

# Expressions of Political Theology in Art and Islam

## *Malcolm X-Inspired Transformations among Muslims in the US and the UK*

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### **The Spectrum of Mediation of Malcolm X**

In the course of my study of how Muslim performing artists in the US and the UK relate art and religion,<sup>1</sup> it came to the fore that a significant number of artists have been influenced by the (political theology of) Muslim human rights activist Malcolm X (1925–1965), also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, mediated in more or less indirect ways.<sup>2</sup> Ranging from popular culture to social and religious authorities, these ways include the determined, multiple recorded speeches of Malcolm X on the Internet, his compelling autobiography as phrased by Alex Haley (1921–1992), the persuasive *Malcolm X* (1992) movie by Spike Lee, the powerful hip-hop music that samples Malcolm X's confrontational allegations, and the Malcolm X resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> In the case of African American artists and those with Caribbean backgrounds, influences may have derived from

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1. The present article is based on an ethnographic study of Muslim performing artists in the UK and the US between 2009 and 2012, partly funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO, which has taken place at Radboud University Nijmegen and the University of Amsterdam.

2. This phenomenon is not limited to the UK and the US, but occurs in Europe as well, as is expounded by 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.

3. On the influence of Malcolm X in American hip-hop from the perspective of social semiotics, see Anders Ackfeldt, "The Semiotics of Malcolm X from Harlem to Tahrir", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 47–60.

the impassioned participation of family members in the Black Power movements or from any parental or personal membership of the Nation of Islam (NOI), or, subsequently, its breakaway movement the Five Percent Nation.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the ideals Malcolm X stood for have been creatively passed through younger, idealist organizations, such as the multiracial American Muslim poetry collective Calligraphy of Thought. Arguably, mediation has occurred and occurs through authoritative Muslim voices – for example Islamic teachers in the US, the UK, and on the Internet – as well as through civil grassroots organizations that organize(d) cultural events, such as North American Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) and British Radical Middle Way (RMW), which are grounded in the fundamental advice of spiritual leaders. Other alternative authoritative voices have played a role as well by means of Malcolm X-inspired academics, role models, and friends.

In order to reflect on expressions of political theology in art and Islam, I will first discuss how the notion of political theology can be understood in the context of Muslim performing artists in the UK and the US. Being engaged, at the time of research, in cultural production in Anglophone hip-hop and alternative music, spoken word and poetry, storytelling, theatre and acting, stand-up comedy, film performance, and contemporary art on stage, they experience power structures as Muslims and as artists, which actuate the question of study in the present article. Then, I will present my previous findings with regard to the differentiation within the field of Muslim artists when it comes to the complicated or complex relationship between authoritative voices, religion, and culture. Subsequently, based on ethnographic data, the kinds of influences that the politico-theological conceptions of Malcolm X had and have, including those that have been drawn from his life, will be explored, leading to a multilayered discussion.

### **Political Theology and Structures of Power**

Denoting how ways of spiritual (religious) thinking relate to politically principled questions within society, political theology becomes significant at the intersection of the domains of religion, politics, and culture – as in the case of Malcolm X, who aimed to counter the power structures that cause(d) institutional racism. Defined by Emin Poljarevic and Anders Ackfeldt, the signification of political theology is “the vibrant relationship between a dominant sacred order in a particular political context and the populations that coexist within such an order”, in which the latter represents

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4. Clarence 13X, a philosopher from Malcolm X's temple, founded the Five Percent Nation of Islam. Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, Bloomington, IN 2005, 15.

the organizing principles or bearing ideologies in a society.<sup>5</sup> In getting hold of the reins of power, particular groups obtain the privilege to (re)shape the contents of these legitimized (consecrated) principles. Jeffrey Robbins discusses political theology as a shift from the transcending, indivisible kind of supreme (divine) power to the intrinsic, diffused, and competing kinds of sovereign powers, which impose different worldviews.<sup>6</sup> In order to get beyond domination (by the privileged), suppression, and war, he regards democracy as the rightful kind of coming-to-power proper to humanity, when power arises specifically from an immanent force. This understanding of political theology combines the theological grappling with supreme power with the ability to locate that power not in some transcendental realm but “*in us, with us, and for us*”.<sup>7</sup> As such, the present kind of political theology is more radical in actively coping with external power, argues Robbins, than liberation theology, which did offer a theological interpretation of the world of the poor and the disadvantaged, but has been accused of having failed to change this world.<sup>8</sup> Blaming the institutional religion specifically for its contribution to oppressive structures, and representing an alternative perspective in liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Nancy Clasby therefore redefine the process of liberation as the continuous creation of “a new way to be a human”, which will lead to “a just society”.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, these kinds of bottom-up ideologies focus on liberation in the present-day world instead of, more traditionally, in some otherworldly domain. In any case, they allow one to reflect anew on the emancipatory potential of (non-institutional kinds of) religion.

Muslim performing artists in the US and the UK experience – while searching for ways to synthesize their religious beliefs with their artistic ambitions, questioning what is allowed, required, and what not, and acting upon their answers (the subject of my basic research) – to different degrees multiform types of dominance leading to reflections on the definitions of “us” and “them”. Various, Muslim performing artists have met Islamophobia, discrimination, and stigmatization in the non-Muslim majority contexts of the UK and the US. These range from being depicted as Islamic villains by the corporate film industry and biased administrative measures at international airports, to British and American funding as cultural state

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5. Emin Poljarevic & Anders Ackfeldt, “Introduction: Impacts of Malcolm X’s Lifework and Political Theology”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 4.

6. Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, New York 2011.

7. Robbins, *Radical Democracy*, x, 6.

8. Robbins, *Radical Democracy*, 23.

9. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY 1973, 32; Nancy T. Clasby, “Malcolm X and Liberation Theology”, *CrossCurrents* 38 (1988), 173–184.

measures of counter-terrorism strategies.<sup>10</sup> Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, these experiences have heightened the awareness of Muslim artists, and even more so of those with immigrant backgrounds.

Secondly, a significant number of artists experience religiously patterned structures of dominance through which they encounter prejudice in the overall Muslim world. Those considered established in Islam – representing the supremacist tradition of the Arab-centred trend, or, more broadly, the set of “Muslim old world” views within Islam – tend to legitimize definitions of Islam expressed by immigrant professionals from the Middle East and South Asia above those of Blackamerican (indigenous) Muslims, as Aminah McCloud and Sherman Jackson have argued among others.<sup>11</sup> Historically, however, the latter embody the established in American Islam, because they developed Islam in the US from the institutions of Black Religion, such as the NOI, where Malcolm X came to blossom. More broadly, understood from “the established and the outsiders” thesis,<sup>12</sup> the related tensions between “convert Muslims”, who have chosen the religion of Islam later in life, and “born Muslims”, who are predominantly raised in South Asian and Middle Eastern Muslim immigrant families, can partly be explained as an established–outsiders relationship in Islam in terms of (not) having relevant social and cultural resources, authority, and networks. All of this generates a picture of dominant and dominated religiosity.

A third, related kind of power structure in Islam is discussed by Sadek Hamid as the challenging contest between important Sufis, who tend to focus on the spiritual dimensions of faith and practice, and Salafis, known for their literalist interpretations of Islam.<sup>13</sup> The impressive success of the Salafi trends in the UK, which tend to severely restrict forms of art and music, prompted a response of leaders following the Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence, which Hamid identifies as “Sufism Strikes Back”.<sup>14</sup> Popularized by Muslim American scholar Hamza Yusuf, a renewed “Traditional

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10. Hisham D. Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture*, New York 2014; Kathryn L. Gardner, *Constructing and Deconstructing Islam in the Western State: A Comparative Look at the Politicization of Religion in France, Great Britain, and the United States, 1945–2008*, Notre Dame, IN 2010; Peter Morey & Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*, Cambridge, MA 2011; Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, New York 2001.

11. Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection*, Oxford 2005, 3–21; Aminah B. McCloud, “Islam in America: The Mosaic”, in Yvonne Haddad, Jane Smith & John Esposito (eds.), *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Experiences in the United States*, Lanham, MD 2003, 159–174.

12. Norbert Elias & John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*, London 1994.

13. Sadek Hamid, *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism*, London 2018.

14. Hamid, *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists*, 68–87.

Islam”, characterized by a relatively activist form of Sufism, brought forth an Anglo-American network of like-minded convert Muslim scholars and teachers. Participants of the network deconstruct Salafis’ claims to textual orthodoxy, accommodate sophisticated understandings of Islamic civilization, and are, to different degrees, politically engaged.<sup>15</sup> Purposefully, they share their recognition of Malcolm X, who inspired Sunni Islam in the West.

From the context described above, the present article intends to examine the possible relationships between the politico-theological ideas and attitudes of Malcolm X and the cultural attempts of British and North American Muslim artists to cope with specific power structures, bearing ideologies, and dominant hierarchies; seek liberation; or create new ways to be human in their societies and the (overall) Muslim world. Being agency-based, radical political theology expands the scope of the outsiders–established thesis. In this article, it refers to governing the everyday relations between oneself and relevant social groups in specific social contexts from the personal to the international level (forming alliances, advancing goals, gaining influence), and from an ethos based on ideas about God, humanity, and salvation.

### **Malcolm X in the Differentiated Field of Muslim Artists**

Related to competition out of ideological preferences and influences on the metalevel, the field of North American and British Muslim performing artists is, importantly, structured along views on the relationship between authoritative voices, religion, and culture.

Although, initially, I was not informed about the broad Sufism Strikes Back (SSB) network related to a renewed “Traditional Islam”, I came to sense the presence of a salient – i.e., focussed despite diversity – informal network of authoritative Islamic voices among a significant number of artists. In terms of cultural capital, the authoritative (convert) Muslim teachers in the West, such as American Hamza Yusuf Hanson and Zaid Salim Shakir, filled these artists with pride and provided the opportunity to identify with Islam in a way that is relevant to the American and British contexts.<sup>16</sup>

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15. See, for instance, Imam Zaid Shakir, “United We Stand: One Nation, One Destiny”, <https://muslimmatters.org/2011/08/16/united-we-stand-one-nation-one-destiny/>, accessed 2020-02-07.

