in October 2018, during which the initial idea for this special issue evolved. We also wish to express our thanks to Mark LeVine and Anthony Paul Smith for valuable comments that have improved the quality of this article. In the end, the assistant editor-in-chief of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, Martin Nykvist, deserves our appreciation for his patience and hard work with organizing the entire special issue.

murder. Some of the results from Muhammad's investigation have increased the likelihood of reopening the investigation into the murder of Malcolm X.²

Across the Middle East, Malcolm X has long been celebrated for his forceful antagonism to the US government and the dominant white society more broadly. For example, in 1984 the Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) government in its defiance of the US-led sanctions against Iran, issued a postage stamp depicting Malcolm X in *ihram* clothing on his 1964 *hajj* to Mecca, with the words “Universal Day of Struggle against Race discrimination” printed both in Farsi and English. Such and other similar examples indicate how state and political leadership far beyond the US borders interpret Malcolm X's defiant struggle against the political system of the US. Much closer to the present day, in 2018, Malcolm X was invoked as a political anti-imperialist symbol in Turkey. The city council of Ankara voted in favour of renaming the street on which the new US embassy will be located: Malcolm X Caddesi (Malcolm X Street). The political message was clear in the midst of strained relations between Turkey and the US.³

The historic and ongoing importance and power of Malcolm X across the globe highlights some of the reasons that this special issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* brings together scholars of history, religious and Islamic studies, philosophy of religion, sociology, and theology in an effort to offer a set of critical approaches to Malcolm X's political theology. The specific articles in this special issue emerged from discussions and exchanges conducted primarily during the workshop “The Political Theology of Malcolm X”, at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 19–20 August 2019. The workshop grew out of our common research interests, studies, and analyses of the legacy of Malcolm X's lifework and political theology.

The main question addressed in this special issue is: How can we explain the continued relevance of Malcolm X's lifework for a significant number of people, organizations, and even politicians far beyond the US context?⁴ This

2. The Manhattan District Attorney is apparently considering that option. See John Leland, “Who Really Killed Malcolm X? Fifty-Five Years Later, the Case May Be Reopened”, *The New York Times* 2020-02-06, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/nyregion/malcolm-x-assassination-case-reopened.html>, accessed 2020-02-18.

3. The strains consisted of several factors. Some of the most important issues were the Turkish government's criticism of the Trump administration's support of the Kurdish YPG militia in Syria – a group that Turkey labelled as a terrorist group. Another one was the Trump administration's unwillingness to extradite a controversial Muslim leader, Fethullah Gülen, to Turkey. The Turkish government considers Gülen as the mastermind behind the 2016 failed *coup d'état* attempt.

4. A range of scholarly attention has been given to Malcolm X since the early 1980s. A random search on JSTOR (“Malcolm X”) gave more than 11,000 hits. An equivalent random search on Google Scholar gave more than 56,000 hits (as of 14 February 2020).

question becomes even more significant in the present global state of environmental crises, ambiguities of collective identities, and even existential uncertainties. These unsettling processes are both mainstreaming many formerly “radical” critiques of the Eurocentric (including “white nationalist”) capitalist system and producing increased calls for radical solutions that directly take on some of the core racialized dynamics so fiercely highlighted by Malcolm X.

Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) describes some of the social and political tensions that cause collective anxieties as various parts of the condition of liquid modernity – an endemic state of global uncertainty. It is within this liquified form of social existence, where no one seems to be in total control of ecological, economic, social, and political events. People therefore doubt the sustainability of their livelihoods, environmental survival, stability of their collective identities, social statuses, and so on. The endemic nature of current collectively experienced anxieties, according to Bauman, eventually lead to the “crisis of humanity”.⁵

Some of the symptoms of this crisis are sometimes described as “Urban Rage” – in social and political uprisings in cities across the globe. In cities like Algiers, Berlin, Cairo, Charleston, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Khartoum, London, Madrid, Stockholm, São Paulo, and so on, young people react, respond, and resist the detrimental economic circumstances, gentrification, xenophobia, political oppression, police brutality, and similar injustices.⁶ It is perhaps symptomatic that urban anti-establishment and civil rights movements, regardless of their scope and place, such as the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, the Occupy Gezi movement in Turkey, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Zapatistas in Mexico, Landless People’s Movement in South Africa, or Spanish indignados temporarily gain strength in social crises.⁷ These few well-publicized instances of a collective sense of crisis suggest that a number of our societies are in a state of moral and ethical flux. In some of these societies, we find revitalizations and context-dependent interpretations of Malcolm X’s revolutionary message and his radical activist authority.⁸

