Malcolm X

From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary

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BRILL

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Malcolm X and Revolutionary Religion: Christianity, Islam and their Emancipatory Potentials

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Many recent books on Malcolm X focus on the biographical transformations of his thought and religious praxis. Malcolm, they demonstrate, like a good scientist or dialectical philosopher was not afraid to change his mind as he was introduced to new evidence, better arguments, and a deeper understanding of the subject confronting him. Yet, I do not want to focus on the determinate negations prevalent within his biography. Rather, in this essay, I will focus on what remained consistent from his days in the Nation of Islam to his embrace of Sunni Islam. One of these themes was his critique of Christianity and other forms of what can be defined as 'positive' religion, or forms of religion that have abandoned the prophetic concern for social dynamics for the priestly investment in social statics. Like other faiths, Christianity abdicated its early oppositional nature towards the state, power, and social idolatry, Malcolm X understood Islam to be the *inner-critique* of the Abrahamic traditions (Horkheimer, 1974: 34–37). As such, Islam was the conceptual 'other' that embodied, augmented, and implemented that which the previous religions either failed to realize and/or had abandoned, i.e. radical equality or, as Malcolm described it, the *true spirit of brotherhood*. Just as the Qur'an regards itself as *al-furqan* (the criteria) by which to judge all other revealed scriptures, Islam, especially in its most conceptually pure form, served as the measure by which the other Abrahamic religions were judged, regardless of the imperfect ways in which it was and is actualized throughout the Muslim world both then and now. Malcolm X saw that Islam was a religion pregnant with the potential to do that which the others failed to do, change the social dynamics of a given civilization, especially in terms of its racial antagonisms. For him, the persuasive power to erase away the "cancer of racism" that is often found within antagonistic civil society made Islam attractive beyond contemporary Christian thought and praxis (Malcolm X, 2013: 40).[1] Christianity, at least in its dominant Western

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1   It also has built within it certain mechanisms to mitigate the disastrous effects of class divisions. However, these have not always had the desired effect. The extreme poverty that can be found within the Muslims world within the shadows of extreme wealth is no different than

manifestations, despite its radical communitarian origins, failed to bring about a society of equality, solidarity, and brotherhood, but rather gave birth to a society of systemic violence, brutal imperialism, slavery, genocide and systematic racism, or at minimum justified such a society.[2] For Malcolm X, African-Americans were just one among many victims of the so-called 'Christian' society, but were nevertheless the subject of his immediate concern.

With the help of the Critical Theory of Religion, as developed by the Frankfurt School for Social Research, especially via the religious thought Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, I will reexamine Malcolm X's critical analysis of Christianity, its social and moral failures, and its functionalization as ideology within the American bourgeois 'white society.' Malcolm X was not a critical theorist in the academic sense, but his keen observations, his penetrating analysis, and his uncompromising praxis embodies the spirit of the radical critique of non-conformist intellectuals; a spirit that recalcitrantly says 'no' to stale ideologies that justify exploitation, oppression, systematic hatred and unwarranted violence against the innocent victim, and the struggle for a more reconciled, equal and peaceful future society. Because of this confluence, the Critical Theory of Religion can help us illuminate the already defiant stance of Malcolm X towards the 'world-as-it-is' and aid in the struggle, not only for recognition of the victims of history, i.e. racial minorities, the poor, the marginalized and all others who have been left in the ditch of 'civilization,' but it can contribute to bringing about a new society rooted within the Prophetic and Socratic ideals for which he and many other revolutionaries were martyred.

Three Periods of Christianity in Malcolm's Biography

Malcolm X's relationship with Christianity can be broken down into three distinct periods in his biography. First, his growing up in the home of his parents and their combination of the Black Nationalism of Marcus Garvey and the Baptist denomination (Malcolm X, 1992a: 7). Additionally, this period extends

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in the non-Muslim world; a phenomenon that many more leftist Muslims see as a failure of the Muslims to implement true Islamic values. In many ways, Muslim society has been influenced by the brutality of aggressive capitalism more so than capitalism has been influenced by Islam.

2   If we cannot say that it was totally responsible for this phenomenon, and I don't believe it was, then we can at least say that it failed to arrest them.

into his wayward days as a minor hustler, pimp, drug dealer, etc., when he became hostile to questions of religion, until he was introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad while in Norfolk Prison Colony in 1948.[3] His most vivid experience with Christianity in this first period began with his father's religious preaching, which left him unimpressed. In his autobiography, Malcolm recalls his church experiences,

> My brother Philbert…loved church, but it confused and amazed me. I would sit goggle-eyed at my father jumping and shouting as he preached, with the congregation jumping and shouting behind him, their souls and bodies devoted to singing and praying. Even at that young age, I just couldn't believe in the Christian concept of Jesus as someone divine. And no religious person, until I was a man in my twenties – and then in prison – could tell me anything. I had very little respect for most people who represented religion.
>
> MALCOLM X, 1992A: 7

It is doubtful that Malcolm developed any real critique of the core concept of Jesus' divinity at such a young age, but we have no reason to doubt his youthful skepticism of this particular form of Christian worship, especially the charismatic aspect. It may have been the case, as others have claimed, that he was projecting his adult critique of Christianity into his childhood experiences, or, he may simply be recalling a time period in his life that was confusing, off-putting and for some unarticulated reason uncomfortable for the youngster in church.[4] However, Malcolm did express his approval of his father's ethno-political views on Marcus Garvey, which were delivered in a more "intelligent" and "down to earth" manner, saying "the image of him that made me proudest was his crusading and militant campaigning" which scared "these white folks to death" (Malcolm X, 1992a: 9). As we can see, the period between 1925, the

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3   In 1950 Malcolm was transferred back to Charlestown State Prison, where he was originally incarcerated, for refusing to be inoculated for typhoid. Since he objected on religious grounds, he was returned to Charlestown. However, by April of 1950, he and other NOI converts were demanding *halal* (permissible by Islamic dietary laws) meals and jail cells facing east towards Mecca (Marable and Felber, 2013: xxx).

4   William David Hart has suggested that this may be a case of Malcolm's "auto-biographical memory," wherein his present opinions are projected back into his biography (William David Hart, 2008: 26–27). If this is the case, it simply further emphasizes Malcolm's later rejected the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth in conformity with the Islamic tradition's insistence on Jesus' mere humanity.

year of Malcolm's birth, to sometime in 1948, when he was introduced to the Nation of Islam by family members, was filled with many experiences with Christianity. If we take Malcolm's writings verbatim, most of these experiences left him unimpressed or with a negative impression.

Second, Malcolm X experienced Christianity through the lenses of the Nation of Islam as being a totally 'racialized' religion. Having just accepted the teaching of Elijah Muhammad in prison, Malcolm relates an insight in his autobiography. He states,

> And where the religion of every other people on earth taught its believers of a God with whom they could identify, a God who at least looked like one of their own kind, the slavemaster injected his Christian religion into this "Negro." This "Negro" was taught to worship an alien God having the same blond hair, pale skin, and blue eyes as the slavemaster.
> MALCOLM X, 1992A: 188

During this time period, certain aspects of Christian history were cleverly integrated into the NOI's mythological anthropology, its 'Yacub's history' (Malcolm X, 1992a: 190–194). While certain 'historical' facts about Christianity and its origins were maintained, others are simply devoid of any truth, thus producing a sacred myth with a few scattered historical references within. Although the NOI often focused on the entwinement of Christianity, slavery, and white supremacy, Elijah Muhammad's peculiar Christology was half historical fact and half fiction. Without a shred of credible scholarship behind his claims, he made Jesus of Nazareth into the "illegitimate son of Joseph and Mary," and a "black prophet" who preached "the essence of the original Islam to the whites" (Clegg, 1997: 54). For having told the Jews about their "evil origins," Jesus was "skewered" with a knife, "pinned...to a wooden wall," his body being contorted into the shape of a cross, until "Joseph claimed his corpse" (Clegg, 1997: 55). According to Claude Andrew Clegg, "The prophet [Jesus] was prepared for burial by Egyptians and interred in Jerusalem. His sepulcher, guarded by Fruit of Islam, could be freely visited and viewed by Muslims; however, others would have to pay six thousand dollars and secure a certificate from the pope of Rome to gain entrance to the site" (Clegg, 1997: 55). The "tricknology" of evil whites, as Elijah Muhammad called it, resulted in the "unholy conspiracy" called Christianity, which was the evil religion of whites who were attempting to obscure the real religion of Islam, the religion of the original Asiatic Black man (Clegg, 1997: 55; Evanzz, 1999: 75). As such, Master Fard Muhammad, whom the Nation of Islam believed was God incarnated and the teacher of Elijah Muhammad, was sent to save the Black race from the evils of the whites, including their re-

ligion.[5] While the NOI's mythical telling of Christianity's origins is rather peculiar and mostly absent of verifiable history, it was designed primarily based on the *needs* of its audience and not *truth.* First, it was an attempt to divorce African-Americans from Christianity and bring them into the fold of the Nation of Islam. Second, such a *sacred story* provided as sense of worth, historical pride, and racial dignity that traditional Christianity failed to do – or intentionally took away – as it had become so indistinguishable from a society dominated by the ideology of white supremacy, the very society that victimized Black folk both physically and psychologically. In this sense, the truth of the myth was not important; what it *did* for Black folk, as it answered a *need*, was the prevailing factor. The 'brainwashing,' which had been done for hundreds of years by white 'Christians' to Black folk, had to be undone, and that was the intent of Yacub's anthropological mythology (Malcolm X, 1992a: 188).

Lastly, as Malcolm emancipated himself from the constrictions of the Nation of Islam's ideology, he divorced his understanding of Christianity from Elijah Muhammad's Dr. Yacub; he began to recognize the emancipatory potentials in Christianity, especially in light of the prophetic courage of the Black Church, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but nevertheless continued to maintain the idea that Christianity was inadequate in the struggle for human rights in the United States and abroad.[6] As such, Malcolm could appreciate the faith of millions of Black folk who looked to the religious opposition of Jesus of Nazareth to the empire of Rome and his subsequent martyrdom as *prophetic religion* – that it was a religion that could resist the *world-as-it-is*, as it was done by his most courageous mother and father. Nevertheless, he could not come to the conclusion that such a religion, so infused and disfigured by the untrue white-bourgeois-society, could bring about a society of peaceful coexistence, racial equality and true justice, similar to the one he witnessed while on pilgrimage to Mecca. Neither could a religion committed to the principle of non-violence engage in the necessary revolutionary praxis that was needed in the United States, as "revolutions are never fought by turning the other cheek [and] revolutions are never based upon love-your-enemy

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5   For a much more comprehensive accounting of the NOI's mythological anthropology and its teachings on Christianity, see Clegg's extremely well written and research book, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad,* pg. 1–73.