16. Hamza Yusuf advised the Bush administration related to the “War on Terror”, which was generally appreciated by American Muslims. However, current discussions on involvement of prominent Muslims in state initiatives to counter extremism demonstrate huge critique. Daniel Haqiqatjou, “Fighting for the Soul of ‘American Islam’ – Activists vs. Imams vs. Academics”, <https://muslimskeptic.com/2019/08/26/fighting-for-the-soul-of-american-islam-activists-vs-imams-vs-academics/>, accessed 2020-02-07.

Therefore, I use the label “SSB network” while acknowledging that several teachers and scholars do not define themselves as exclusively Sufi-oriented. For instance, Imam Talib el-Hajj Abdur-Rashid, of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in New York City (a successor to the Muslim Mosque Inc. of Malcolm X), explains: “We strive for a Salafi message, a Sunni [jurisprudential] way, and a Sufi truth.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in terms of relating to art and music, these Islamic teachers display more tolerance or positivity towards art than Salafi-oriented adherents.

Drawing from my study,<sup>18</sup> the transnational SSB network is related to the conditional view at the centre of the differentiated field of Muslim performing artists in the US and the UK, where art and music moderately takes into consideration guidelines acquired from religion.<sup>19</sup> “Consciousness” has become one of the central notions revealed in the socially conscious hip-hop, stand-up comedy, and storytelling of Muslim artists in the twenty-first century, in the tradition of MCs who have radically expressed disturbing experiences in their communities since 1968, inspired by Malcolm X. Based on horizontal bonds, a part of the SSB network and beyond is also related to Muslim artists of the civilizational view, who are convinced that Islam needs art and music because it is culture that takes Islam forward into civilization. These artists of hip-hop, theatre, and film – who are often converts to Islam, frequently from mixed African lineage, just as Malcolm X – are eager to take his ideas further. In contrast, by defining boundaries that limit art and music, from rap to spoken word, in far-reaching ways for moral fortifications, Muslim artists of the strict view draw on rather Salafi-oriented classical scholars and (conservative) Islamic teachers with speech codes that echo Malcolm X in straightforward and pronounced speaking. They represent him as a powerful symbol of spiritual progression from the ghetto.

### **The Political Theology of Malcolm X in Relation to Muslim Artists**

In the course of his fight against structural racism, Malcolm X developed various politico-theological conceptions, which are in one way or another reflected in the tastes, orientations, and artistic practices of various Muslim performing artists by means of mediating subjects. I will outline the most salient conceptions and explore those that have been drawn from

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17. If not specified otherwise, all quotes are drawn from my interviews with Muslim artists, Islamic teachers, and academics on Islam.

18. In this study, which is informed by the concept of intersectionality, artists are part of the field of cultural production. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford, CA 1996.

19. Yolanda van Tilborgh, “Islam, Culture and Authoritative Voices in the UK and the US: Patterns of Orientation and Autonomy Among Muslims in Art”, *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 2 (2018), 101–134.

his life and reflect on their possible impact among Muslim artists. First, I will discuss “social action towards social justice”, the related “paradise in the here-and-now”, and, subsequently, “the Oneness of Humanity”. Then the various “conversion narratives to enlightenment” and the “transformational views of art”, which I have associated with constitutive views regarding the (im)permissibility of music, are considered. The narratives and views explain in which ways Muslim performing artists are influenced by Malcolm X’s remarkable politico-religious trajectory and how religious experts who claim Malcolm X in contrasting ways have influenced the life trajectories of several artists.

### *Social Action towards Social Justice*

Malcolm X was geared towards a religion that would encompass political and social action to eliminate racial and social injustice.<sup>20</sup> He detected that the religion of Christianity, despite its radical communitarian origins and compassion with the marginalized, failed to bring about a system of equality and solidarity.<sup>21</sup> According to Max Horkheimer, this was the result of it operating in symbiosis with the state.<sup>22</sup> In Malcolm X’s view, Dustin Byrd argues, the religion of Islam was better equipped to incite revolution for human rights due to its commitment to “principled violence” (as a last resort), its encouragement of its adherents to engage in a *jihad* (struggle) against oppressors, and its vision of a just and equitable society.<sup>23</sup> Malcolm X felt attracted to *asabiyya* (social solidarity), which comes to fulfillment in the *ummah* by giving the believer (voluntary) obligations towards his fellow men.<sup>24</sup> Through focussing religiously, *asabiyya* is a guide for collective action towards political power and cultural hegemony.<sup>25</sup>

For the past two decades in the UK and the US, Islamic grassroots organizations specifically have stimulated their young audiences to be actively engaged in society<sup>26</sup> by means of Muslim performing artists, while taking advice, among others, from teachers and academics engaged in the

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20. Malcolm X, *February 1965: The Final Speeches*, New York 1992, 22.

21. Dustin J. Byrd, “Malcolm X and Revolutionary Religion”, in Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016, 92.

22. Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York 2002, 129.

23. Byrd, “Malcolm X and Revolutionary Religion”, 96. Malcolm X, *The Diary of Malcolm X: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1964*, Chicago 2013, 40.

24. Malcolm X, *The Diary*, 26–27.

25. Beyza Sümer, “Ibn Khaldun’s *Asabiyya* for Social Cohesion”, *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences* 41 (2012), 253–267.

