The Political Theology of Malcolm X

Between Human Dignity and Returning the Gaze

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Introduction

At a time when social movements across the globe are seeking justice, political accountability, and, most of all, dignity, Malcolm X's (1925–1965) lifework is becoming known far beyond its original socio-political context.[1] While it is hard to measure his legacy, his short public life and civil rights activism clearly continue to resonate with disgruntled young people. One reason for this is his political theology, which envisions the possibility of another world, one in which human dignity is centred on the principles of freedom, justice, and equality – ideals that humans are morally and ethically obliged to obey. Political theology is therefore a relational framework that guides a population and ideals that are considered to be revered and sacred, all of which are embedded in a particular political order, and which in turn define the wider scope of social relations. This implies that social and political relations in a state are power-centred, but at the same time these relationships are justified, oftentimes subtly and tacitly, by invoking a particular set of ideas and intepretations of those ideas. When someone, like Malcolm

1. I wish to thank all of my conversation partners during the whole process of writing this article, as well as the Uppsala Religion and Society Research Centre (CRS), for their support. Particular thanks go to Anders Ackfeldt for productive cooperation in organizing the workshop at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, "The Political Theology of Malcolm X", in August 2019, which was the crucial reason for writing the article. Two anonymous reviewers have made insightful suggestions on how to improve the text, which is appreciated. Jay Willoughby has offered valuable advice, as always. The usual disclaimers apply.

X, challenges some of these central ideas, or the dominant interpretation of the same, that person is oftentimes labeled a radical, extremist, rebel, traitor, or simply a threat.

Malcolm X's political theology, as this article shows, pivots around the value of human dignity. For him, human dignity is the sacred ethical and moral value that is worth pursuing and sacrificing for, something that is especially clear within the socio-political framework premised on White supremacy. Human dignity, Malcolm X argues in the last phase of his life, is a manifestation of the God-given and therefore inalienable right of all humans, not just Whites or Blacks, to be regarded as human. He argued that those who committed themselves to pursuing those principles are friends, morally committed and righteous, whereas those who opposed them, namely, the oppressors and the unjust, are enemies. His initial distinction between good and evil, based on racialist categories, later transformed into qualitative categories wherein race appropriated a more symbolic meaning. Nevertheless, the distinction between good and evil represents the pivotal and lasting center of gravity in all of his life phases. And thus his life, spent in the pursuit of dignity, strikes a chord with many contemporary Muslim rights activists.

Recovering Human Dignity

The 2010s saw a renewed scholarly and activist interest in Malcolm X's life-work and impact[2] for reasons having to do with the post-Cold War globalization processes, heightened levels of social polarization, xenophobia, and the rise of White supremacy across the North Atlantic region and elsewhere.[3] The volatile tensions between majority and minority populations startled many of the region's liberal regimes, some of which have attempted to deal with them by adopting increasingly illiberal and anti-Muslim

2. This renewed interest is similar to the scholarly attention given to Malcolm X during the 1990s. For recent trends, see Robert E. Terrill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, Cambridge 2010; Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, New York 2011; Stephen Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at The Oxford Union: A Transatlantic Story of Antiracist Protest*, Berkeley, CA 2014; Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016. Many more scholarly volumes and articles could be mentioned, as well as numerous civil rights activists who invoke, discuss, and borrow words and ideas expressed by Malcolm X, but the format does not allow enough space for such discussions.

3. See Cas Mudde, "The Relationship between Immigration and Nativism in Europe and North America", Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC 2012; Aya Ramadan, "Bobigny 2017: quand la banlieue impose la dignité", Parti des Indigènes de la République, http://indigenes-republique.fr/bobigny-2017-quand-la-banlieue-impose-la-dignite/, accessed 2020-02-06; Förortens pantrar, https://pantrarna.wordpress.com/om-pantrarna/, accessed 2020-02-06.

policies.[4] These two phenomena are perhaps most visible as regards secularism, religious freedom, and Muslim minorities.