6   In a moment of contrition, Malcolm writes in his autobiography that "I was to learn later that Elijah Muhammad's tales, like this one of 'Yacub,' infuriated the Muslims of the East. While at Mecca, I reminded them that it was their fault, since they themselves hadn't done enough to make real Islam known in the West. Their silence left a vacuum into which any religious faker could step and mislead our people" (Malcolm X, 1992a: 194).

and pray-for-those-who-spitefully-use-you" (Malcolm X, 1965: 50). Christianity, even if stripped from the tyranny of white supremacy, was ill equipped for revolution, for within its foundation was the principle of non-violence. Islam, he believed, was the only religion that contained the moral, ethical, and political-economic vision to bring about a future reconciled, peaceful and just society, precisely because of its dual commitment to 'principled violence' (when necessary and as a last resort) and to its vision of a just and equitable society.

Positive and Negative Religion

From the perspective of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, the history of religion is dialectical in nature. There is always a dialectical tension between the religion that resists the world (*adversus mundi*) and the religion that conforms and compromises (*pro mundi*) with the world (Boer, 2012: 11–14). All three Abrahamic faiths, beginning with their founders (or initiators) Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, are by nature and design resistant towards conforming or compromising with the 'fallen' world and all its wickedness. Moses fights against the brutality of the slave holding society of Egypt; Jesus resists the unjust and oppressive empire of Rome and the collaborating Jewish authorities; and Muhammad fights against the pagan barbarity of *Jahaliyya* (Arabian age of ignorance). In their purest of essences, they are in a perpetual state of what Max Horkheimer calls the 'longing for the totally other,' (*die sehnsucht nacht dem ganz anderen*) opposed to the already established history of torture, terror, suffering and misery that this world breeds. In this sense, the given world is always in contradiction to the world-as-it-should-be, and the prophetic voices are those that make this distinction painfully clear to the masses, thus disturbing their sense of security, their invested-ness in the status quo, and/or their complacency in the face of suffering, poverty, misery and social despair. They are also the uncompromising voices that confront the brutal powers behind the status quo; those ruling classes, ideologies, governments and groups that depend on the status quo for their position, wealth, and authority. Nevertheless, as history has demonstrated too often, these faiths can be co-opted by the worldliness of power, status, and wealth, and abandon the very vision of the 'other' society that once made them so attractive to the victims of history. When these Abrahamic faiths abandon this 'otherness,' when it compromises with earthly power, the state, or the status quo, it loses its revolutionary and emancipatory potentials; it deflates into mere ideology – no longer concerned with *social dynamics* but rather with the preservation and reproduction of *social statics*. *Positive religion*, therefore, is any form of religion, whether it be an

institution, belief and/or belief attitude, that embraces, justifies and sancti-
fies the given, especially the political, economic and social status quo, which
includes the social antagonisms that lead to the reproduction of unnecessary
suffering, despair, and oppression (Adorno, 2005: 135–142). It is a religion that
has abandoned its revolutionary and prophetic core, and is left exhausted
and facile, or worse, it becomes a "whitened sepulcher" – holy and pure on
the outside but hollow and dead in the inside: a reduction to mere formalism
(Matthew 23:27). From the perspective of the critical historian, this form of
religion is often embraced by those who are the 'winners' of history, i.e. the feu-
dal lords, the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the dominant 1% in today's so-
ciety, who are rarely ever concerned with the *content* of religion, but rather the
appearance. This form of religion has a dual function. First, it fails to threaten
the social status and wellbeing of the ruling class, i.e. it is defanged and made
into *harmless* religion. Secondly, as Vladimir Lenin pointed out, it serves as a
outlet for their guilt-consciousness (if it is present), by offering the ruling class
opportunities for social absolution through meaningless compromises with al-
truism (the social appearance of which is more important than the altruistic
act itself) (Lenin in Schapiro and Reddaway, 1967: 108–109). Despite its origins
in radical Prophetic equality, most notably with Jesus of Nazareth and continu-
ing through the early Christian tradition, this form of religion reifies the unjust
conditions which are already established, making any thought of radical trans-
formation within the given impossible as it is often perceived to be perverse
and/or unnatural to attempt to change that which has a fixed nature. In an at-
tempt to naturalize – and therefore legitimate – the socially constructed, Jesus
of Nazareth is often quoted saying "the poor will always be with you" while
failing to ask *why* such poor are always with us and whether or not Jesus meant
they *should* always be a permanent fixture in the society of man (Mark: 14:7).
If even the 'son of God' believes the poor will always be with us, they coyly say,
then who are we to disagree, or God forbid, proving him wrong!

In this slumber-induced religiosity, associated with the 'Uncle Tom,' the vic-
tims of history are routinely asked to *suffer peacefully* while they are victimized –
what Malcolm X referred to as "Novocaine" religion (Malcolm X, 1965: 12). In his
Message to the Grass Roots, delivered in Detroit on November 10, 1963, Malcolm
spoke of the religion of passivity, stating that,

> It's like when you go to the dentist, and the man's going to take your tooth.
> You're going to fight him when he starts pulling. So he squirts some stuff
> in your jaw called novocaine, to make you think they're not doing any-
> thing to you. So you sit there and because you've got all of that novocaine
> in your jaw, you suffer – peacefully. Blood running all down your jaw, and

you don't know what's happening. Because someone has taught you to suffer – peacefully.

MALCOLM X, 1965: 12

In other words, the social imperative instilled in the victim is to *suffer well*, forget this life, and be content to be rewarded after death (Malcolm X, 1992a: 188). In this passive ideology, revolutionary and emancipatory potentials quickly evaporate as the victims are made immobile, apathetic, and unwilling to engage in their own struggle for liberation; they are in affect *paralyzed in their lamentations*. By only gazing inward, and seeing salvation exclusively in the realm of the eschatological, the status quo remains unmolested, unmodified, and entrenched, and most perversely, serviced and maintained by the victims themselves. Although they remain extremely conscious of their deplorable conditions, their second-class citizenship, and their absence of substantive freedom, the victims nevertheless hopelessly rely on a remedy outside of history for their miserable condition. Revolution, as Malcolm X advocated, was barred from serious consideration by those hooked on novocaine religion.

However, the Abrahamic religions, especially Christianity, were not always world-confirming, but had a negative or world-defying aspect from its very inception. Although it has been forgotten, submerged within the ethical and moral bog of bourgeois society, Christianity inherited its inherent negativity from Messianic Judaism (Scholem, 1971: 1–36). For example, remembering the social implication of the belief in a divine being, the Critical Theorist Max Horkheimer writes,

> The concept of God was for a long time the place where the idea was kept alive that there are other norms besides those to which nature and society give expression in their operation. Dissatisfaction with earthly destiny is the strongest motive for acceptance of a transcendental being. If justice resides with God, then it is not to be found in the same measure in the world. *Religion is the record of the wishes, desires, and accusation of countless generations.*[7]
>
> HORKHEIMER 2002: 129

For the philosopher Horkheimer, the concept of God was the repository of all hope – 'hope' being the entrenched and undiminished longing or desire to negate what is the case, i.e. the unnecessary suffering and misery of created

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7   My emphasis added.

by the perpetual catastrophe of nature and history, what liberal-capitalist and fascist society calls *progress*. (Benjamin, 1969: 257). If perfect justice did not reside within this world, whether its absence is in any given society's justice system or in the day-to-day lifeworld, then it could only be found in the negation of this world, through the perfect justice of the divine. Where this world fails to bring about this perfect justice, the perfect creator of justice remained the only possibility for global reconciliation, and all hope is placed within that potential. The space between this world, with all its deficiencies, ugliness, and unwarranted violence, and the concept of God, allowed the believer to continue to hope for the coming of God and his kingdom, which would create *on earth as it is in heaven.* The idea of an eschatological rupture of history by the divine, either through the Messiah or Mahdi, expressed the longing for the negation of this fallen and cruel world and the misery it imposes on its finite inhabitants. In other words, the broken and abused wish to end the tragic suffering embedded not only in the general human condition, but especially within the communities who feel the wrath of unjust oppression, as well as systemic and direct violence, i.e. the very condition that African-Americans endured (and still endure) in the United States for centuries, with the perverse brutality of slavery, Jim Crow and the 'New Jim Crow' of the American Industrial Prison Complex. As long as this world was not thought to be identical to the *other* world; as long as the 'other' expressed its dissatisfaction and disappointment with the worldliness of the earth-bound, than the oppressed and battered could hope to be on the side of the 'totally other,' who represented absolute and perfect justice and therefore the hopeful end of their unspeakable suffering. As such, *negativity* towards the destructiveness and brutality in the world, with its unbalanced and unjust social relations, animated the thought of those believers who hoped for an *apocatastasis* (ἀποκατάστασις), or a restitution of the primordial condition of mankind and his creator – a state of *being-with* the divine outside of the ugliness of 'history as Golgotha.' Therefore the world-as-it-is could not be embraced, but rather the suffering, the brokenness, and the martyrs that this cruel world created, symbolized and witnessed for – through their misery – the opposite of such misery: the *world-as-it-should-be*. That *otherness* was the world that the Abrahamic faiths embraced and held up as the standard of judgment for this world. If world history was world judgement, as Hegel believed it was, then the Abrahamic religions were supposed to be the *grand inquisitors*, as they expressed the ideals of absolute justice, unconditional love, and limitless compassion in the name of history's victims. Christianity, especially in its earliest articulations, expressed this longing to transcend the world and all its ugly brokenness; it attempted to actualize that utopic nature of the 'other' in its religiously inspired – and radically

communistic – communities, which could not embrace, to Nietzsche's disappointment, the heroic (and brutal) *ethos* of the pagan Roman empire.

In looking at why the post-Nation of Islam Malcolm X rejected Christianity as an agent for radical social change, despite the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was certainly an advocate of such change in his own time, we must examine the history of Christianity. We must ascertain what drove the prophetic, Socratic and revolutionary nature in Jesus of Nazareth and the first martyrized Christian community to embrace the worldly, the mundane, and the barbaric status quo in nature and history. What brought the religion of freedom, as Hegel described it, to legitimate a society of slavery? What brought the iconoclastic religion of anti-idolatry to idolize power, wealth, greed and unjust violence?