5. Zygmunt Bauman, *A Chronicle of Crisis: 2011–2016*, London 2017.

6. Mustafa Dikec, *Urban Rage: The Revolt of the Excluded*, New Haven, CT 2017.

7. See Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity: Bringing Capitalism Back into Protest Analysis*, Cambridge 2015; Donatella della Porta, “Late Neoliberalism and Its Discontents: An Introduction”, in Donatella della Porta et al., *Late Neoliberalism and Its Discontents in the Economic Crisis: Comparing Social Movements in the European Periphery*, Cham 2017, 1–38.

8. See Rita Kiki Edozie & Curtis Stokes (eds.), *Malcolm X’s Michigan Worldview: An Exemplar for the Contemporary Black Studies*, East Lansing, MI 2015.

In order to address the relevance of Malcolm X in this global context, it is helpful to invoke parts of the conceptual toolbox that will help analyzing some of the complexities of the reclaiming processes of his lifework, namely political theology. Political theology, at the same time, represents a conceptual instrument that helps us deepen our understanding of how we ourselves understand our moment in history, full of growing social and political tensions, violent conflicts, and extremist politics.

Political theology is here understood to signify the vibrant relationship between a dominant sacred order in a particular political context and the populations that coexist within such an order.⁹ The sacred in this case is not necessarily connected with a particular religious tradition or notions of God. Instead, the sacred here represents a broader notion that a population or a political community understand to be the bearing or “sanctified” idea(ology) of that particular community wherein individuals are subjects (several times over).¹⁰ The bearing idea of the society is based on a common understanding of “who we are as a collective”, or rather, what is considered to be an immutable set of ethical and moral principles that bind that particular community together. In a context of a modern nation state, this means that the organizing idea of a society or community is shaped by and through its relationship with the state – the political and sacred hegemon.¹¹ This implies that the state represents the sovereign structure, a “supernatural agent” as it were, and a part or a producer of “hegemonic systems”.¹²

Political theology, in the words of Paul W. Kahn, “challenges the basic assumptions of our understanding of the meaning of modernity, the nature of individual identity, and the character of the relationship of the individual to

9. For instance, the idea of nationalism in France is based on the particular majoritarian notions of “frenchness” that is based on the ideology of secularism, including ideals such as liberty, fraternity, and equality. This understanding is contrary to some of the leading theorists of liberalism, who understand liberalism (which is invoked as a sacred ideological frame of states in Europe and North America) to be fundamentally egalitarian and protective of religious rights and other rights. See John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: With “The Idea of Public Reasons Revisited”*, Cambridge, MA 1999, 9–30.

10. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, New York 2014, 192–194.

11. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Cambridge, MA 1988.

12. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971. The idea here is that modern nation states are widely recognized as sovereign political powers that internally define or adapt to the hegemonic criteria for citizenship/membership (perhaps even salvation) of their respective populations. Beyond Antonio Gramsci, see Schmitt, *Political Theology*; Jan Assmann, *Herrschaft Und Heil: Politische Theologie in Ägypten, Israel und Europa*, Munich 2000; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago 2005; Karen Barkey & Sunita Parikh, “Comparative Perspectives on the State”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991), 523–549. It is also useful to think about international order as a pantheon of state-gods that continuously invoke and attempt to prove their worth for other states.

the state”.¹³ This means that interactions between social classes, ethnic and race groups, religious communities, political interest group, and so on, in a particular state more often than not result in a contingent set of ethical and moral principles recognized by wider populations. Here, identity matters as it signifies a person’s relative position *vis-à-vis* the state’s bearing idea. The interactive process between various groups within a society shapes the form of inter-state power distributions, which in turn determines the contents of the state’s “sacred” content. For instance, those groups of people that get to hold the reins of power in a particular state also have a privilege through which they define the contents of the organizing idea of the state itself. Historically, this has meant that the dominant political elite holds the privilege to outline the principles of a hegemonic system.