26. The practice of Islamic inspiration in civic organizations goes back to the Black Art Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

SSB network. From the perspective that this will help the growing Muslim communities in the UK and the US to survive and even gain cultural dominance, Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, for instance, aims to replace expressions of victimhood through stimulating a national Muslim identity with a related cultural citizenship.<sup>27</sup> Part of his civilizing attempts is the appreciation of both Islamic and indigenous (e.g., African American Muslim) forms of art and culture among Muslims. In the US, IMAN delivers social services in combination with cultivating the arts in urban communities by means of artistic festivals, community cafés, and guiding spiritual lectures. Its initial organizer, Kuwaiti American performing artist Asad Ali Jafri, of Indian and Pakistani parents, embraced the idea that hip-hop artists are ethically still learning to perform in line with Malcolm X, that is, through the advice of activist Imam Talib Abdur-Rashid, who has an artistic background himself. In the UK, by combining spiritual lectures with performances of popular (hip-hop) culture, RMW has encouraged an active, moderate kind of understanding of Islam. Organizer British Canadian Pakistani Abdul-Rehman Malik points at the life of Malcolm X for inciting civic engagement from the values of Islam to become self-determined and create a better society. RMW arranged the cultural *I Am Malcolm X* tour with spoken word performances, such as of the British Caribbean feminist hip-hop duo Poetic Pilgrimage and African American activist poet Amir Sulaiman. In both contexts, the Prophet Muhammad, who is regarded to be the first Muslim social activist, and Malcolm X are mentioned in one and the same breath. However, RMW and many other artistic Muslim organizations worked partly with funds of the Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE) programme to promote a “Sufi way of thinking”, the kind of state funding that divides the Muslim community.<sup>28</sup> To retain credibility in this matter, RMW referred to its long-lasting project to realize the ideals of Malcolm X before and after any funding.<sup>29</sup>

### *Paradise in the Here-and-Now*

Malcolm X searched for a socially engaged religion to eliminate injustice to (Black) people in order to achieve a foretaste of Paradise here on earth,

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27. Umar F. Abd-Allah, *Islam and the Cultural Imperative*, Burr Ridge, IL 2004; “Cultural Jihad: Making Islam Matter”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTQrYNlaoTI>, accessed 2020-02-07.

28. Interview with Michael Mumisa. See also Gardner, *Constructing and Deconstructing Islam*.

29. Similar to cultural organizations who organized performances in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia based on state funding, such as from The Rhythm Road programme, the organizations receiving PVE in the UK were criticized by members of the Muslim community.

according to William D. Hart.<sup>30</sup> He recognized that the Christian Jesus only seems to offer consolation in the face of suffering instead of an earthly liberation from that suffering.<sup>31</sup> Malcolm X remembered how Black followers of the Baptist Church would shout “for the peace-in-the-sky and their heaven in the hereafter while the white man had his here on earth”.<sup>32</sup> He realized that there is nothing in the Qur’an that teaches people to suffer peacefully;<sup>33</sup> Islam rather teaches one to stand up and “make heaven right here on this earth”.<sup>34</sup>

Through the mediation of Malcolm X and their own spiritual beliefs, Muslim performing artists interpret making heaven on earth artistically differently, deducing certain styles of “militant power” as well as “soft power”.<sup>35</sup> Along doing so, social activism becomes justified especially by one saying in the *Hadith*: “Whoever among you sees an evil action and can change it with his hand (by taking action), let him change it with his hand. If he cannot do that, then with his tongue (by speaking out).”<sup>36</sup> While several artists may change the first part of the saying to “If you see an injustice” – which is more aligned with the way of Malcolm X – many perceive the fate of fellow Muslims, such as those in Palestine, as a matter of outrageous social injustice by Western powers.

In the UK, Malcolm X’s accusations inspired the national to global critique of British Pakistani Haq Nawaz Qureshi, also known as Aki Nawaz, leader of the controversial socio-political world fusion music group Fun-Da-Mental. Nawaz represents the artistic view in the field of Muslim artists, which positions the act of questioning morals at the core of faith.<sup>37</sup> Since he grew up in the racial volatility of Bradford, he has experienced that immigrants, even when UK-born, are impeded to feel equal in a society that “targets their colour and culture in all its aspects”. During his

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30. William D. Hart, “Malcolm as Religious Peripatetic”, in Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016, 19; Malcolm X, *February 1965*, 22.

31. Byrd, “Malcolm X and Revolutionary Religion”, III.

32. William D. Hart, *Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis*, New York 2008, 27.

33. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, New York 1965, 12.

34. 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.

35. Yolanda van Tilborgh, “From Hell to Heaven: The Malcolm X Narrative of Muslim Artists: The Meaning of his Life in Relation to the Doctrine of Predestination for American and British Muslim Performing Artists in the 21st Century”, in Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016, 273–320.

36. Sunan Ibn Majah, vol. 5, book 36, Hadith 4013, <https://sunnah.com/urn/1291130>, accessed 2020-02-08.

37. van Tilborgh, “Islam, Culture and Authoritative Voices”.

international travels, he saw “newly marketed colonial ideas” leading to atrocities against “the victorious losers of humanity”, for which no one has been held accountable.<sup>38</sup> Displaying the social and symbolic boundaries of class, race, and religion in a militant kind of style, Nawaz produced the uncompromising album *All is War (The Benefits of G-had)*.