Looking in to early Christian history, we witness the negativity of the early Christian Church towards the world-as-it-is swiftly giving way to the *world-ing* of the church via the imperial embrace of Emperor Constantine in 313 CE. The heavenly words he heard at the Milvian bridge, *In Hoc Signo Vinces* (In this sign conquer) speaks of *conquering* this world, it did not speak of *overcoming* or *transcending* (*aufhebung*) it. To conquer was to embrace, and to embrace was to deflate Christianity of its eschatological other-worldiness, as it delivered Christianity to the machinations of the state – a very world-affirming institution.[8] Lamenting this sudden and devastating evaporation of Christianity's negativity, Horkheimer writes,

> But the more Christianity brought God's rule into harmony with events in the world, the more the meaning of religion became perverted. In Catholicism God was already regarded as in certain respects the creator of the earthly order, while Protestantism attributed the world's course directly to the will of the Almighty. Not only was the state of affairs on earth at any given moment transfigured with the radiance of divine justice, but the latter was itself brought down to the level of the corrupt relations which mark earthly life. *Christianity lost its function of expressing the ideal, to the extent that it became the bed fellow of the state.*[9]
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> HORKHEIMER, 2002: 129

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8   Although we can be critical of how Christianity embraced the empire of Rome, we do have to remember that Emperor Constantine represented to many Christians the end of oppression and systematic violence against their communities within the Roman empire. Making Christianity legal, which happened through the Edict of Milan (*Edictum Mediolanense*) in 313 CE, meant safety and security for the first time within the empire – a prospect that seemed extremely desirable after nearly three hundred years of persecution.

9   My emphasis added.

It is in the final passage of this last quote from Horkheimer that we can see a similar observation of Malcolm X and even the Nation of Islam, who often expressed the idea that Christianity had become the ruling and legitimating ideology of the white racist society. Making the state and the religion identical inherently deflated Christianity of its liberational potentials; it had become the dominant ideology of a dominating state edifice, which was created by slaveholders. The very Constitution reflected their interests, not the interests of their victims. In modern times, despite the official separation of church and state, that American state has failed its Black citizens.[10]

Once the Constantinian state appropriated Christianity, it was no longer 'the other' world that was emphasized, nor was it the utopian vision of a world without suffering that it advocated, but rather it became entangled in its own reproduction, maintenance and advancement. Because of the *parousia delay* (tardiness of the messianic presence of God), it was not the Messiah that comforted the people, but rather the institution of the church. The worldly church, with all its hierarchy and bureaucracy, became the center of religious life, not the longing for the negation of this earthly and suffering-bound life. In this transformation something radically altered the constitutional and liberational potentials of Christianity. This constitutional change within Christianity had a lasting effect up to the modern period and Malcolm X, both while in the Nation of Islam and after his defection, was keenly aware of this distortion, and this knowledge contributed to his overall critique of Christianity.

It is easy to see that Horkheimer's critique of religion is partially rooted in Karl Marx's famous passage from his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* where he states that,

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10   Malcolm X didn't allow individual politicians to take the blame for the plight and predicament of its Black citizens; it was not a particular party, a particular election or candidate that was responsible, the whole of the government was responsible. He said in *The Ballot or the Bullet* speech, "it is…the government of America…that is responsible for the oppression and exploitation and degradation of black people in this country. And you should drop it in their lap. This government has failed the Negro. This so-called democracy has failed the Negro. And all these white liberals have definitely failed the Negro" (Malcolm X, 1965: 31). One can't help but to wonder had the state actually embodied the values of Jesus of Nazareth, would it not have been on the side of those who were enslaved from the beginning. Malcolm X was keenly aware of this cleavage between "Christian" values and the dominant ethos of America, thus his critique of America never blames Jesus of Nazareth, who he believed to be a prophet in accordance with Islamic beliefs, for the sin of the "Christian" nation.

> religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion in the sign of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition. It is the opium of the people.
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> <div align="right">MARX, 1978: 54</div>

Many religious critics and followers of Marx have taken this as proof of his anti-religious stance, but this was no mere reactionary critique of religion. Marx fully understood that the origins of religions lie within the existential *needs* and *experiences* of mankind, especially in the face of suffering and despair, thus religion is both the "expression of real suffering" and the "protest against real suffering" (Marx, 1978: 54). Religion was consolation in the face of real disappointment, comfort in the face of brokenness, and solace in the face of misery, and thus Marx took religion as a human phenomenon seriously. He understood that at least in its origins, religion was partially the product of oppressive and exploitative conditions. Just as he attempted to answer the question of injustice in this world under the conditions of capitalism with his historical materialist philosophy, he understood religion to be an inadequate attempt of others to address those very same or similar conditions, albeit via eschatology. With this in mind, *negative religion* can be understood as a form of religion that both realizes the suffering of the finite individual and longs for its negation. As such, recognition of the unjust conditions and the longing to negate them are the preconditions for revolutionary praxis, whether the theory and method is secular or religious. What Marx failed to conceive adequately was the possibility that religion could play a positive role in the negation of the cruel conditions mankind finds itself trapped within. It seemed impossible to Marx that religion, a symptom of a disease (capitalism, exploitation, oppression, alienation and class domination), could be an active ingredient in the overcoming of the disease. In short, Marx's analysis of religion was insufficiently dialectical.

Following Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx conceived of religion as a product of man's alienation which serves the purpose of justifying and legitimating his condition, but unlike Feuerbach, he did not believe the critique of religion was the end point. Religion was the first object of critique for Marx, as the task of liberating man's mind from his religious illusions was the necessary condition for his political, economic and existential liberation on earth, but it was not the end of critique (Marx, 1978: 143–145). In other words, in order to bring "criticism of earth" to bear, one must first engage in a "criticism of heaven" (Marx, 1978: 54). Outside of Friedrich Engel's work on Thomas Müntzer, who argued

for *omnia sunt communia* (all things in common), Marx remained unaware of the liberational qualities and potentials of religion, or rather saw those potentials as passé and/or utopian. His analysis was rooted in science, reason, and *dialectical materialist* (*diamat*) thought, which did not sympathize with theology or even with Hegelian metaphysics, as they remained too abstract and abeyant from the concrete conditions of humanity. The tools of the Enlightenment, albeit often used against the Enlightenment itself, were the tools of Marx's philosophy, and he refused to *retreat* into obscurantist metaphysics, religious or otherwise.

Regardless of Marx's dogmatic materialism, a hint of his critique of religion can also be found pulsing through Malcolm X's critical analysis of religion, especially Christianity. Malcolm X rarely tired of pointing out the opiate-qualities of the form of Christianity embraced by the overwhelming number of Black folk, while knowing there was also a more prophetic side of the Black Church, in part due to the memory of his Garveyite father Earl Little (DeCaro, 1996: 38–47). Nevertheless, the question for Malcolm X was whether or not Black Christianity would aid just as vigorously in the liberation of Black bodies as it did for Black souls, or would it continue to preach the opiate religion of 'pie in the sky when you die'; would it engage in more radical praxis, or was it hopelessly ineffective because of its commitment to the Gospel tradition of non-violence? If Black Christians continued to take seriously the constitutional ban on the *lex talionis* (law of retaliation), even in the face of White America's complete abandonment of Jesus' *contra lex Talionis* (against the law of retaliation), then for Malcolm X Christianity could not successfully aid in the liberation of Black folk from White oppression, White supremacy, and the racist American social order. It appeared to him to hopelessly handicap itself with its ethical commitment to non-violence amidst a struggle for life and death, and thus Malcolm X was not prepared to join the self-sacrificing nature of Black Christianity. He said in his *Message to the Grassroots* that,

> the white man does the same thing to you in the street, when he wants to put knots on your head and take advantage of you and not have to be afraid of your fighting back. To keep you from fight back, he gets these old religious Uncle Toms to teach you and me, just like novocaine, to suffer peacefully. Don't stop suffering – just suffering peacefully... There's nothing in our book, the Koran [Qur'an], that teaches us to suffer peacefully... if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. That's a good religion.
>
> MALCOLM X, 1965: 12

For Malcolm, the religion that cannot match the language of the violent other is an ineffective religion, and a religion that could communicate better with the violent nature of white society was necessary for the liberation of African-Americans. For non-violence to work against the brut there must be a sense of shame within the nation that brutalizes. This sense of shame is what Gandhi was able to bring out in the British people, when they saw the peaceful non-violent resistance of the Indians, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, when they were slaughtered, abused, and beaten by the colonial police. *Shame* was the essential ingredient in changing the minds of the average British citizen on the question of Indian home rule. Nevertheless, there seemed to be no overwhelming sense of shame among the American oppressors, the lynch mob, rapists and murderers, nor the general public outside of the American liberal, whom Malcolm frequently accused of being a hypocrite. This liberal would condemn racism in words but failed to live his views in deeds (Malcolm X, 1992a: 33). Therefore, the condition of *shamelessness,* rooted in American pride, racial pride and the sense of being chosen by the divine – the new Augustinian "City of God" – blinded many in the United States to the plight and predicament of Black people and the suffering they endured. Yet, even Mahatma Gandhi, believed the shamelessness of White supremacy should not be succumbed to, but rather should be resisted at all costs. Sounding much like Malcolm, he said to a group of West African soldiers that

> The moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall. He frees himself and shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states. Therefore, the first thing is to say to yourself: "I shall no longer accept the role of a slave. I shall not obey orders as such but shall disobey them when they are in conflict with my conscience." The so-called master may lash you and try to force you to serve him. You will say: "No, I will not serve you for your money or under a threat." This may mean suffering. Your readiness to suffer will light the torch of freedom which can never be put out.
>
> GANDHI, 2002: 282–283

What Malcolm understood through his own experiences, regardless of Elijah Muhammad's peculiar mythical anthropology, was that the thoroughly 'whitened' African mind was incapable of saying 'no' to the slave master. The 'white' in 'White Christianity' so thoroughly deflated the prophetic negativity of Christianity, which he had seen in his parents' political-theology, that Christianity became synonymous with White society, i.e. the rules, regulations, social norms, and values of the present American Bourgeois order. To be a *real*

Christian was to accept, not reject, this unjust order, believe it to be divinely ordained, and to forego any substantive critique of such an order. This social imperative within this social order not only infected the minds of Black Christians, but also saturated the minds of what Malcolm called 'bourgeois Blacks,' who were happy to be 'tokens' and accept token measures in the struggle for equal rights (Malcolm X, 1992b: 45–46). Speaking to a mostly white audience on the campus of Michigan State University, on January 23, 1963, he spoke of this kind of "negro" and his acceptance of white Christianity. He said,

> This type has blind faith in your religion. He's not interested in any religion of his own. He believes in a white Jesus, white Mary, white angels, and he finally gets to a white heaven. When you listen to him in his church singing, he sings a song – I think they call it – "Washing him white as snow." He wants to be clean white so he can go to heaven with the white man. It's not his fault…for this is the state of his mind. This is the result of four hundred years of brain-washing here in America. You have taken a man who is black on the outside and made him white on the inside. His brain is white as snow. His heart is white as snow.[11]
>
> MALCOLM X, 1963

For Malcolm, 'white' Christianity was the most effective vehicle through which the Black man was integrated into the bourgeois order. Through this, he was domesticated, politically castrated, and made docile, and therefore was unable to resist the demands of the 'slave master' as Gandhi and others insisted. Content to accept the crumbs of the American bourgeois society, just as the 'house negro' was content to accept the crumbs of his slave master, Malcolm advocated a religion that would liberate this house negro from the American "brainwashing," and bring him to the side of the 'field negro,' who was prepared, like Nat Turner, to burn down the master's house. However, if such a 'house negro' failed to see the light, and insisted on maintaining his chains, Malcolm was fully prepared to burn the house down with the house negro still inside.