This is particularly clear in the US, where the foundations of the political system are framed within the idea of white supremacy. It is also the case in a number of European societies that are steeped in the idea of nationhood, which is in turn based on the supremacy of one ethnic group, one language, one religion, and one culture over all others within a particular territory. Thus hegemony of one identity group (the socio-political, economic, and cultural power-bearing group) becomes the reason for dominating all others within that particular context. In other words, hegemony of one group becomes a dominating and colonial order for another. Consider this, the core idea of Black Nationalism and even Black Theology is the resistance to the domination of Whiteamerican hegemony. Here, Malcolm X came to embody that resistance by concluding that “American society [in and of itself] makes it next to impossible for humans to meet in America and not be conscious of their color differences. And we both agreed that if racism could be removed, America could offer a society where rich and poor could truly live like human beings.”¹⁴ He therefore challenged the basic assumption of the relationship between the state and the individual, between a White-american understanding of the sacred and that of all other minority groups, especially Blackamericans.

By threatening the “sacred” order of the state (i.e. White supremacy) Malcolm X was considered as an enemy of the state. He, much like other state enemies, is considered as a “heretic”, extremist, and radical deserving the state-ordained sanctions and punishments. Thus, the supposed tension between the power-holding elites, those who hold the priority of interpretation of institutionally codified idea (for example the constitution) of the sacred, and everyone else who dares to openly challenge that same idea

13. Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, New York 2011, 18.

14. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York 1984, 371.

constitutes an existential threat. Due to the existential dimension of the contentious relationship between the two sides, the discourses used to describe the hostile “other” are often expressed through theologically and eschatologically loaded terminology, such as damned, evil, devil, Armageddon, hell, and so on.¹⁵ An important aspect of political theology relevant for the analyses of the impact of Malcolm X’s lifework in this special issue is based on the postulations above, together with an assumption that humans are political and moral beings who interact, communicate, and change through contentious political engagement.

The race-based power-dynamics, both socially and politically, has produced a domination of a particular understanding of the idea of a (sanctified) state-membership or citizenship. A range of answers to questions, such as what it means to be an American, or successful, or desirable, or acceptable, have habitually been linked with the imagined, constructed, and maintained ideals of whiteness.¹⁶ Malcolm X’s indictment of the Whiteamerican domination over the black minorities clearly signals visceral opposition and resistance to the perceived domination and oppression. He states:

“The white man doesn’t want the blacks! He doesn’t want the blacks that are a parasite upon him! He doesn’t want this black man whose presence and condition in this country expose the white man to the world for what he is!” [...] “For the white man to ask the black man if he hates him is just like the rapist asking the raped, or the wolf asking the sheep, ‘Do you hate me?’ The white man is in no moral position to accuse anyone else of hate!”¹⁷

By attempting to delegitimize and radically oppose the Whiteamerican authority, Malcolm X also attempted to challenge whiteness’ colonial-like domination in the US context. In effect, Blackness, especially its radical form, represented, and perhaps in various ways still represents, the anti-thesis of White supremacy.¹⁸ Blackamerican civil rights and religious leaders and social movements have expressed their opposition to such a *status quo* by challenging the hegemonic understanding of what it means to be an American.¹⁹

15. See Emin Poljarevic, “The Political Theology of Malcolm X: Between Human Dignity and Returning the Gaze”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 11–27.

16. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property”, *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993), 1707–1791.

17. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 241.

18. See Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Minneapolis, MN 2015.

19. The term “Blackamerican” is appropriated from Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection*, New York 2005, 70.

The scholarly work presented in this special issue suggests that few civil rights leaders in the US have expressed their opposition in more clear political theological terms than Malcolm X. For instance, one of the hallmarks of his radical activism was that he was consistently unconcerned with the Whiteamerican's sensibilities and entitlements. Instead, his message (but not his alone) for freedom, justice, and equality was an attempt to deconstruct and redefine the sanctified definition of what it means to be an American – beyond the categories determined by the hegemon. His challenge to the hegemonic whiteness made a journey from the streets of Harlem to the national stage, and by the end of his life, around the globe. For instance, upon his return from the religious pilgrimage and a brief tour of the Middle East and West Africa, Malcolm X explained his understanding of whiteness in a lengthy interview with a former white supremacist and later civil rights activist, Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989), on 2 June 1964:

Well, white people whom I have met, who have accepted Islam, they don't regard themselves as white but as human beings. And by looking upon themselves as human beings, their whiteness to them isn't the yardstick of perfection or honor or anything else. And, therefore, this creates within them an attitude that is different from the attitude of the white that you meet here in America, because [...] it was in Mecca that I realized that white is actually an attitude more so than it's a color.²⁰

Here, Malcolm X rephrases his earlier assessment and understanding of the institutionalized racism and oppression of Blackamericans in relation to the hegemony in the US.²¹ Malcolm X's efforts to rearticulate the image of the enemy in the Blackamerican struggle for freedom, justice, and equality could also be interpreted as being a result of his international experiences and his continuous activist development.