In the US, African American director of Progress Theatre, Cristal Chanelle Truscott, learned from Malcolm X that, even though the US gave African Americans full-scale civil rights, their institutions did not heal the wounds of structural racism, because: “If you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it [...] out – that’s not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made.”<sup>39</sup> Employing the style of soft power in order to influence ways of thinking,<sup>40</sup> Truscott, who attends teachers from the SSB network, aims to weaken symbolic racial boundaries. With her attractive theatre productions, she contributes to the process of healing by deconstructing stereotypical representations of (Black) people. In interplay with the artists, who project meanings to Malcolm X and his politico-theological life venture, the complementary styles of militant and soft power reflect the attitudes of both anger and agency to change the present world for the better.

Social activism is not exclusively directed against state power or dominant White meanings, however. African American performance poet Dasham Brookins, also known as Brother Dash, whose art structurally exposes a vigorous Malcolm X-inspired activist component, does not shy away from issues within the community. On his album *Poetic Justice*, he also addresses domestic violence and (religious) extremism.

### *The Oneness of Humanity*

Malcolm X sought to eradicate the structural dehumanization of African Americans in White American society.<sup>41</sup> On his pilgrimage to Mecca, he experienced a sense of community by meeting a society of peaceful coexistence and racial equality, apparently free of exploitation and oppression. Referring to the monotheist Islamic dogma of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), these experiences made him recognize “the Oneness of all Humanity”.<sup>42</sup>

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38. Correspondence with Aki Nawaz.

39. “Malcolm X – On Progress”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cReCQE8B5nY>, accessed 2020-02-08.

40. Coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York 2005, soft power can influence preferences by making use of the ability to attract instead of coerce, such as through cultural means. Used in an alternative way in the case of Malcolm X, see van Tilborgh, “From Hell to Heaven”.

41. Byrd, “Malcolm X and Revolutionary Religion”, 116.

42. Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, London 2011, 311.

Manning Marable and William Hart indicate that, along the way, Malcolm X realized that the intolerance dismissing all White people as “White devils” was incompatible with Sunni Islam and its claim to universalism as much as it was with his own political purposes to develop a broad movement.<sup>43</sup> He externalized the transformation of his goal from civil rights for Black American people to international human rights by describing his cause as something in which people of all faiths could participate.<sup>44</sup> Although his core aim continued to be improving the world-as-it-is especially for the African American population, during the travels in the last period of his life, Malcolm X strengthened the groundwork for Black–Palestinian solidarity as part of “Afro-Arab solidarity politics”.<sup>45</sup> This development may indicate his more syncretic, ecumenical attitude.

In order to rehumanize Muslims in society, the field of Muslim performing artists holds the important goal to “normalize” the Muslim image by portraying Muslims as complete human beings instead of as Muslims only. To gain equal treatment, public fear for Muslims should be reduced. Filmmaker Lena Khan feels explicitly inspired by Spike Lee, the socially engaged African American film director of the biographical movie *Malcolm X*. Ever since Malcolm X’s standing up against racism, filmmakers and artists such as Lee explored race relations and White domination artistically. In particular, in the process of giving more opportunities to Black artists, Lee detached any relation between role and race in all his productions, thus normalizing the image of Black people. By weakening the symbolic boundaries of distinction, Lena Khan intends to depict and treat Muslim people in similar normalizing ways.

In contrast, some artists reinforced the symbolic boundaries of distinction by starting their own businesses on Muslim terms to gain equal treatment. Meeting Malcolm X in hip-hop throughout his formative years, music producer and DJ Anas Canon, also known as BeLikeMuhammad, of a mixed African American and White background, gave birth to the independent Muslim music collective Remarkable Current in 2009. Defining “us” and “them” at the time – besides emphasizing the qualities of artists from American Islam – Muslims would have to control their own platform instead of “work under secular direction” in the mainstream of arts and culture to guard the status of Muslim expressions, preserve sacred religious aspects, and influence the world’s perception of Islam.<sup>46</sup> However, by

43. Marable, *Malcolm X*, 12.

44. Hart, “Malcolm as Religious Peripatetic”, 17.

45. Maytha M.Y.Z. Alhassen, *To Tell What the Eye Beholds: A Post 1945 Transnational History of Afro-Arab “Solidarity Politics”*, Los Angeles 2017.

46. “Remarkable Current Tour Dates and Concert Tickets”, <https://concerts.eventful.com/>

collaborating with artists of multiform musical styles and spiritual backgrounds, and refraining from his Islamic name in the course of the process of professionalization, Canon's collective developed towards an inclusive serving of humanity.

### *Conversion Narratives to Enlightenment*

In the following, I will explore the influences of the politico-theological conceptions that have been drawn from the life of Malcolm X. In a remarkable threefold ideological trajectory, Malcolm evolved from Malcolm Little, an unknown African American – exemplifying a deprived social group in the United States – and a street hustler, to Malcolm X, a successful Black Nationalist leader, and, subsequently, to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, a global Muslim leader and international human rights activist. Spiritually, after being raised in a Christian family, Malcolm converted to the NOI in the American prison complex, followed by – more than a decade later – embracing Sunni Islam.