One issue that opponents of Islamic religious practices and Muslim identities often invoke is that of "Muslimness", which, broadly defined, contends that these threaten a particular White-majority state's national cohesion and secular order.[5] This perception is often framed by racializing those Muslims living as minority communities in such states. It could also mean that "the fact of being a migrant, or a migrant offspring – a condition indicated by given ethnic/racial or even religious characters – that can produce a differential treatment towards immigrant-origin individuals, on a both practical and symbolic level".[6]

One can, therefore, plausibly assume that such and similar socio-political conditions pressure Muslim minorities to formulate individual and collective strategies to cope with threats, prejudice, and the snowballing structural infringement on their religious freedom.[7] In contexts where such pressure is mounting, a part of these minorities seek modes through which their demands for dignity can be expressed. And this is why the story and representations of Malcolm X's lifework and messages continue to resonate across cultures.[8]

The Muslim part of African-American civil rights activism, primarily in the shape of the Nation of Islam (NOI), is considered to have been a radical part of the broader civil rights movement and a response to the structural violence of the US government.[9] Malcolm X is arguably a central figure in shaping this radical response, given the impact of his political theolo-

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4. Kees Groenendijk, Elspeth Guild & Sergio Carrera, *Illiberal Liberal States: Immigration, Citizenship and Integration in the EU*, Farnham 2009.

5. Aurelien Mondon & Aaron Winter, "Articulations of Islamophobia: From the Extreme to the Mainstream?", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (2017), 2153–2155.

6. Laura Zanfrini, *The Challenge of Migration in a Janus-Faced Europe*, Cham 2019, 93. Clearly, there are exceptions to this, nevertheless, Zanfrini means that "the migratory background as a variable deeply influenc[es] social life".

7. Pew Research Center, "How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World", https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/, accessed 2020-02-06. The report shows that "Europe's average score measuring government limits on religious activity has doubled" in the recent decade.

8. See Emin Poljarevic, "Malik al-Shabazz's Practice of Self-Liberation", in Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016, 227–251; Farid Hafez, "Malcolm X and Mauthausen: Anti-Semitism, Racism, and the Reception of Malcolm X in the Austrian Muslim Youth", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 95–108; Khairudin Aljunied, "A Travelling Model: The Mythicization and Mobilization of Malcolm X in the Malay World", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 79–94.

9. See Terrill, *The Cambridge Companion*.

gy, which is based on personal experience, Blackamericans'[10] cultural and intellectual heritage, the NOI's religious activism, self-discipline, and mainstream Sunni teachings.[11] All of these point towards the struggle for both individual and collective dignity.

Although the core of his political theology is the good–evil or friend–enemy distinctions,[12] it is also very much about one's human dignity being recognized.[13] Malcolm X's personal struggle in this regard directly shaped his socio-critical method of "returning the gaze" to all Blackamericans' common enemy: the Whiteamerican power elites. His practice of communicating his grievances to inter/national audiences without much concern for the enemies' sensitivities directly challenged a major tenet of contemporaneous mainstream civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), established in 1909.[14] His daring to "return the gaze" is arguably one of the reasons why the broader civil rights movement viewed the NOI, Malcolm X, and later Black Power organizations as radical.[15]

A self-proclaimed committed Muslim, Malcolm X sought to socially, politically, and ideologically disassociate himself and all Blackamericans from the socio-political and economic power system that denied him human dignity.[16] His efforts to empower disempowered minorities by instilling a

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

11. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York 1984, 10–12, 150, 266–270, 294–295, 370–374.

12. Although Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), who originates much of the terminology about political theology, is clearly addressing an entirely different political, social, and religious framework, engaging with his ideas, such as the concept of "the political", is nevertheless still useful. He claims that it "is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend–enemy grouping". Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago 1996, 29.

13. One can argue about how well Malcolm X was acquainted with the Qur'an's contents, but it is plausible to assume that this autodidact had read all of it. If so, Marmaduke Pickthall's (1875–1936), or Yusuf Ali's (1872–1953), translation would have been the standard version he read. One verse, among several others, addresses the issue of human dignity (through the idea of honouring) directly: [Pickthall] "Verily we have honoured the Children of Adam. We carry them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good things for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom We created with a marked preferment." [Ali] "We have honoured the sons Of Adam; provided them With transport on land and sea; Given them for sustenance things Good and pure; and conferred On them special favours, Above a great part Of Our Creation." (17:70). See also Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 337.

14. See Sondra Kathryn Wilson, *In Search of Democracy: The NAACP Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and Roy Wilkins*, Oxford 1999.

15. Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, Cambridge 2001, 49, 80.

16. Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke*, 150–152.

sense of collective dignity (among Blackamericans) is political theology in practice.