While Malcolm was prepared to take radical action against White supremacy in the United States, as well as lend his support to Third World liberation movements, both the Black Church and the Nation of Islam were reticent to follow him. From their own ethical commitments, they could not accede to

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11   This is my transcription of a youtube video. A parody of this type of 'negro' can be seen in an episode of Aaron McGruder's *Boondocks*, where 'Uncle Ruckus' plays the part of the white-infatuated 'house negro' who visits 'white heaven' and meets its real 'St. Peter at the Pearly Gates,' Ronald Reagan.

Malcolm's radical call for the overthrowing of White supremacy *by any means necessary.* While the NOI cowered from the thought of real revolutionary action, waiting rather for an eschatological rapture-like event to rescue them (or simply to secure the riches they had acquired), and the Black Church remained dedicated to the Gospels rejection of violence, Malcolm X forged ahead with his political-theology, which brought together the Islamic sense of justice and the political struggle of Black Americans in the United States (Evanzz, 1999: 310–335).

However, despite Malcolm's damning critique of Christianity, many forms of the Prophetic Black Church preserved within itself the *negativity* of the early Christians and its martyrs, much more so than many of the predominantly 'White' denominations, whose affirmative religiosity embraced the world-as-it-is precisely because it was effectively *their world*.[12] Naturally, the Old Testament stories of enslaved Hebrews rang more true to those in bondage rather than to those who bound the slaves, and the desire to liberate the *eternal soul* from the torment of the *finite flesh* was a message that was painfully felt with every wound brought by the slave master's whip, every laceration created by vicious police dogs, and with every 'strange fruit' harvested by the lynch mob. The longing to negate this world of torment, the longing for the end of suffering, and the longing for perfect and absolute justice – that the innocent victim shall someday triumph over their abuser and/or murderer – remained engrained within those who suffered from the viciousness of slavery, Jim Crow, and the systematic ghetto-bound racism of the urban north. Witnessed through the hymns, the 'down-trodden' hermeneutics of sacred scripture, and the transcendent nature of Black worship, the negativity that Christianity once revealed through its persecuted martyrs and saints of the first centuries, was rediscovered and relived with the victims of America's racist society. Christianity was once again returned to the victims of history, just as it was in its beginning with its initiator (*stifter*) Jesus of Nazareth. With the victims it was a prophetic religion once again; with the victors it was a stale ideology that legitimated their barbaric rule. As such, those who were lynched embodied in their torment the suffering of the crucified just as forcefully as those who did the lynching embodied the sadism and cruelty of the Roman executioners.

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12   Clearly not all forms of Christianity fall into the denomination of "white" and "black" as there were many White Christians who identified more with the slave and the victims of Jim Crow than they did with the White dominated social order. John Brown, a dedicated Calvinist and radical abolitionist, would be the best example of this. See Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. *Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown.* New York: New York University Press, 2002. Also see W. E. B. DuBois, *John Brown.* New York: International Publishers, 1996.

Yet, if we accept the argument that the negativity of Christianity could still be found within the ever-suffering Prophetic Black Church, that it held within itself a deep desire to negate the given-ness of the world, especially racist America, then what drove Malcolm X to reject Black Christianity as an inadequate or unviable source for liberation? If he too wished to transcend or overcome the iron cage of American capitalism, and its original sin of racism, genocide and slavery, then what made Islam a more viable option in the struggle against those things? Given the intricate similarities between Christianity, especially in its negative form, and Islam – both having roots in the prophetic faith of Abraham – what dynamics did Islam provide which proved to Malcolm X that it was more capable of bringing about a society of justice and equality? In essence, we must ask: why Islam and not the Prophetic Black Church?

Context

Malcolm X's critique of racism, imperialism, and dollarism (capitalism) matured during a period of radical social and political transformation throughout much of the world. The old edifices of Western imperialism were beginning to crumble from within, especially after the devastation of the Second World War, and more importantly from the growing pressure from the subjugated peoples themselves. As Malcolm X stated on February 18, 1965, "we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter" (Malcolm X, 1992b: 177). Struggles to liberate the minds and bodies of Africans, Arabs, and Asians from the repressive grip of imperial powers, whether it be through various forms of nationalism, socialism, communism and/or religio-political thought, grew to the point where dozens of nations were able to emancipate themselves from their former imperial masters. Even the Frankfurt School's Herbert Marcuse, who was deeply rooted in Marx's class analysis, believed the agent of social revolution had shifted from the working class, most associated with white workers, to communities on the margins of liberal capitalist society, i.e. ethnic minorities, women, students, etc. (Marcuse, 2005). In this sense, Malcolm X understood the struggle for the basic Human Rights of the Afro-American in the United States as being intimately connected with the liberation struggles in Africa, the Middle East, and in other parts of the world, especially those in which the primary subject of oppression was people of color. Forging a solid connection between these two struggles was one of the primary reasons for his extensive travel in 1964 and 1965 (Malcolm X, 1992a: 366–418; Malcolm X, 2013).

By bringing the struggle of African-Americans to the attention of revolutionaries in other parts of the world, Malcolm X joined the liberation struggles being fought by various revolutionaries, including the Argentinian/Cuban Commandante Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, who in early 1965 went to the Congo to help the Simba Movement and their struggle against the counter-revolutionary forces that overthrew the leftist freedom fighter and later President Patrice Lumumba (Anderson, 1997: 621–670; Reitan, 1999). Remembering the 1954 CIA led coup d'état of the revolutionary President Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala, Guevara understood that the murder of Lumumba was an counter-revolutionary act that all leftists should learn from; the imperial powers, and their friends in Washington D.C., would not allow leftist liberation movements to simply destroy the structure of domination that the West had for centuries built and maintained. All attempts to overthrow the imperial powers were met with substantial and brutal resistance, either overtly or covertly. Che, having already fought and defended the Cuban Revolution from American aggression, joined forced with the Congolese communists in their attempts to liberate the Congo from Western domination and their African 'House Negroes' who were the black façades of white control. He would eventually be executed at the hands of the Bolivian government and the CIA while attempting to start a continent-wide revolution in South America, a prospect the capitalist Euro-north could not tolerate (Ratner and Smith, 2011).

Malcolm X also joined the ranks of the Algerian revolutionary leader Ahmed Ben Bella, who led a successful revolution against the French colonial power in Algeria in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Through his *Front de Liberation Nationale* (FLN), Ben Bella was able to defeat the French forces who had occupied this North African nation since the mid-19th century, and who regarded Algeria simply as another 'province' of greater France. Regarding himself as a moderate 'Islamist,' Ben Bella engaged in a war against oppression that many in the West viewed as being 'terroristic' in nature. However, Ben Bella never tired of pointing out the true terroristic nature of imperialism, racism, and capitalism, and believed that armed struggle against such oppression was the only way to liberate the nation from the clutches of imperial France. Malcolm X was later invited by Ben Bella to his February 1965 international conference of world revolutionaries, at which he and Che Guevara would have been the keynote speakers (Jenkins, 2002: 96). According to Mfanya Donald Tryman, Malcolm X and Che Guevara were to cooperate and coordinate the African-American involvement in the global struggle for emancipation for all oppressed people of color; a conflation that would have alarmed the American political establishment (Jenkins, 2002: 97). The 'internationalization' of the struggle for human rights in the United States by finding common cause with those groups who

had already successfully liberated their countries from the allies of the United States, was a major concern for Washington D.C., as some of these nations had liberated themselves with the help of the Soviet Union and other communist factions. However, Malcolm's death and the overthrow of Ben Bella's presidency cancelled the promise of their cooperation.

Malcolm X was also impressed by the revolutionary efforts of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the young military officer who overthrew King Farouk of Egypt and established a socialist but non-Aligned secular government in 1952–1953 in the North African country. Nasser, refusing to ally himself with the intrusive policies of the Soviet Union, while at the same time refusing the manipulative support of the U.S. and its monetary 'aid,' steered his country on a path towards modernization, while at the same time attempted to alleviate the entrenched inequality that had plagued Egypt under colonialism and monarchy. As he embraced Malcolm X as a fellow freedom fighter, he offered Malcolm twenty scholarships to Al-Azhar University in Cairo for African-Americans to study Sunni Islam, as a way of bringing orthodox Islam to the United States and strengthening the fledging Muslim community in the United States to traditional 'Azhari' style Islam. This would also strengthen the bonds between those who were fighting for a new socialist reality in their countries and the struggle for substantive emancipation and the realization of human rights in the United States. Additionally, it would interject the revolutionary potential of Islam into the struggle of the African-American more adequately, as Malcolm X would begin to have a more Islamically educated cadre serving as the basis for his movement.[13] This was especially important as it would have been the counterpoint to the NOI's version of Islam and would have surely eclipsed the luster of Elijah Muhammad within the Black community, especially among militants.