Conversion or reversion with regard to religion is generally considered as a process of going “from darkness to light”. The double conversion of Malcolm X strikes multiple Muslim performing artists and Islamic teachers. By his trajectory of passing from the considered state of “ignorance” and backwardness (as immigrant Muslims may regard the NOI) to the state of “truth”, artists feel triggered – especially in the culture of hip-hop – to reflect on their own lives from performing sin to performing obvious virtue. The sequenced politico-theological trajectory of Malcolm X, by speaking truth to power as much as by being sincere to himself, inspires Muslim artists to develop their own biographical (conversion or born-again) narrative with a from-darkness-to-light structure.<sup>47</sup>

After his phase of embracing Islam when convicted for petty crime, British Caribbean Muslim rap and spoken word artist Masikah Feesabillah, also known as Abu Siddiq, became active in social *dawah* projects for vulnerable youths. Masikah, who participated in the *I am Malcolm X* tour, explains his strong attachment to Malcolm X: “The path that I came from till the path I am on now is similar to the path of Malcolm X.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, born in a Muslim Nigerian family, British Nabil Abdul Rashid acquired from Malcolm X that “one simple man can be influential to a lot of people” by standing up for what he or she believes in. After his imprisonment for drug-related street crimes at a young age, Abdul Rashid presented himself as

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Remarkable-Current, accessed 2020-02-08.

47. van Tilborgh, “From Hell to Heaven”.

48. “I am Malcolm X”, <http://www.radicalmiddleway.org/media/i-am-malcolm-x/3>, accessed 2014-07-16.

a proud “born-again” Muslim in stand-up comedy as a means to give back to the community and display his controversial views to fighting extremism.

Muslim performing artists emphasize the way to reach enlightenment and Paradise differently, inspired by distinct teachers. Jamaican-born Islamic teacher Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, who felt aroused when reading how Malcolm X converted from the NOI to Sunni Islam in the end,<sup>49</sup> promoted Islam in the video “How I Came to Islam From Darkness to Light” with the recommendation: “Earn Paradise! Bring the light of true faith to cease the darkness of ignorance!”<sup>50</sup> Because Philips came to understand that wind and string instruments are Islamically forbidden, due to its presumed relation with addiction, deviant behavior, homosexuality, and suicide,<sup>51</sup> he suggests that the anti-musical stance can lead to enlightenment. This perspective is part of the broader strict view in the field of Muslim performing artists in the UK and the US.

In contrast, during the cultural *I am Malcolm X* tour<sup>52</sup> of RMW, British Sudanese Sheikh Babikir Ahmed Babikir introduced Malcolm X to the audience as a man who “has come from the darkness to the light”, by “rejecting all that is evil to stand fair with what is right”.<sup>53</sup> Babikir connects the Malcolm X from-darkness-to-light narrative with advocating, albeit conditionally, music and dance. He aligns these artistic behaviours with “being human”, which reflects the perspective that enlightenment encloses the musical stance. This perspective can be part of the conditional and civilizational view among the teachers of the SSB network and, in less conservative form, beyond.

The understanding of the sequence of “light” after “darkness”, which Muslims acquire from the politico-theological life trajectory of Malcolm X, has created the sense that generating influence is within reach – especially to Muslim performing artists – through straightforward verbal acting as much as by being honest with oneself and others. This understanding may thus enhance speaking truth to external or internal relationships (the state, society, or Muslim communities). Besides, it demonstrates that Muslims

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49. Amina Alhassan, “My Journey to Islam, by Bilal Philips”, *Daily Trust* 2014-03-14, <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/my-journey-to-islam-by-bilal-philips.html>, accessed 2020-02-08.

50. “How I Came to Islam from Darkness to Light – Dr. Bilal Philips”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Y8KakzkoZo>, accessed 2020-02-08.

51. “Shaitan’s Azan ‘Music’ by Dr. Bilal Philips”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buoX3yJYJYQ>, accessed 2020-02-08; “Music, Art, Photography – Contemporary Issues Bilal Philips”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFiQS7-5WAo>, accessed 2020-02-08.

52. “I am Malcolm X – UK Tour ‘09”, <https://vimeo.com/8911092>, accessed 2020-02-08.

53. “I am Malcolm X”, <http://www.radicalmiddleway.org/media/i-am-malcolm-x/7>, accessed 2014-06-24; “Shaykh Ahmed Babikir I am Malcolm X Bradford Playhouse 28th Feb 09”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivL2wqYkP6A>, accessed 2020-02-08.

enact enlightenment differently, depending on the mediation of Malcolm X by authoritative voices of different strands and their perspectives on Islam and music.

### *Transformational Views of Art*

For Malcolm X, his atheist kind of adolescence was characterized by smoking, drinking alcohol, and immersing himself in jazz music. He was passionate about contemporary music and loved its environments – women, dancing, and gambling.<sup>54</sup> This period came to an end when Malcolm X was incarcerated. He converted to the NOI and developed the view that there was a certain connection between music and his “sinful past”.<sup>55</sup> Malcolm X performed his piety strictly, according to Hart, with public acts of asceticism.<sup>56</sup> When turning to Sunni Islam, he had to adjust himself to the required habits again. After leaving the NOI and internationalizing his major cause concerning injustice by the US state against the African American population in newly independent states, such as Ghana and Egypt, Malcolm X immersed himself in cultural life again, as Hisham Aidi describes, by enjoying music and dance in the centres of art and entertainment in Egypt.<sup>57</sup> Reflecting on the development of his all-inclusive views to participation in the fight for social justice, this could be understood as a syncretic phase in living his political theology. After he had internalized restrained behaviour with regard to the codes of eating, praying (*salah*), and consuming music, it is possible that, through reconsidering the importance of music for Black liberation,<sup>58</sup> as much as previous phases that were crucial for his position as a human rights activist, Malcolm X could now loosen up his behaviour in a controlled way.