By raising awareness of the power differentials in his society and formulating an influential analysis of how hegemonic White supremacy works, he presented a model for self-liberation and the pursuit of dignity.[17] Such awareness did, indirectly, generate responses among the ethnic, racial, and religious minorities of the 1960s. This process seems to inspire a number of youth activists even today, some of whom are actively confronting state repression, policies of economic and cultural disempowerment, Islamophobia, and racism.[18]

The roots of this political theology are also embedded in the tradition of Black Nationalism, the origins of which lie in the late nineteenth century Blackamerican liberation struggle. It, therefore, mirrors the growth of nationalist sentiments that had been an integral part of mobilization ever since the slave rebellions earlier in the same century. The era of Jim Crow laws (1870s–1965) only accelerated the formation of a collective consciousness, which was further boosted in the 1910s and 1920s by the Great Migration from the South to the North.[19] Such collective experiences are instrumental in shaping an acute sense of dignity and empowerment, an important source of political theology.

Returning the Gaze

Another part of Malcolm X's political theology can be traced to the intellectual and religious history of Blackamerican liberation. Pan-Africanists such as Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912), the early William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963), and Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) helped form his thinking.[20] Moreover, part of the post-Great Migration's religious mobilization was led by Noble Drew Ali's (1886–1929) Moorish Science Temple of America, Wallace Fard Muhammad's (1877–c. 1934) NOI, and

17. Poljarevic, "Malik al-Shabazz's Practice", 228–232.

18. See Farid Hafez, "From Harlem to the Hoamatlond: Hip-Hop, Malcolm X, and Muslim Activism in Austria", *Journal of Austrian-American History* 1 (2017), 159–180.

19. The contextual elements, among them this period's structural economic, social, cultural, and political changes, elements of which have contributed to racial tensions, including riots and uprisings in metropolitan areas in various northern states, must be considered. This is also true of the impact of some of the effects of the Blackamerican Cultural Revolution (i.e. the Harlem Renaissance) that he experienced in New York City during the 1940s. All of these realities shaped his worldview and his decision to initially disengage from activism and to reengage with it later on via the NOI.

20. It is particularly important to consider the Garveyite ethos presented to him by his parents, both of whom were activist members of the United Negro Improvement Association. See Essien U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: The Rise of the Black Muslims in the U.S.A.*, Suffolk 1966, 47–52.

other messianic leaders, such as Father Divine (1877–1965), all of whom provided radical theological arguments for recovering Blackamerican dignity. These men and many others attempted to instill a sense of black pride and racial independence in light of discrimination and oppression of black populations in the US and the Caribbean.

By the time of Malcolm X's activist zenith in the early 1960s, the religious and socio-political empowerment discourse had produced a polyphonic and politically cognizant activist culture comprising new expressions of a popular sense of dignity in being Muslim, Black, African, and also being superior to Whites.[21] These were also claims of self-determination, knowledge production, and social conditions, all of which directly threatened white power. In other words, the hostility between political and even religious rivals was displayed through culture-specific sets of discourses easily recognized by a particular group of people.

For instance, the early Black Nationalist discourses and parallel theological constructs that reframed some of those discourses proposed a particular definition of good and evil, friend and enemy, and the distinction between "us" and "them". Malcolm X, now an NOI Minister, formulated sharp theological distinctions between White- and Blackamericans[22] that mirrored much of the already prevalent images of the friend–enemy distinctions among the Blackamericans who comprised his audience.[23] What is more, their various ideological and even religious convictions concurred with his socio-political analyses and revolutionary rhetoric, if not with the NOI's theology.[24]

Malcolm X's quest for dignity, or an individual sense of autonomy among Blackamericans, significantly shaped his "returning the gaze". At the same time, this recognition implies that his early and later distinctions between friends and enemies are rooted in the Black Nationalists' historical attempts to use both political and theological narratives to empower Blackamericans. The primary political marker in these discourses was, and in some ways still is, based on the principle of an existential struggle between good and evil, friends and enemies, "us" and "them", and so on.[25] This timeless, transferable and resonant model is recognizable in places around the globe.[26]

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21. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 62–67.

22. Claude Clegg, "Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad", in Robert E. Terrill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, Cambridge 2010, 11–25.

23. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Talks to Young People: Speeches in the United States., Britain, and Africa*, New York 1991.

24. Clegg, "Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad", 16–18.

25. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 29.

26. Aljunied, "A Travelling Model".

In the Black Nationalist discourse's empowerment narratives and the NOI's theology, "returning the gaze" held up an epistemic mirror to the political system that maintains White supremacy.[27] This gaze expressed the view of the White-majority society and its political establishment upon Blackamericans throughout much of the twentieth century. In several ways, this view is the extension of the Whiteamerican establishment's post-slavery sentiments and institutionalized domination of the Black minority.[28]

One important aspect of the domination framework is that it *de facto* legitimized the prevailing discrimination and exploitation of Blackamericans. For instance, socio-economic discrimination generated the unequal distribution of opportunities for education and healthcare, and exploitation meant underpaying the Blackamerican labour force.[29] Blackamericans logically interpreted all such processes as depriving them of their dignity and, by default, their sacred right to be recognized as fully human.