Needless to say, Malcolm X's involvement with groups and individuals that were fundamentally against U.S. policies in their regions and countries only heightened the American government's fear that Malcolm X was quickly becoming a threat to the status quo. In his debate with Louis Lomax on May 23,

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13   Malcolm X's embarrassment stemming from his lack of knowledge of orthodox Sunni Islam and the Arabic language is evident in his autobiography and his travel journal. This was something that he was determined to remedy and his hajj was partially an attempt to do just that (Malcolm X, 1992: 366–393). He states "not being able to speak the language is like being in a fish bowl: everyone looking at me, talking about me and to me, and me not able to understand (hear) or answer back. Never have I felt so deaf and dumb, and I'm thankful I am among friends and brothers whose very religion compels them to be patient with my ignorance, my 'crippled condition' and take me by the hand at every step" (Malcolm X, 2013: 15).

1964, as a reminder of the revolutionary change that was sweeping across the globe, Malcolm emphasized to his American audience that his methods were not the same as Dr. Martin Luther King's methods, and that the growing impatience of the twenty-two million Black people in the United States could lead them to "adopt the guerrilla tactics of other deprived revolutionaries" (Marable and Felber, 2013: 332). Not only that, his attempts to bring charges against the United States in the United Nations was not only an embarrassment for the government, but would also have undermined the dominant narrative that was publicly peddled by Washington's propagandists: that the United States was the epicenter of the 'free world' in distinction to the 'tyranny' of communism. Malcolm X demonstrated to all who would listen the 'hypocrisy of American democracy' – while the United States condemned other countries for their violation of human rights, twenty two million African-Americans languished in poverty, second-class citizenship, and systematic racism; while they fought for so-called 'freedom and democracy' abroad, in far off places such as Germany, France, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, they enforced barbaric and unfree conditions at home, thus fighting against the 'rule of the people' (especially people of color) within their own borders. While liberals extolled the virtues of the free markets, they simultaneously attempted to mute the victims of those free markets. 'Free' in this sense was relative to whom one was speaking of. For Malcolm, the 'free world' was the world free of racism, exploitation and oppression – that was the world he found in Mecca, not within the ugliness of the entrenched race and class antagonisms of the United States of America.

For the U.S. government of the time, Malcolm X was Che Guevara, Ahmed Ben Bella, and Gamal Abdel Nasser with an American passport. He was not a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose religious faith only allowed him to slightly modify the system through non-violent resistance, but was rather a man of religion whose faith radically embraced revolutionary theory, revolutionary praxis, and a revolutionary-humanistic vision that was intricately saturated with third-world liberation thought. The internationalizing of the struggle for Human Rights for the African-American population brought the anti-colonial and anti-imperial fight of Cairo, Algiers, Brazzaville, Conakry, Dakar, Havana, to the streets of Detroit, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Washington D.C. In this sense, Malcolm X was the door way for the global struggle against white supremacy via European and American imperialism to enter into the ghettos of the United States, which were already on the verge of exploding in the mid-1960's as he had predicted. Malcolm testified in his 1964 diary that "freedom comes only from the efforts made [by] those who themselves tire of oppression and themselves take action against it" (Malcolm X, 2013: 171). With their

common weariness born of exploitation, denigration, and oppression, Malcolm X, more than anyone else, blurred the multiple visions of emancipatory praxis into one push towards liberation. Just as the Bandung conference of 1955 had done, he *deemphasized* the differences of the oppressed of various nations in order to highlight the similarities of those same *wretched*; all were brutalized and disfigured by the international status quo and thus all had a common enemy to fight against (Malcolm X, 1992b: 158–159).

By looking into the world context, and seeing that the world was lit by the fire of revolution during Malcolm X's public life, we can get a better understanding of his thoughts on both religion and political praxis. We can begin to answer the question as to why a revolutionary faith was needed for Malcolm X and why Christianity wasn't adequate for the task of liberating the twenty-two million African-Americans in his understanding.

Inadequacy of Christianity as Revolutionary Praxis

In the chapter entitled "1965" in Malcolm's autobiography, he remarks that he knew that most 'Afro-Americans' would be reticent to support taking the United States to the international courts of the United Nations to demand justice for themselves. In other words, they were not prepared to see their struggle as being anything beyond the realm of civil rights, which was only a matter of *reform* and not *revolution*. He also opined the improbability of African-Americans following him into Islam, remarking that "American Negroes – especially older Negroes – are too indelibly soaked in Christianity's double standard of oppression" (Malcolm X 1992: 419). For Malcolm, the whites man's religion, i.e. Constantinian-turned-Bourgeois-Christianity, not only sapped the revolutionary and emancipatory potentials from the victims of history by teaching them to be passive and to love their enemies, but it also indelibly bound them to the ideology that justified the cruel and barbaric treatment which they experienced every day in both the urban north and the rural south of America (Malcolm X, 1992a: 46). They were emotionally, spiritually, and eschatologically invested in Jesus Christ, who, most cruelly, only seemed to offer consolation in the face of suffering and not earthly liberation from that suffering. However, Malcolm knew that if he were to push his own Islamic faith, which "had given [him] the insight and perspective...that black men and white men truly could be brothers," it would surely be met with hostility from other African-Americans who were distrustful of other religious faiths, seeing them as dangerous cults whose insistence on empowering Black people could threaten their own stable but marginal place in white society (Malcolm X, 1992a: 419). It

was also a simple matter of faith; they wholeheartedly believed in the *content* of their religious tradition, which, in an era of *neutralized religion,* already makes them "non-conformists" (Adorno et al, 1950: 731). However, religious hypocrisy *is* constitutional within White "Christian" society, as Horkheimer wrote, "it is not part of life in this civilization to take religion seriously. Only the powerful have to be respected; the poor and powerless are worshipped in religion, i.e., in spirit, but mistreated in reality" (Horkheimer, 1978: 91). The 'double standard' of Bourgeois Christianity, that preached brotherhood on Sunday but failed to practice it on any day, would remain the dominant reality among his Christian listeners, despite their attraction to his political program. Therefore, as Malcolm wrote, he "did not immediately attempt to press the Islamic religion, but instead [began] to embrace all who sat before [him]," as discussions of religion would only create new fissures between himself and others (Malcolm X, 1992a: 419). As he became increasingly more interested in engaging in a forceful praxis against white supremacy and white bigotry by joining other African-American leaders, he refused to allow his Islamic beliefs, which still struck 1960's America as being exotic and outside of the mainstream, to become a point of contention that would drive away otherwise willing participants to his burgeoning movement. Common cause against the brutality of racism would unite the various factions, not religion. Yet, after experiencing an enormous frustration with the political castration of the Nation of Islam, which, by Elijah Muhammad's orders, didn't allow him to join with reform minded movements, his new independence in 1964/1965 would not allow the age-old trick of *divide et impera* (divide and conquer) to separate him from other leaders (Malcolm X, 1992a: 417). Despite the pragmatics of continuing his socio-political work without *dawa* (Islamic evangelizing), he nevertheless remained deeply critical of the American and/or Western articulation of Christianity and its social and moral failures. For Malcolm, just as the Black man's traditional leaders failed to inspire a revolutionary spirit in the community, so too did "the religion of Christianity…fail him. The black man was scarred, he was cautious, he was apprehensive," and that had to be remedied (Malcolm X, 1992a: 420). But in the immediate struggle, it would not be remedied through the mass conversion of Black folk to Islam. What Malcolm had to do was appeal not only to their innate sense of moral justice, but to the deep seated longing to see that justice actualized. This longing was found both in Christianity and Islam, as well as in the secularized political theories which animated the various entities which comprised *The New Left.*

Behind the historical confluence of religion and the state, religious legitimation of criminal activities, and clerical support of unspeakable violations of human sovereignty, dignity, and autonomy, such as one witnessed in the

genocide of the Native American, slavery and Jim Crow, there is a foundational dynamic that helps explain why religion, and Constantinian-turned-Bourgeois-Christianity in particular, has so often taken the side of those with the biggest battalions (Voltaire).[14] Again, the Critical Theorist Max Horkheimer points out that

> when the authoritarian state seems to engage in a historic conflict with religion, the essential issue is whether the two shall compete, be coordinated, or go their separate ways. A bureaucracy au courant with the contemporary situation takes over and reorganizes the old ideological apparatus in which the church had its share. Even if it involves hardship the church must ultimately see that *its own social position depends on the continued existence of the basic traits of the present system.* If these were to change, the church would lose all and gain nothing. *Its position rests on the belief that absolute justice is not simply a projection of men's minds but a real eternal power; a future society, however, would cease to perpetuate this belief.*[15]
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> HORKHEIMER, 2002: 130

Horkheimer gives us a keen insight into the nature of the church as an institution; although there may be individual clerics, movements, and or orders that wish to arrest, abate, and/or transcend the present social order, the institution itself is dependent on the status quo for its own continual existence. Here we can see the function of the church: it is not only to pacify the victims of the history, who, according to Marx, possess the greatest potential for revolutionary change, but also to guarantee its own survival by binding itself to the already established society. In this sense, the church as an institution is inherently conservative, reactionary, and counter-revolutionary, as it must preserve the situation that allows it to remain relevant. However, it is not the case that the church has been merely the dependent entity in society, as the state often looks to the church for its blessing to engage in various activities. In other words, "God is on the side of those with the biggest battalions" as long as the battalions worship at God's *carroccio* (portable war altar). As such, there is a symbiotic relationship between the state and church; the state provides the space and stability for the church to reproduce itself while the church provides legitimation and justification for the activities and policies it engages in.

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14 "On dit que Dieu est toujours pour les gros bataillons." (It is said that God is always on the side of the biggest battalions).

15 My emphasis added.

This dynamic even transcends the secular constitution of the United States, in which the government, which is supposed to be neutral in matters of religion, is barred from engaging in religious activities, but nevertheless benefits from the opiate work of the church, especially in Black and other disenfranchised communities. However, the function of the church, especially in Bourgeois society, remains the same; it is there to forestall any revolutionary movement from the population as revolution could mean the end of the religious institution, as happened in during the Bolshevik revolution in Russia (Froese, 2008). The Bolsheviks, having inherited the vision of a fully reconciled future society, as expressed by Marx, one in which mankind no longer lives in alienation from himself, his labor, nature, and others, which itself was a semblance of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic vision of a peaceful and reconciled society, attempted to bring such an existence into being without the help of religion. Indeed, had their attempts been fully realized, it was claimed, the heavenly vision of such a society would no longer be relevant; what the Messiah was once tasked to do mankind had now done – all the Messiah had to do is put his stamp of approval on it. In this sense, following the long path of the Bourgeois Enlightenment to the Marxist Enlightenment, eschatology was humanized.