To some degree comparable to Malcolm X, Muslim performing artists, when converting or reverting to Islam, have to integrate new cultural codes in their lives related to the production and consumption of art and music. Along this process, they may experience more or less strain. From the theories of Norbert Elias (1897–1990) and Cas Wouters, the conception of “formalization” signifies a social phase towards more strict regimes of

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54. Hart, *Black Religion*, 29–41; Marable, *Malcolm X*; Hisham Aidi, “The Music of Malcolm X”, *The New Yorker* 2015-02-28, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-music-of-malcolm-x>, accessed 2020-02-09.

55. Aidi, “The Music of Malcolm X”; Hisham D. Aidi, “Du Bois, Ghana and Cairo Jazz: The Geo-Politics of Malcolm X”, in Olivia U. Rutazibwa & Robbie Shilliam (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics*, Abingdon 2018, 413–430; Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York 1992; Marable, *Malcolm X*.

56. Hart, “Malcolm as Religious Peripatetic”, 10–11.

57. Aidi, “Du Bois, Ghana and Cairo Jazz”.

58. Aidi, “The Music of Malcolm X”.

manners and emotions, due to psychological and social pressures, whereas the conception of “informalization” reflects a following phase of controlled relaxation of behavioural regimes.<sup>59</sup> According to my study, some Muslim artists may pass formalizing and informalizing phases towards a syncretic stage in their career and life trajectories.<sup>60</sup> Especially among Muslims who embraced Islam later in life, informalization can be understood as “syncretism”, which Monika Wohlrab-Sahr defines as a gradual combining of old and new religio-cultural aspects of past (for instance, American or Jamaican) and present (Islamic) selves and contexts.<sup>61</sup>

American singer of the hip-hop duo The Reminders, Aja Black, with an ethnically varied Jamaican, French Creole, and African American background, had Malcolm X as one of her role models because of his severe endurance for the benefit of other people. After converting to Islam, she formalized her behaviour by dressing discreetly and covering her dreadlocks while singing for Muslims. Nonetheless, she was socially criticized for performing anyway. The need to repress her cultural habitus and ethnic heritage was, however, put into perspective by the interpretations of scholars of the SSB network. Against the “old world attitudes” of patriarchal Muslims who reject unknown cultural habits, Abd-Allah, for instance, argues that Islam has been able to become a global civilization due to its ability to make itself “culturally relevant to distinct peoples in different times”, e.g., in China and Malaysia.<sup>62</sup> Islam has thus displayed cultural understandings of positive content from ethnic, local, and national cultures. Informalized in her praxis since then, Aja Black now sings for both Muslims and non-Muslims with a certain controlling of her gestures but without toning down her artistic performance. In the Anglophone field of Muslim artists, this transition towards a syncretic phase is regularly encountered among convert artists with the civilizational view.

In contrast, convert Muslims who engage in “symbolic battle” undertake a radical break from their former, non-Muslim selves and contexts.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, some Muslim rap artists with experiences of socially destabilized (ghetto-related) environments display a contrasting follow-up by intensified

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59. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, Dublin 2000; Cas Wouters, *Informalization: Manners and Emotions Since 1890*, London 2007.

60. Yolanda van Tilborgh, “Career Trajectories and (In)Formalization among Muslim Performing Artists in the UK and the U.S.: Accommodationism or Fundamentalism?”, *Journal of Religion & Society* 19 (2017), 1–25.

61. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Conversion to Islam: Between Syncretism and Symbolic Battle”, *Social Compass* 46 (1999), 351–362.

62. Abd-Allah, *Islam and the Cultural Imperative*.

63. Wohlrab-Sahr, “Conversion to Islam”.

formalized behavior, such as Ashley Chin, also known as Muslim Belal.<sup>64</sup> Belal, who has tweeted that “Malcolm X started as a hustler, ended as a [*sic*] inspirational Muslim. I Wanna go #LikeMalcolm”,<sup>65</sup> prefers artistically restrictive outlooks above those of the SSB network. Possibly emulating Malcolm X in his twofold conversion to Islam, these male Muslim artists of the strict view came to decide to abstain entirely from musical instruments by stressing its Islamic impermissibility, exchanging rap for spoken word or a cappella (*nasheed*).

Although the cases above demonstrate different orders of behavioural phases, they are all examples of emancipation from social contexts to higher kinds of religio-cultural self-determination related to the mediation of Malcolm X.