On 12 December 1962, Minister Malcolm X talked about returning the Whiteamerican gaze in his "Black Man's History" speech. He presented whites as devils, the epitome of evil and treachery, beyond redemption, and therefore inferior.[30] This and similar statements, as presented below, have been so modified, restated, and reformulated that the adjective "Whiteness" gradually came to signify a diabolic and evil attitude as opposed to a specific race of people.[31]

Discursive Elements of Malcolm X's Political Theology

The two most important primary source documents used for this article are Malcolm X's autobiography and his diary.[32] However, the discourse, as

27. Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity and Malcolm X", in Robert E. Terrill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, Cambridge 2010, 150–156.

28. Rhonda V. Magee Andrews, "The Third Reconstruction: An Alternative to Race Consciousness and Colorblindness in Post-Slavery America", *Alabama Law Review* 54 (2003), 494–497.

29. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Oxford 2007, 63–68, 114–117.

30. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches, Debates and Interviews (1960–1965)*, s.l. 2018, 65–67. See also Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 370–372. Malcolm X "returns the gaze" many times; however, very few are provided here due to space constraints. This particular statement reflects one of the classic NOI doctrine's main theological principles. See Edward E. Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960–1975*, Chapel Hill, NC 2006, 18, 111.

31. For instance, during a 2 June 1964 interview with Robert Penn Warren, the post-NOI Malcolm X stated: "I [have] realized that white is actually an attitude more so than it's a color [of a person's skin]." Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 216.

32. This analysis is primarily based on critical discourse analysis, which, on a basic level, allows one to explain the function of discourse by investigating how language (written and spoken) shapes and is shaped by the sociopolitical context within which the communication takes place. See John E. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*, Basingstoke 2007, 26–29.

well as political theology, must be embedded in the broader socio-political and historical context[33] of such transnational movements as Pan-Islamism, Pan-Arabism, and Pan-Africanism. During the last year of his life, Malcolm X molded his own ideas on mobilizing Blackamericans based on the insights gained from these movements.[34] Moreover, his Garveyite upbringing, his family's breakup, everyday racist antagonism, upheavals of adolescent life, prison, and redemption need to be understood according to the socio-political events of the early and mid-twentieth century.[35] Placing both *The Autobiography* and *The Diary* in their historical context clears up much of the confusion regarding the perceived ir/relevance of Malcolm X's political theology, distinctions between friends and enemies, and his understanding and pursuit of dignity.

Four distinctive and analytically separate discursive elements constitute his political theology of human dignity.[36] First, the centuries-old socio-political oppression and marginalization of Blackamericans shaped its collective consciousness. This means the modes of communications through which both individuals and groups interact with representatives of this country's hegemonic political system.[37] Second, the evolution and peak of Black Nationalism during the 1960s provided an ample political vocabulary through which dissent could, simultaneously, be articulated and appeal to the Blackamericans' collective consciousness.[38]

Third, the evolution of Black Theology had allowed for the development of distinct Black religious traditions and their specific features in the US.[39] One can argue that the historical legacy of Black Theology in

33. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers*, 39–44.

34. Maytha Alhassen, "'Three Circles' Construction: Reading Black Atlantic Islam through Malcolm X's Words and Friendships", *Journal of Africana Religions* 3 (2015), 2–3.

35. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 1–190. His prison experiences are particularly interesting to analyze in future research. Incarceration and extreme forms of othering, isolation, and repression are some of the aspects that need to be taken into account when considering the form of radical activism, search for human dignity, and personal discipline in Malcolm X's later life.

36. Theology, much like politics today, is structurally tied up with the state institutions within which the knowledge of Divine things is usually produced by contemporary civil servants such as muftis, state-appointed imams, and state supported-fatwa councils. This does not mean that politics and theology deal with the same realms of knowledge, but only implies that both of them are produced and performed within the confines of largely secular nation states. Here then, religion, and its practical and theological contents, are subordinated to the state laws. This also means that the principle of sovereignty is only found within the secular power of the state, not as an integral part of the Divine – something that is usually addressed through theological reasoning.

37. Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Cambridge 2001, 5–22.

38. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 31–45; Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 183.

39. James H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion", *Journal of the American*

Malcolm X's thinking influenced his search for the authentic religious form of Blackamerican identity, which he eventually found in Islam. "Whiteness", therefore, came to represent "the enemy" through "his/her" racialist practices that were conditioned by white supremacy's socio-political domination. For instance, he described the press media as "vicious in their whiteness".[40] Fourth, Islam, initially in the form of the NOI's religious doctrine and later in the Sunni tradition, allowed him to make more cosmopolitan and transnational human rights claims.[41]

By merging and balancing these key elements in both local and global contexts, Malcolm X radically articulated and stimulated the imagination for popular resistance against injustice and systems of racial discrimination and oppression. The discursive creativity of his charismatic rhetorical performances, and the development of aesthetics based on his persona, has caused the core content of these key elements to resonate beyond his own specific context.[42]

These key elements are also sources of Malcolm X's political theology. For instance, the principles of freedom, justice, and equality, the primary markers of his call for dignity, can be found in each of these key elements.[43] This is equally significant in his redefinitions of friends and enemies, which he expressed differently in different contexts. Consider his discursive transformation in pre- and post-NOI periods, or his adoption of different rhetorical strategies when speaking to Whiteamerican and Blackamerican audiences or to the national and international media. Such variations provide each specific audience with relevant pieces of information and political theological content, all of which, in turn, reveal Malcolm X's taxonomy of friends and enemies.

From the Form to the Essence of Evil

After completing his *hajj* and a brief return to the US in April 1964, Malcolm X toured the Middle East, Africa, and Western Europe from 10 July to 17 November, a period that he meticulously recorded in his diary.

Academy of Religion 53 (1985), 755–757.

40. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 379.

41. Anna Hartnell, "Between Exodus and Egypt: Malcolm X, Islam, and the Natural Religion of the Oppressed", *European Journal of American Culture* 27 (2008), 207–211.

42. See Anders Ackfeldt, "The Semiotics of Malcolm X: From Harlem to Tahrir", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 47–60; Yolanda van Tilborgh, "Malcolm X-Inspired Transformations among Muslims in the U.S. and the U.K.", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 61–78.

43. These principles are infused with sacred values that can be found in many of his speeches both during and after his membership in the NOI. See, for instance, Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 195; Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 11, 93.

The Diary reveals, among other things, his thoughts on his evolving sense of cosmopolitan religiosity and belonging, as well as developing strategies for mobilizing Blackamericans for freedom, justice, and equality.[44] In this part of his life, Malcolm X acquired national and international experience by interacting with African and Arab populations, religious and political leaders, academic scholars, and public intellectuals. This had a profound effect on his friend–enemy distinction, as seen in his move away from the NOI's racialist theology and towards more power-oriented distinctions between "us" and "them". The "new" frame was shaped by his newly adopted mainstream Muslim identity.[45]

For example, his earlier designation of "white" and "whiteness" as representing evil, and defined as such theologically, was a racialist category and therefore an irredeemable condition. His later understanding of "whiteness" continued to rhetorically represent the domestic socio-political system as oppressive and unjust. Nevertheless, as a mainstream Muslim, he said that the oppressor, who symbolized Whiteamericans' opposition to human dignity by negating freedom, justice, and equality to Blackamericans and people of colour worldwide, could potentially be redeemed. In other words, Malcolm X unsurprisingly kept the racialist terminology rooted in Black Nationalism's long activist tradition,[46] while redefining its contents and meanings by infusing the theological contents of Sunni teachings. This undertaking, which broadened his analysis and conceptualization of the friend–enemy distinction, was not necessarily a shift in his moral and ethical footing.

For instance, one can reasonably assume that after his *hajj*, Malcolm X came to view racism as a hostile condition rooted in individuals and societies, rather than a predetermined biological circumstance. He framed racism as an intrinsically destructive ideology that had dominated the country's social relations from the very start.[47] Therefore, anyone who adopted it could be considered as an enemy of human dignity. A summary of his pilgrimage experiences demonstrates in part some of the reasons for this redefinition process and his recalibration of the friend–enemy distinction:

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44. Malcolm X, *The Diary of Malcolm X: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1964*, Chicago 2013, 168.

45. It is certainly possible to view his re-formation as a beginning of formation of an identifiable Muslim minority in the US context.