Horkheimer highlights this dynamic in the last passage of the above quote; a future reconciled society, one that has embraced and actualized the principles and ideals of equality, fraternity, and justice, would leave no real place for the imagined *paradisio* of the post-apocalypse. If such a society could be brought about by the hands of man without the guidance or labor of the Holy Spirit, the Messiah, etc., than the need for such a religious institution would cease to be. In this sense, Malcolm X understood that the religion was, (1) a possible force for the bringing about a future reconciled society – like he saw in Mecca, but that it could also be done through more secular 'revolutionary' means, and (2) that some forms of religion are heavily invested in making sure the status quo remains unmolested, because only within the social chaos of racism, sexism, class domination, etc., is the power of the utopian 'pie in the sky' motif effective. Malcolm pointed out this dynamic when he ruminated over the status of the "most fervent Christians" in America, the Black man. He wrote,

> The Black man needs to reflect that he has been Americas most fervent Christian – and where has that gotten him? In fact, in the white man's hands, in the white man's interpretation…where has Christianity brought this world?
>
> MALCOLM X, 1992A: 424

In a FBI summary report dated April 30th, 1958, the devoted NOI spokesman, Malcolm X, is recorded to have said to his Detroit audience,

> the so-called Negro had really been taken for a ride by accepting a religion which teaches that there is life after death. He said the very phrase "life after death" is self-revealing if put in its proper prospective. He told those in attendance that they should immediately dispense with this false religion which is a throwback of the days of slavery and accept Islam which "is the religion of the black man."
>
> MANNING AND FELBER, 2013: 114

If Malcolm believed that African-Americans are the most committed group of people to Christianity, and Christianity served as the legitimating ideology of white supremacy and white domination, then where did that leave the believing African-American Christian? In one phrase, they were the most enslaved community in America, partially by their own doing. Without explicitly conceptualizing it, he fully understood the nature of *positive religion* within the American context, that the greater the misery of the African-American, the greater their attachment to the consoling effects of Christianity; the greater their attachment to Christianity, the greater they were bound to the status quo. The prophetic Black Church (as an institution), as Malcolm frequently pointed out, perpetually failed to follow Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nat Turner or John Brown into revolutionary praxis, but too often passively dreamed of better tomorrows within America, despite their deep seated longing to transcend the barbarity and butchery of American society.

Because of Malcolm's travels in the Muslim world, in which he saw the revolutionary potential of *negative* and therefore revolutionary religion, he could not go the way of the secular Marxist, who discarded religion all together as being a force for reactionary status quo reproduction. He saw in Islam a religion that embraced the revolutionary spirit, acted upon it, and wasn't afraid to struggle for it, even if it was through violent means. Christianity, despite Jesus of Nazareth's and the early Christian community' radical negativity, remained inadequate for the liberation of the African-Americans. By nature and by history, it's most dominant orientations had been functionalized and transformed into a force for enslavement. In Malcolm's view, it could not liberate itself from the clutches of white supremacy, European culture, and its cruel legacy of violence against the poor, the broken, and the downtrodden, and therefore it could not contribute adequately to the real emancipation of Black folk and the Third World from the clutches of white supremacy, capitalism, and Western imperialism.

The True Terror in American Society

In a dialogue with Louis Lomax in 1964, Malcolm X elaborated on the aims of African-Americans in their struggle with the society and government of the United States. He said,

> The 22 million Afro-Americans…seek recognition and respect as human beings and when you think in terms of segregationist or rather separationists or integrationists, it actually clouds the issue. Integration is only a method that is used by some Negroes to get what they really want – recognition and respect as human beings.
>
> MARABLE AND FELBER, 2013: 336

He continues,

> I differ…greatly [on] this stress on civil rights and in acceptance in the American society as citizens before the society itself has even permitted itself to recognize us as human beings, and I very much doubt that you can make a citizen out of anyone that you don't regard as a human being.
>
> MARABLE AND FELBER, 2013: 337

Here, I think Malcolm articulated his ideas in an inadequate liberal idiom, despite the fact that the reality of his own life taught him otherwise. Malcolm expressed the idea that the *dehumanization* (lack of recognition and respect) of African-Americans by white people is what allows them to engage in discriminatory and oppressive behavior. In other words, because African-Americans were not considered sufficiently human by white society, they were not afforded recognition and/or respect. The assumption in this line of thinking is that if whites could fully realize the humanity of Black people they would no longer engage in such hateful activities. However, from my own experience dealing with white racists and bigots, I think Malcolm underestimated the nature of their hatred: the *true terror* is not that the racist denies the humanity of the other, thinking them to be something other than humans, even if they tell themselves that, but rather that they fully realize the humanity of the other, but continues to engage them *as if* they were less then human, *as if* they were life unworthy of life. This wasn't a mistake of *consciousness*, but a *conscious* choice to hate, brutalize and murder other humans, whom they fully recognized as humans. Recognition, as Malcolm declared as being a precondition for civil rights, was not the problem, as such recognition did not necessarily lead to better relationships between the races. Racism is more insidious than

just a problem of recognition and citizenship – it is a blunt conscious decision to hate the other who is *fully human* despite the recognition that they are full human. Racists hate a portion of humanity precisely because they are a portion of humanity which the racist feels should not be a part of humanity. The closeness of the other to the humanity of the racist himself motivates his attempt to exile the other from the species. In other words, dehumanization, although as a method of making it psychologically easier to brutalize a group of people, does not necessarily make the aggressor more aggressive, as one can be dehumanized to something non-threatening, such as benign object. However, it is because the hated other is a part of one's same species – and thus biologically and psychologically too close to the one who's hating – that the hatred is so deep and encompassing. We should not be fooled by the linguistic absurdity of dehumanizing language; the white racist psychologically comforted himself when describing Black people as being sub-human, but those very accusations betrayed the uncomfortable truth that what they really feared (and knew), that Black people were just as human as whites. As such, hatred for other species rarely invokes such a response as hatred for a certain group *within* one species, a dynamic the Nazis demonstrated in their idea that Jews were "of our species but not of our race." Most perversely, the hatred for Black people by the white supremacist was the very way in which they recognized the humanity of Black people. A negative recognition for sure, but a recognition of their full humanity – and therefore perceived threat – nonetheless. Therefore, the violence done to Black people was conversely the translation of such negative recognition into praxis. As such, the precondition for a more peaceful and reconciled society was not simply recognition of the humanity of Black people, but the recognition that Black humanity equally affords Black people *the same rights and respect due to all members of the human race.* The 'otherness' of the 'other' must be decoupled with hatred, and for Malcolm, there was only one force that could adequately do that: the egalitarian nature of Islam.

Islam as Revolutionary Force

On his way to Mecca to perform the hajj, Malcolm was stopped in Jedda and his passport inspected. Reflecting on the irony of this small gesture, he said "I'm handing them the American passport which signifies the exact opposite of what Islam stands for" (Malcolm X, 1992: 373). For Malcolm X, America was the "other" to Islam, the *hubris* and the *nemesis*, the enslaver and the liberator, and it seems he felt a certain level of embarrassment for carrying the passport of the most aggressive imperial power, especially in light of the unbridled cruelty

America perpetrated upon African-Americans and other people of color, as well as poor people around the world, which was always done most hypocritically in the name of 'freedom, justice and democracy.' In light of this micrological moment – which was clearly saturated with comedic tragedy for Malcolm – we have to investigate what it is about Islam that made it the "exact opposite" of America. Through this investigation we can obtain a better understanding of why Malcolm X believed Islam was the answer to many of the deeply entrenched problems plaguing the West and America in particular, as well as why he was convinced of its corrective potential.

According to the Critical Theorist Max Horkheimer, the urge to engage in radical praxis towards the realization of a fully reconciled future society remains ever present in the contemporary moment. However, as much of the world increasingly moves through the secularization process, the religious veneer that once shrouded this longing for a society devoid of hatred, violence, alienation, and antagonisms, has been shed and the task has been left primarily to secular revolutionaries. Horkheimer writes,

> A purely spiritual resistance becomes just a wheel in the machine of the totalitarian state. True discipleship, to which many Christians may once again be called, does not lead men back to religion. Yet that image of perfect justice, the spreading of which brings neither power nor respect in the world or the beyond and which is accompanied by a growing awareness of its own vanity, may be more attractive to disillusioned believers than the empty self-satisfaction which religion in the last century either did not see within itself or else tolerate as well intentioned.

He continues,

> Mankind loses religion as it moves through history, but the loss leaves its mark behind. Part of the drives and desires which religious belief preserved and kept alive are detached from the inhibiting religious form and become productive forces in social practice. In the process even the immoderation characteristic of shattered illusions acquires a positive form and is truly transformed. In a really free mind the concept of infinity is preserved in an awareness of the finality of human life and of the inalterable aloneness of men, and it keeps society from indulging in a thoughtless optimism, an inflation of its own knowledge into a new religion.
>
> HORKHEIMER, 2002: 130–131

What I find most enlightening about Horkheimer's critique here is his keen awareness of the effect the process of secularization has upon religion and religious believers. Although they may be forced to abandon their faith in religion and metaphysics, as Nietzsche so clearly pointed out as being impossible to maintain after the *death of God*, i.e. the impossibility of faith post-Enlightenment, they nevertheless cannot abandon their longing for absolute justice. For Horkheimer, the "inhibiting religious form" has been cast off from the disillusioned former believer while simultaneously the longing and commitment to a world in which the ills of the given are transcended remains branded upon their consciousness. Religion, for Horkheimer, is no longer adequate for revolutionary praxis in the modern period – it simply cannot persevere having lost all its rearguard-struggles against secular modernity. In this sense, the former believer has *determinately negated* (*bestimmte negation*) religion; having both preserved its negativity within secular revolutionary praxis while at the same time allowing religion's criminality, obscurantism, divisive sectarianism, and most of all its self-defeating positivity, to recede into the forgotten pages of history. Yet, does this pessimistic diagnosis of religion and religion's future apply to all religions, or does it apply only to western Christianity (which Horkheimer was writing about)? More specifically, has Islam fallen victim to the same secularization process as has Christianity in the West, wherein the only way to rescue the liberational and emancipatory potentials of the religion is to translate them into secular ideals, principles, and goals (Benjamin, 1969: 253)? The answer to this question weighs heavily on why Malcolm X was attracted to Islam.