## Conclusion

In examining the relationship between the political theology of Malcolm X and the socio-political cultural attempts among British and North American Muslim performing artists to cope with the power structures, hierarchies, and bearing ideologies they experience, the influence of Malcolm X appears to be mediated and/or expressed in manifold ways – of which this article gives an account.<sup>66</sup> Muslim performing artists deduce complementary styles from the passion of Malcolm X, as discussed in “Social Action towards Social Justice”, and “Paradise in the Here-and-Now”. These styles reflect the attitudes of formulating critique and standing up as well as the agency to heal grief and reform degrading mechanisms in the present world related to specific situations and images of Muslims, Blacks, and other Others. Nevertheless, the influence of the political theology of Malcolm X cannot be identified by a large commitment to a unified kind of activism among Muslim artists – on the contrary – and its significance therefore needs to be explained in alternative ways.

Translating their interpretation of the multilayered symbol of Malcolm X in divergent approaches, the artists and teachers discussed seem to make use of Malcolm X and his political theology as a reservoir of meanings, ideas, beliefs, theories, and practices through which they are shaped as well

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64. van Tilborgh, “Career Trajectories and (In)Formalization”.

65. Ashley Belal Chin, <https://twitter.com/ashleybelalchin/status/14302049164>, accessed 2020-02-09.

66. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the participants Aminah Beverly McCloud, Anthony Simpkins, Anthony Smith, Farid Hafez, Joel Kuhlin, Khairudin Aljunied, and the organizers Emin Poljarevic and Anders Ackfeldt of the Malcolm X workshop at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, in August 2019, for their valuable comments as well as the peer-reviewers of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*.

as shape theories, eschatological narratives, and myths themselves.<sup>67</sup> By informing processes of thinking, symbolizing, and reflecting on experiences, Christopher Partridge argues, a reservoir of concerns and values born from popular culture has developed in opposition to the secular. In constituting a new spiritual atmosphere, this functions as the re-enchantment of the West.<sup>68</sup> In the present case, this reservoir of Malcolm X-inspired meanings and practices might also be considered as a re-enchantment of the Muslim world.

While Malcolm X can be used as part of the politics of distinction, for instance by Blackamerican artists and teachers, he is also used in the politics of syncretism. Outside the centre of the field, instead of finding new ways to be human, Muslim artists prefer to normalize rather than distinguish their Muslimness in order to become equal human beings, which is in line with Malcolm X as discussed in “The Oneness of Humanity”. They will be able to contribute to the bearing ideas in society, if liberated from restrictive identifications.

Besides the normalizing and liberating effects of the mediation of Malcolm X and his political theology by externally directed expressions towards societies and states, I found certain transformative, emancipative effects relating to intercommunity directed expressions, i.e., towards Muslims and Islamic currents. At the centre of the field, Muslim performing artists may draw their personal “Conversion Narratives to Enlightenment” from the spiritual trajectory of Malcolm X. Its from-darkness-to-light structure has an empowering quality, because it signifies a process of coming out of the gutter into a state of enlightenment encompassing influence, which – against the bearing ideas – seems accessible to new (convert) Muslims as well. In several cases, proceeding from Stuart Hall, the background of artists of the post-independence Caribbean nations, who had to redefine their identities, may play a role.<sup>69</sup>

The “Transformational Views of Art” subsequently explain as well how Islamic teachers – who claim Malcolm X in contrasting ways – have particularly affected several of the career trajectories of Muslim performing artists. From locating salient power in themselves, the life-changing processes involve the coming to terms with psychological tensions, leading to emancipation from religio-social pressures.

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67. See Khairudin Aljunied, “A Travelling Model: The Mythicization and Mobilization of Malcolm X in the Malay World”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 79–94.

68. Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, London 2004. On Partridge, see Anders Ackfeldt, *Islamic Semiotic Resources in US Hip-Hop Culture*, Lund 2019, 107–109.

69. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, Cambridge, MA 2017.

In this sense, on the metalevel, specific Muslim artists may have become part of the informal Anglophone network of interdependent Islamic teachers and institutions – proceeding from Hamid’s conception of the SSB network against the popularity of Salafism – which seems focussed on reforming the power structure between Islam and “Muslim old world” views and those of the “Muslim new world” by incorporating the inclusive symbol that is Malcolm X. Besides presumably aiming to re-explain the most powerful mainstream of Islam and its cultural standards in the world, the network is also active on the national level. Through expressing celebrated opposition, such as by Hamza Yusuf, those representing the network gained the privilege to co-define the contents of certain organizing ideas of the state in the case of Muslim matters. However, these kinds of engagement in symbiosis with the established and ruling governments are now very much debated. Altogether, Muslim performing artists who encountered a mediation of Malcolm X in politico-theological ways have thus become more or less involved in complex relationships concerning the bearing ideology in the Muslim world, as much as those in the nation states. ▲

#### SUMMARY

In examining the relationship between the political theology of Malcolm X, also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, and the socio-political cultural attempts of British and North American Muslim performing artists to cope with the power structures they experience, the influence of Malcolm X appears to be mediated, personalized, and expressed in manifold ways. Besides the liberating and normalizing effects of Malcolm X and his political theology by externally directed expressions towards societies and states, I found transformative, emancipative effects among expressions directed towards Muslims and Islamic currents. On the meta-level, specific Muslim artists may have become part of the informal Anglophone network of interdependent Islamic teachers and institutions that is focussed to re-explain the most powerful mainstream of Islam and its cultural standards in the world by incorporating the inclusive symbol that Malcolm X is.