46. After the summer of 1964, Malcolm X toured Africa as an unofficial ambassador of the civil rights movement, gathering international support for the Blackamerican civil rights struggle by talking with African statesmen who were either ruling independent states or engaged in decolonial struggles. It is entirely possible to draw a conceptual line between earlier Blackamerican Pan-Africanists and his calls for revolution in the US.

47. See Reiland Rabaka, "Malcolm X and/as Critical Theory: Philosophy, Radical Politics, and the African American Search for Social Justice", *Journal of Black Studies* 33 (2002), 145–165.

> The brotherhood, people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as one, which proved to me the power of the One God. This also gave me an opening to preach to them a quick sermon on American racism & its evils [...] *For me the earth's most explosive evil is racism*, the inability of God's creatures to live as One, especially in the West. The Hajj makes one out of everyone, even the king, the rich, the priest loses his identity (rank) on the Hajj – everyone forgets self & turns to God & out of his submission to the One God comes a brotherhood in which all are equals.[48]

Here, racism is understood as symbolizing evil within the context of the human inability to live as "one". Malcolm X bears witness that this inability is temporarily overcome during the *hajj* season, when the "brotherhood" and "equality" among people of various races and cultures is possible, although temporary and locally limited. For example, *The Diary* presents multiple instances in which Malcolm X demonstrates that racism is the main source of injustice. One such instance occurred after pilgrims outside Mecca asked him about his *hajj* experience. He wrote in his diary, "this also gave me an opening to preach to them a quick sermon on American racism & its evils".[49]

He further notes that his post-NOI understanding of "whiteness" had changed from his earlier NOI notion:

> When they [whites] accepted Islam, it removed that [racism]. 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 then and it was in Mecca [*sic*] that I realized that white is actually an attitude more so than it's a color.[50]

The racial power dynamic in the US dictates that "whiteness" is a key part of the hegemony and thus "the attitude" of that hegemony's representatives. One's skin colour, therefore, is loaded with the potential to perpetu-

48. Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 23. My italics.
49. Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 23.
50. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 216.

ate the society's unequal power dynamics, as opposed to being an inherent evil characteristic of a specific person. This idea was further accentuated by Malcolm X's brief education in the general framework of mainstream Sunni teachings, which enabled him to update his ethical grounding.[51] One consequence of this process allowed him to broaden his definition of what it means to be a human, especially within the American context.[52]

During his travels, Malcolm X met with thirty-three African and Arab heads of state, as well as ministers, parliamentarians, Muslim religious leaders, and anticolonial activists. He sought to convince them that Blackamericans needed international support in their fight against "the U.S. government's injustices".[53] In addition, he tried to communicate to others that mobilizing for the Blackamericans' civil rights was both a moral struggle for the universal values of dignity and freedom and required the dismantling of his international listeners' conceptions of the US as being governed by a liberal regime.[54] He further attempted to connect the Blackamericans' civil rights struggle to the ideas of universal human rights, presumably on the grounds that this would resonate especially well with the leaders of both African states and of anticolonial movements.

Despite the limited results obtained, during his 11 October 1964 address to Kenya's Parliament Malcolm X persuaded its members to adopt a "resolution of support for our human rights struggle".[55] This meant that, due to the explicit support of a member state, Malcolm X and his Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) could file a human rights case against the US government through the relevant United Nations body. He proclaimed:

> If South Africa is guilty of violating the human rights of Africans here on the mother continent, then America is guilty of worse violations of the 22 million Africans on the American continent. And if South African racism is not a domestic issue, then American racism also is not a domestic issue. We beseech independent African states to help us bring our problem before the United Nations, on the grounds that the United States Government is morally incapable of protecting the lives and the property of [its] 22 million African-Americans. And on the

51. The Muslim World League (MWL) appointed Malcolm X as its representative in the US. As a representative of the MWL, the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, which is attached to Egypt's Awqaf Ministry, financed his five months of travel during 1964.

52. Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 99, 133.

53. Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 180. See also Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 370–372.

54. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 369–370.

55. Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 156. Another occasion occurred in Ghana, where he addressed "12 ambassadors of African, Asian & Arab nations". Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 62.