This re-articulation of the image of the enemy should however not be confused with a redefinition, reformation, or redemption of the enemy. On the contrary, Malcolm X's political theology on this point relates to his early understanding of the sources of oppression, injustice, and inequality in the US. His rephrasing of the image of the enemy is consistent with his earlier positions – the hegemony of white supremacy is inhuman and unjust for Blackamericans and people of colour, and at the same time, it has been the essential feature of the US since its inception.²² For Malcolm X, the “earth's

20. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches, Debates and Interviews (1960–1965)*, s.l. 2018, 216.

21. To be clear, a hegemonic power structure is hegemonic primarily for the White America and domination for everyone else.

22. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Talks to Young People: Speeches in the United States, Britain, and*

most explosive evil is racism”, and those representing a racialized hegemonic structure (regardless of the intensities of melanin in their skin) are the enemy to his moral and sacred values.²³ This conceptualization of the enemy within Malcolm X’s activism is connected to a long tradition of Black liberation theology, and therefore not unique.²⁴ What is on the other hand rather exceptional is the impact of his activist-life and radical discourse on the contemporary transnational Muslim mobilization against injustices, racism, and state repression. Such mobilization is particularly interesting to analyze in the backdrop of liquid modernity and collective uncertainty in a range of multicultural and multiethnic societies in Europe and North Africa.

In a way, Malcolm X’s lifework has come to represent a form of Muslim civil rights activism, not necessarily rooted in the divisions between the religious “others”, but rather as a collective symbol for shared experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and repression. Hamid Dabashi formulates a larger point by stating that,

the significance of Malcolm X is that he rises from the heart of the metropolitan disenfranchised poor in the USA and moves out to reach one of the most massively manufactured civilizational other of “the West” in the Islamic world. [...] There is no other evolutionary figure who like Malcolm X so gracefully and courageously climbs over that dilapidated wall which mercenary Orientalists have constructed between the Western part of their own perturbed imagination and the rest of the world.²⁵

The global resonance of the contents of Malcolm X’s political theology in form of his anti-racist message, rhetorical fortitude, discourses of empowerment, and social mobilization, including his assassination, are partly analyzed in the articles included in this special issue.

The first two articles, “The Political Theology of Malcolm X: Between Human Dignity and Returning the Gaze” and “The World Is a Prison to Believers: Naming and Worlds in Malcolm X”, engage with discursive and

Africa, New York 1991.

23. Malcolm X, *The Diary of Malcolm X: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1964*, Chicago 2013, 23.

24. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY 2010.

25. Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, New York 2008, 23. Dabashi’s claim is clearly a provocative one, as it is too general and sweeping in comparison to a wide range of revolutionary figures that might inspire popular revolts and protests in Muslim majority societies. Nevertheless, his normative claim is symptomatic of the elective affinity that many historians as well as scholars of religion and humanities more broadly might have with regard to Malcolm X’s historical and contemporary significance.

historical analyses of Malcolm X's political theology, that is, the range of his conceptualizations of the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

The two following articles, "The Semiotics of Malcolm X from Harlem to Tahrir" and "Expressions of Political Theology in Art and Islam: Malcolm X-Inspired Transformations among Muslims in the US and the UK", address a number of cases where artistic expressions play a counter-hegemonic role. Artists challenge the *status quo* and the dominance of the state or social and political elites. Malcolm X is both explicitly and implicitly invoked as a moral authority and inspiration for artists' resistance to the hegemonic structures in their respective contexts.

The two succeeding articles, "A Travelling Model: The Mythicization and Mobilization of Malcolm X in the Malay World" and "Malcolm X and Mauthausen: Anti-Semitism, Racism, and the Reception of Malcolm X in the Austrian Muslim Youth", constitute two distinctive case studies where Malcolm X's legacy takes on new life in what is for some the unexpected contexts of Austria and the Malay speaking world.

At its core, this special issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* tracks a part of the diffusion of Malcolm X's ideas from the context of the US across the globe and more than a half century after his assassination. ▲