Through a detailed study of Malcolm X's autobiography and his travel journal, as well as other major works that have contributed to our understanding of the religious aspects within his biography, we can see that Malcolm X was interested in Islam especially for two important reasons. The first, Malcolm was attracted to the theological dogma of *tawhid,* the oneness of God that is at the theological core of the Qur'an, and second, the socio-political and moral imperatives that Muslims derive from the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnah* (way) of Prophet Muhammad, and the example of the *Sahaba* (Muhammad's companions). These two aspects of Islam are interlinked and cannot be artificially divorced from each other for the devote Muslim. The ethical norms of Islam are rooted in the idea of God's oneness; as God is one so too is humanity, his religion, and his vision for what *ought* to be the case in the world are also one. It is certainly a fact that Muslims, just like every other religious community, have too often failed to embody those norms, values, and principles, and that *fitnah* (division) within the global Muslim *ummah* (community) has been a source of major historical conflicts, but regardless of the shortcomings, the sense of '*asabiyya*

(solidarity) within the ummah remains much stronger than it does in the now secularized Western world, which, since the beginnings of Protestantism, places emphasis on individual autonomy rather than social solidarity.[16] However, such individual autonomy has failed to block the mass madness of extremist political movements in the 20th century, such as fascism, the consumer society (where one appears to be an individualist while consuming the same mass produced and mass marketed products as everyone else), and various forms of nationalism.

In his journal, Malcolm writes of the connection between the theology of Islam and its social implications which he juxtaposed to the reality of racial brutality in the United States. He says,

> I have not bitten my tongue once, nor passed a single opportunity in my travels to tell the truth about the real plight of our people in America. It shocks these people. They knew it was 'bad' but never dreamt it was as inhuman (psychologically castrating) as my uncompromising projection of it pictures it to them. These people have a tender heart for the unfortunates, and very sensitive feelings for truth and justice. The very essence of the Islam religion in teaching the Oneness of God gives the believer genuine voluntary obligations toward his fellow men (all of whom are one family, brothers, sisters to each other)...and because the True Believer recognizes the Oneness of all humanity the suffering of others is as if he himself were suffering, and deprivation of the human rights of others is as if his own human rights (right to be a human being) were being deprived.
>
> MALCOLM X, 2013: 26–27

In this brief passage, Malcolm highlighted one of the most important aspects of the Qur'an's teaching about the divine intelligence embedded within creation. The Qur'an states,

> O mankind! We [Allah] created you from a single male and female and fashioned you into nations and tribes, that you should know each other (and not hate each other). Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight

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16   For a classical Islamic conception of 'asabiyya, see Ibn Khaldun's *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History.* Trans. Franz Rosenthal, Ed. N. J. Dawood. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989. For a discussion of Protestantism's influence on the idea of individualism, see Alister McGrath's *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution – A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty First.* New York: HarperOne, 2007.

of Allah is the most righteous among you. And Allah is omniscient and is well acquainted (with all matters).[17]

QUR'AN: 49: 13

In this passage, the Qur'an establishes two important things. First, that Allah is the author of the racial, linguistic, and regional differences within mankind, and thus those differences represent the way Allah wants the world's population to be. Additionally, these differences are not reasons for discord, but rather are invitations to discourse, dialogue, and mutual friendliness; to use them as points of contention is a violation of Allah's design for mankind. Second, righteousness has something to do with understanding the divine design and living in accordance with it. According to the Qur'an, Allah reminds his followers that he is fully aware of all things they do, especially those that contradict the meaning and goals of human diversity. In light of this one Qur'anic passage, artificial antagonisms based solely on race, ethnicity, gender, and nationhood are to be struggled against, as Muhammad taught in his "final sermon." In other words, these social ills are a part of the personal and collective *jihad* (struggle) within the lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) – the world in which the individual experiences himself/herself and struggles against themselves within their worldly context. *Nationalism*, or the sense of superiority, whether it be by race or region, has no part in a transcendent and internationalist understanding of Islam, which sees the whole of humanity as a family created by the divine.[18] The measurement of man, as Malcolm learned in Mecca, was in his deeds, his righteousness, and how he lives his faith, and not in his race, which he could not control. Therefore, 'asabiyya (solidarity), or in the Christian lexicon *agape,* plays a major role in the way the *Muslim* is to live their life; they are to live in *sympathy* (to suffer with) with those who have been left in the ditch of history;

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17   My translation.

18   This was a rather difficult lesson for Malcolm X to learn. Despite his first idea to bring both Black Nationalism and Islam to the African-Americans, the limits of Black Nationalism was brought to his attention by an Algerian Ambassador in Ghana, who Malcolm X regarded as racially 'white' but was both a Muslim and a successful Algerian revolutionary (Malcolm X, 2013: 19; Barnes, 2010: 47–48). The Ambassador expressed his disagreement with Malcolm X over the appropriateness of Black Nationalism, which would leave no part for men like him because of his pale complexion. By limiting his political, economic, and social philosophy within the confines of *race*, Malcolm stated in an interview to the *Young Socialist* magazine that he "was alienating people who were true revolutionaries dedicated to overturning the system of exploitation that exists on this earth..." and that he "had to do a lot of thinking and reappraising of [the] definition of Black Nationalism" (Barnes, 2010: 47–48).

those who have been marginalized and/or excluded; those who suffer from poverty, sickness, and oppression, as Muhammad did during his prophetic life. While Christians are to engage in a radical *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ's earthly life), Muslims too are to live in accordance with the *sunnah* (way) of Prophet Muhammad, who harbored a inextinguishable "being-with" ethic even before his prophetic call in 610 CE. Indeed, Malcolm X, like Muhammad, was for all intents and purposes an orphan after his father, Earl Little, was assassinated by the Black Legion and his mother, Louise Little, was so cruelly detained by the State of Michigan and committed to the Kalamazoo State Hospital for twenty four years (Marable and Felber, 2013: 15–16, 24, 26–32). Without his parents, Malcolm was forced to live in a foster home in Mason, a small rural town just outside of Lansing, Michigan, where he was the "token" Black boy: the perpetual 'outsider.' This experience of being without the family anchor, being without unconditional love, and being vulnerable to the corrupting brutality of civil society due to the loss of familial protection, shaped both Muhammad and Malcolm's life's trajectories. 20th century America and the Arabian *Jahaliyya* (age of ignorance) had much in common, including the dominance of greed, violence, racial antagonism, misogyny, and *necrophilia* (love of dead material things) as determining aspects of the society. These contexts made them both keenly sensitive to the plight and predicament of those who were vulnerable, but it also bore in them the willingness to dedicate their lives to the furthering of justice – a struggle that serves the goal of a fully reconciled future society, in which families are not torn apart by the inhumanity of the state and civil society, but are once again cherished, nurtured and protected as the basis of a healthy society.

Rooted in this 'being-with' ethic is the Qur'anic vision of the *world-as-it-ought-to-be*. For Islam, this vision remains the main interrogator of the *world-as-it-is*; it is the source of Islam's negativity. 'Revolution,' within the context of Islamic thought, does not simply mean the overthrow of one government for the purposes of installing another, it means the implementation of a vision of the way the world-ought-to-be based on the Qur'anic – and humanistic – precepts of absolute justice, equality, mutual recognition, mercy, compassion, solidarity, friendly-living-together, the absence of alienation and the balance between individual autonomy and collective solidarity. Freedom cannot be achieved within the ancient cages of heteronomy, alienation, injustice, and disrespect, and neither can it be found through the necrophilic *having-mode of existence* (consumerism), but rather through a modern transcendence of such constrictions does one find subjective and substantive freedom. Malcolm X explicitly understood this when he spoke of so-called 'civil rights' laws, as well as the Emancipation Proclamation, the Constitution of the United States, and the Declaration of Independence, as not being true sources of freedom; they were

empty documents loaded with false promises that failed to change the material and spiritual conditions for African-Americans. It was not the passing of more superfluous laws that would change the ugly reality for the victims of America, but a change in the fundamental constitution of the American people – they had to go through a revolution of consciousness which, according to Malcolm X, was possible only through the conversion to Islam, which was a religion that would *sharpen their consciences* towards the suffering of others, and not *dulls the conscience* so that they can sleep blissfully next to the slums of their cities (Kant, 1998: 93). He wrote in his letter home from Mecca that,

> I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept *in reality* the Oneness of Man – and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their 'differences' in color.
>
> MALCOLM X, 1992: 392

For Malcolm, the 'white' in 'white Americans' impeded their ability to see the diversity of God's human creations. Islam was that religion that could still wipe this 'white' away.[19] Additionally, he wrote

> With racism plaguing America like an incurable cancer, the so-called "Christian" white American heart should be more receptive to a proven solution to such a destructive problem. Perhaps it could be in time to save America from imminent disaster….
>
> MALCOLM X, 1992: 392

In this optimistic moment, Malcolm seems to be scaling back his wholesale condemnation of America, but rather looking for a cure for the ills that have infected it from the beginning – the cure being the acceptance of Islam and its radical sense of brotherhood beyond the boundaries of race. In this sense, Islam is the only viable option for America if it wants to eradicate the plague of racism. We have no reason to believe that Malcolm X was optimistic about the prospects of America embracing the Islamic path and therefore rescuing itself from itself, but he would remain a "prisoner of hope" nevertheless (Zachariah 9:12). Thus, while he struggled for human rights in the United States, he simultaneously made modest contributions to the correcting of the Nation of Islam's distortion of Islam, both in his own organization *Muslim Mosque*

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19   Malcolm is clearly talking about a 'white' that has nothing to do with pigmentation of the skin, but rather a socio-political concept of white in which it means to be 'superior,' or 'boss' as he often pointed out.

Incorporated (MMI), but also in his public speeches and interviews, through which he emphasized Islam's racial inclusivity.