> grounds that our deteriorating plight is definitely becoming a threat to world peace.[56]

This analysis of the broad issue of racism in the US, and his explanation of how this issue is connected to morality and human rights (i.e. dignity), demonstrates an important shift in his theological focus from the form of evil to the essence of evil. The widening of Malcolm X's claims on freedom, justice, and equality – the dignity of Blackamericans – was manifested in the OAAU, a composite mirror image of other anticolonial social movements. International movements in the form of Pan-Islamism, Pan-Arabism, and Pan-Africanism have given rise to a number of socio-political organizations, among them the Organization of African Unity, established in 1963, and the Muslim World League, established in 1962, all of which attempted to unite regional non-white states to resist "Western" colonial and neo-colonial policies of domination.[57]

Radical Voice

Malcolm X's primary epithet for Blackamericans as the category of friends, and in opposition to "whiteness" as a notion of discrimination and oppression, was "black people".[58] For instance, in his "Harlem Freedom Rally" speech he stated:

> When we say "our" [Harlem Freedom Rally] we do not mean Muslim nor Christian, Catholic nor Protestant, Baptist nor Methodist, Democrat nor Republican, Mason nor Elk. By "our" Harlem Freedom, we mean the black people of Harlem, the black people of America, and the black people all over this earth.[59]

This maximalist definition uttered in 1960 demonstrates that Malcolm X was already widening the category of friends. At the time, this racial distinction was derived directly from the NOI's theology. This definition of the black man's essence also directly relates to the ideas of the "black man's" God-given ownership of the earth: "God will erase the American government and the entire race that it favors and represents, from this planet [...]

56. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 247.

57. Alhassen, "'Three Circles' Construction", 7–8.

58. At other times, he declared all "black people" in the Western Hemisphere to be Afro-Americans, which greatly expanded the term's original definition: the 22 million Blackamericans who were the NOI's primary constituency. See Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 221.

59. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 11.

and God will then give the whole earth back to the original owners, the black man!"[60] Here, "black man" is defined as a divine group, the category of "friend" embroiled in the cosmic struggle against a materially stronger enemy – *all* whites. The terminology and its contents are clearly embedded in the NOI's theological framework, based on the presumption of the races' cosmic struggle.[61] In a 1961 interview, Minister Malcolm X went out of his way to explain the ambition and role of the NOI: "[The NOI] primarily is a religious movement here in America that's designed to reform the black man or the so-called Negroes, reform us – reform us morally and enable us to stand on our own two feet and do something for ourselves."[62] Here, the "black man" is connected to the aspiration of collective improvement, especially moral and ethical reform.[63] Moral orderliness and ethical discipline are some of the recurring features of Malcolm X's conceptualization of both individual and collective strength within the category of "friend". His initial transformation from an incarcerated thug into a devoted follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975) had lifelong effects on his ideas of the necessary conditions for the Blackamericans' struggle for dignity.

In the same interview, Malcolm X connected this understanding of friend to the global context of anticolonial struggle:

> The world revolution that's taking place all over this earth, the black man would be fighting for what he knows is his by right, but the movement on the part of [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] and the others had done nothing but slow down the militancy that is inherent in the nature of the black man. All over this world people are standing up for freedom.[64]

"Militancy" and "militant" feature frequently in his discourse, for they indicate his perception of urgency in the struggle between good and evil. Here, the notion of "returning the gaze" is employed to empower Blackamericans in the most violent period of their country's civil rights struggle. The professed militancy represents an attempt to mobilize the increasingly frustrated Blackamericans against aggressive white supremacist policies. For example, meeting violence with violence is an attempt to "return the gaze".

60. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 14.

61. Clegg, "Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad".

62. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 23.

63. There is much to say about this aspect of the NOI's mobilization and grassroots initiatives, which often had the most decisive practical impact on potential recruits.

64. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 26.

During an *Open Mind* interview with James Farmer (1920–1999), Alan Morrison (1916–1968), and Wyatt Tee Walker (1928–2018), Malcolm X again stressed the collective dimension of Blackamerican identity as "us", while contrasting it with the morally corrupted and "criminal" "white man":

> I think that we can solve our problems better by looking at the condition of the black men in America as a collective thing, not individual, but collective. We're in this condition collectively; we're second-class citizens. Collectively, we're the last hired and the first fired. Okay, since we suffer collectively the one who benefits, the white man, benefits collectively. If a white individual were to murder a man he would be a murderer. Lynching is a murder. For the past four hundred years our people have been lynched physically but now it's done politically. We're lynched politically, we're lynched economically, we're lynched socially, we're lynched in every way that you can imagine. And we look upon the white man, the American white man, as a criminal.[65]

This collective dimension and description of structural violence seems to have pushed him to make even more radical claims disassociating himself, and presumably all Blackamericans, from the category of "Americans", in 1963:

> We don't think as Americans any more, but as a Black man. With the mind of a Black man, we look beyond America. And we look beyond the interests of the white man. The thinking of this new type of Negro is broad. It's more international. This integrationist always thinks in terms of an American. But you find the masses of Black people today think in terms of Black. And this Black thinking enables them to see beyond the confines of America. And they look all over the world. They look at the happenings in the international context.[66]

This is a different position from Malcolm X's post-NOI period, but only in part. This difference is not found in the distinction between good and evil or in his international focus or the radical tone of his discourse, but in his downplaying of separatist rhetoric. In *The Diary*, the distinction between friend and enemy is made almost exclusively on the basis of character, behaviours, and attitudes toward the Blackamerican struggle for full

65. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 40.
66. Malcolm X, *Collected Speeches*, 78.

citizenship and human rights.[67] This indicates that he understood the futility of driving the narrative of the Blackamericans' with a "mass return" to Africa or, for that matter, a separate polity within the US context.[68] This also reveals that his political theology had shifted from attaining dignity via separation to attaining dignity by confronting the enemy directly, on the basis of universal and Islamic moral and ethical ideals and through inter/national support.

Conclusion

The full extent of Malcolm X's transformation functions as an important source of inspiration for contemporary religiously and ethnically racialized youth activists in the North Atlantic region and beyond. His political theology, rooted in the struggle for dignity, comes out of a particularly salient critical method of "returning the gaze" to the perceived enemy. Social media, which has globalized the availability and visibility of his recorded and written speeches, images, and different appropriations, have popularized various bits and pieces of what can be considered to be his political theology.[69] New communication technologies have enabled the rapid popularization of his lifework and radical activism, all of which seem to resonate in a number of places where people experience heightened levels of repression, injustice, racism, and other forms of dehumanization.

Malcolm X's main activist mission, namely, to empower Blackamericans by his unrelenting insistence on their God-given human dignity, sought to bring about freedom, justice, and equality in a system preferring Whiteamericans. This activist tradition of liberation among Blackamerican leaders throughout the twentieth century certainly informed his political theology. However, what sets him apart is his cosmopolitanism and the clarity of his political theology's contents, including his friend–enemy distinction.

The issue is not just about more democracy and people's inclusion in the decision-making processes, but about the moral and ethical contents of such decisions, about upholding or undermining human dignity. This is the red thread running through the different phases of Malcolm X's life and activism, and the core content of his political theology.

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67. Malcolm X singlehandedly popularized the notion of an "internal enemy" within Blackamerican communities, namely, the distinction between the "house negro" (a heretic to the "cause"), or "that type Negro", an "Uncle Tom" as opposed to a "field negro", embodied by the masses, militant activists, and all those who were willing to sacrifice themselves in the struggle.

68. Alex Haley, "Epilogue", in Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York 1984, 459.

69. See Ackfeldt, "The Semiotics of Malcolm X"; van Tilborgh, "Malcolm X-Inspired Transformations".

It is therefore plausible to assume that his critical discursive method, his ability to transform with all that it entails, and his ultimate sacrifice, continue to engage marginalized people's collective consciousness in the North Atlantic region and beyond. These aspects of Malcolm X's political theology encapsulate a *telos* of many Muslim and other racialized youth organizations today, especially in debates pertaining to integration, citizenship rights, and even radicalization in a number of socio-political contexts. These assumptions need to be tested in future research. For instance, to what extent and how does Malcolm X's political theology of dignity and returning the gaze inspire contemporary urban and marginalized youth today? ▲

SUMMARY

This article makes a limited attempt to explain a part of the reason why Malcolm X's radical activism for freedom, justice, and equality presumably resonates with a large number of disempowered people around the world today. The analysis presented herein is based on a modified understanding of political theology that captures some of the appeal of Malcolm X's message and his pursuit of human dignity. Two components of his political theology stick out as arguably the most relevant for a number of contemporary civil rights movements in a wide range of places around the world. One is the distinction between friends and enemies based on people's support for or opposition to a collective pursuit of human dignity, oftentimes expressed as human rights, religious freedoms, economic justice, and so on. The other component is the returning-the-gaze argument, which points towards Malcolm X's ability to articulate an unapologetic and empowering indictment of the majority society and its overbearing political, cultural, and economic power structures. This argument represents a moral and ethical effort to gain human dignity in a socio-political context perceivably premised on repression and inequality. The underlying political theological argument is thus found in Malcolm X's empowerment discourse. This discourse is today oftentimes decontextualized, which adds to its resonance among the global Muslim youth who seek inspiration for mobilization against apparent injustices beyond the traditional voices, and in a variety of socio-political, linguistic, and cultural contexts.