Along with its vision of a world without racism, Islam, throughout its history, has advanced a more pragmatic understanding of violence as a means for social progress. Unlike Jesus of Nazareth's complete negation of violence as a way of solving conflicts, the Prophet Muhammad never made such a prohibition as long as the violence is confined by moral considerations and Qur'anic principles. However, against the Islamophobic claims of the critics of Islam, Muhammad's preference for peaceful means of conflict resolution can be demonstrated through any cursory study of his *seerah* (biography). Nevertheless, violence as a means of restoring justice, freedom, addressing grievances, and championing the poor, the marginalized, the broken, and the brutalized has always been reserved as a possible avenue of praxis within Islamic thought. Muhammad himself engaged in violent actions when compelled to do so by the antagonistic forces surrounding him. In this sense, if the negativity of Islam – its insistence on saying 'no' to the unjust conditions of the world-as-it-is – is at the core of the Islamic way-of-being-in-the-world – and it is willing to fight against those unjust and unfree conditions peacefully, or with violence if necessary, than Islam, unlike Christianity, offers the revolutionary Muslim more options through which he can struggle against the brutality of tyrants and unjust systems of control. Islam offers a very similar recalcitrant and resistant negativity as Christianity – at least Jesus of Nazareth – but it also encourages its members to engage in a *jihad* (struggle) against the hypocrisy and mendacity of tyrants, oppressors and despots. If "oppression is worse than death," as the Qur'an tells us in Surat al-Baqarah 2:191, than it is incumbent on Muslims to change the social, political and economic situations that maintain and/or produce such oppression, even if it is through violent means. In this sense, the *negative vision*, i.e. the utopic *sum of all oughts*, remains the blueprint for the longing for absolute justice, equality and freedom from alienation and oppression, and this vision is brought into existence through *revolutionary praxis* when it cannot be done through any other means (Malcolm X, 1965: 45–57).

Malcolm X understood clearly that the Christian language of the *contra lex talionis,* the ethic of 'turning the other cheek' and 'loving thine enemies' was not the political-theology of the so-called 'Christian' America, who had long since abandoned this ethic but, being a bourgeois nation, did not discard the ideological functionalization of it. Through secularization and the accumulation of wealth, American elites had become *securi adversus Deum,* not troubled about the status of their souls in the eyes of religion.[20] Although they

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20   "Indifferent towards God."

never believed in it, the ruling bourgeoisie in Europe and in America never failed to functionalize the statements of Jesus of Nazareth when it suited their interests, especially when it pacified their would-be hangmen: the poor, the workers, abused, oppressed, marginalized, colonized and the excluded. Similar to Marx, Malcolm understood this functionalization as an powerful tool for turning the potential for a revolution into a mild reform; without violence and the overthrow of the American political system, there was no chance for a true emancipation of African-Americans, as that system itself was entrenched within systematic and structural forms of racism, as well as the class antagonism, which was often camouflaged by the race problem. The only way to eliminate the tyranny of the system was, like Samson, to bring down the whole edifice. With this in mind, Malcolm was geared towards a religion of action, a religion of radical praxis, and religious believers who were not willing to compromise on the freedom of African-Americans. In this sense, he was looking for a 'John Brown' form of religion to ally himself with; one which did not see the American government, nor the Constitution, as being somehow sacred, but rather as a very human document constructed by a certain class for the benefit of a certain class. As he said on July 5, 1964, in his second OAAU rally,

> We've got to seek some new methods, a reappraisal of the situation, some new methods for attacking it or solving it, and a new direction, and new allies. We need allies who are going to help us achieve a victory, not allies who are going to tell us to be nonviolent. If a white man wants to be your ally, what does he think of John Brown? You know what John Brown did? He went to war. He was a white man who went to war against white people to help free slaves. He wasn't nonviolent. White people call John Brown a nut. Go read the history, go read what all of them say about John Brown. They're trying to make it look like he was a nut, a fanatic. They made a movie on it, I saw a movie on the screen one night. Why, I would be afraid to get near John Brown if I go by what other white folks say about him.[21]
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> MALCOLM X, 1964

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21   http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-second-oaau-rally-july-5-1964.html   The fact that Malcolm knew that some Christians, like John Brown and his family, could overcome the imperative to "turn the other cheek" against the brutality of white supremacy and consequently take up arms against it, must only have solidified his belief that most Christians were not committed to the non-violence principle, but were simply not prepared to sacrifice their own life and treasure for the African-American as John Brown had done. In this sense, their insistence on non-violence was a cover for their cowardice, duplicity, or lack of true commitment. Where actions were needed, too many stopped at words, using the Bible as their legitimation.

Through Dr. King's non-violent approach to the struggle for African-American emancipation, the Black community would become experts at 'revolts' and 'rebellions,' but never revolutions; the constitutional strictures of Constantinian-turned-Bourgeois-Christianity would never allow for such questionable activity, as violence, even in self-defense was suspect on the basis of the Gospels. Yet for Malcolm, White folks had already liberated themselves from the Christian ethics of charity, compassion, and solidarity with the suffering and oppressed, while African-Americans continued to chain themselves to the ideology of non-violence at their own peril. While it certainly meant that the Black Church was more exemplary of Christian ideals, it did not emancipate African-Americans from the burden of White supremacy. Therefore, non-violence with those who are violent against you was the wrong language, it was incomprehensible to the violent other, and would only lead to further brutality. It taught the brute how he could treat the brutalized; it normalized his injustice and it perpetuated his rule. Only Islam, in Malcolm's mind, provided for both the spiritual life of the African-American as well as the tools for his physical emancipation, which indelibly included the use of principled violence to achieve a just solution to an unjust society (Malcolm X, 1992: 390–393).

Redemption of the Dead: Memory and Mimesis

Malcolm's political-theology resided in the present; it was a future-oriented struggle for the benefit of oppressed peoples, especially those who were the victims of white supremacy. Nevertheless, an important component of his political-theology remained underdeveloped, even if it was simply appropriated from the Islamic tradition, i.e. the redemption of the previous generations of victims. In other words, Malcolm X's attempts to bring about a society that transcends racism, oppression, and alienation was directed towards the contemporary and those yet-to-come, but world history is saturated with the innocent who were abused, tormented and murdered simply because of their race, class, gender, and religious affiliation and they also cry out for redemption from the brutality of our depraved history. Yet, as a philosophical and theological question, we must ask: in light of Malcolm's prophetic way-of-being-in-the-world, what can the living do today to redeem the multitudes of innocent victims from history, and how can the innocent victim ultimately triumph over their abuser and murderer? Additionally, how can we today, in the shadow of Malcolm X, redeem his suffering at the hands of an unjust and vicious system of exploitation and murder, as he too became a victim of that hateful system?

Returning to the critical theorist Max Horkheimer, he writes most pessimistically that,

> It is impossible that such justice should ever become a reality within history. For, even if a better society develops and eliminates the present disorder, there will be no compensation for the wretchedness of past ages and no end to the distress in nature... Yet the urge to such a conceptional transcending of the possible, to this impotent revolt against reality, is part of man as he has been moulded by history. What distinguishes the progressive type of man from the retrogressive is not the refusal of the idea but the understanding of the limits set to its fulfillment.
>
> HORKHEIMER, 2002: 130

From the perspective of Horkheimer's Critical Theory of Religion, man's praxis is inherently incapable of bringing about a full redemption of the dead, for they are lost to history and their lives full of suffering remain the ugly disfigurement they have taken to their grave. Nevertheless, Horkheimer gives the revolutionary a certain semblance of *hope* (the undeterred longing to negate what is the case in history and nature) that can guide him in his attempts to "transcend the possible," to "revolt against the reality of unnecessary suffering," and to embrace and embody the negative principle of both Prophet Muhammad, which Malcolm X courageously followed until his murder on February 21st, 1965, as well as a guide towards the recovery and resurrection of the latent negativity of the prophetic Jesus of Nazareth. Even if the fatigue associated with the *parousia delay* (delay of the Messiah/Mahdi) weighs heavily on the members of the Abrahamic faiths, through this radical praxis, combined with the sensitivity for the suffering of the finite individual – which resides most fervently within the consciousness of the historical materialists – revolutionaries may bring about what the critical theorist Walter Benjamin described as earthly *jetztzeit,* or "now-time" or *nunc stans* (eternal now) – a messianic-like breaking of the present conditions through an aggressive actualization of the utopian other (Benjamin, 1969: 261). While Horkheimer believes in the concrete limits to the redemption of the dead through the radical praxis of the living, Benjamin optimistically believes that each generation is endowed with a "weak messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim," the likes of which "cannot be settled cheaply" (Benjamin, 1969: 254). In other words, if Golgotha history weighs heavily on the revolutionary today, so too does their responsibility to transcend the history of brutality and oppression. This imperative/endowment gives each passing generation the ability to redeem the dead through the construction of a future society based on the realm of freedom

beyond the realm of necessity, the realm of autonomy beyond the realm of heteronomy, and the realm of love and solidarity beyond the realm of hate and division, starting with a recovery of memory of past sacrifices and prophetic *mimesis* (μίμησις – imitation). What Benjamin thought, while facing the rising tide of fascism that would eventually take his life in Portbou, Spain, in 1940, was that the living can modify the past through a future-oriented remembrance of past suffering coupled with a radical commitment to bring about the society that redeems the blood, misery, and despair of the victims of the past. It is true that in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that "only the messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems" and therefore "nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic," but what Malcolm X has taught the revolutionary is that the messianic notion of the totally other society – other than what is already the case – must remain as the yardstick which stands as the grand inquisitors of the world and all it contains (Benjamin, 1978: 312). If the revolutionary cannot see the Kingdom of God as the *telos* of history, because it is by definition the breaking of the continuity of history, then he must see Malcolm X and other revolutionaries for what they are: the voices that expresses the longing for absolute justice and the example of those who strive to bring it about in hopes that the Messiah will someday complete and/or endorse the job.

Malcolm Today

As the world becomes increasingly enveloped by the disfiguring forces of racism, capitalism, neo-imperialism, and other systems of exploitation and brutality, it becomes ever more important that we both *remember* Malcolm X and engage in a radical *mimesis* of his radical and prophetic praxis. Not only are the living and the soon-to-be-living dependent upon us for sculpting the conditions for a future reconciled society, and leading humanity away from the totally administered society, but so too do the dead look to us for their redemption, even if it is incomplete. Only on the foundations of the great prophetic and revolutionary voices like Malcolm X are we to ever achieve such transcendent goals. And so as Ossie Davis' eloquent eulogy for Malcolm X should not be the final word on him, so too should the grief-filled eulogies of history not be the final word on the innocent victims; the horror and terror of slavery, Jim Crow and new Jim Crow, the pain and agony of First Nation Americans, the destitution of the poor white worker, and the misery of all the oppressed should be given bold expression if only to rescue them from the shackles of history itself. The legacy of Malcolm X impels us not to forget the wretched,

but to remember them within our daily praxis. His *dies irae* (day of wrath) has yet to come, but now we – in the shadow of this great revolutionary – are tasked to be its instrument.[22]

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