

A History of Islam in America

*From the New World to the
New World Order*

For

Kamala and Daryush

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As I mentioned earlier, unlike most Americans who viewed victory in the war as a crusade in which America triumphed over evil, members of the Nation of Islam viewed World War II as a “white man’s war.” They wanted no part of it. This did not mean that they disagreed with the ideals of America’s civil religion. They did not. They were simply keenly aware of the hypocritical gap between these ideals and the realities they experienced:

¹² See a reprint of the constitution in Elkholy, *Arab Moslems in the United States*, 153.

¹³ Elkholy, *Arab Moslems in the United States*, 149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

We believe that the offer of integration is hypocritical and is made by those who are trying to deceive the Black peoples into believing that their 400 year-old open enemies of freedom, justice and equality are, all of a sudden, their "friend." ... If the white people are truthful about their professed friendship toward the so-called Negro, they can prove it by dividing up America with their slaves. We believe that we who declare ourselves to be righteous Muslims, should not participate in wars which take the lives of humans. We do not believe this nation should force us to take part in such wars, for we have nothing to gain from it unless America agrees to give us the necessary territory wherein we may have something to fight for. ... We believe that Allah (God) appeared in the Person of Master W. Fard Muhammad, July, 1930; the long awaited "Messiah" of the Christians and the "Mahdi" of the Muslims... and He will bring about a universal government of peace where in we all can live in peace together.³⁵

At the heart of the Nation of Islam's critique of American society in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s was the notion that American idealism did not address the structural inequalities that persisted in the country. "If you can't do for yourself what the white man is doing for himself," Malcolm X exclaimed in one of his speeches, "don't say you are equal with the white man. If you can't set up a factory like he can set up a factory, don't talk that equality talk. ... *This* is American democracy, and those of you who are familiar with it know that, in America, democracy is hypocrisy. ... If democracy means freedom, then why don't we have freedom? If democracy means justice, then why don't we have justice? If democracy means equality, then why don't we have equality?"³⁶

The Nation believed that racism was biologically entrenched in the "white devil," so the only way to address social inequalities in the United States was for black Americans to sever dependence on white institutions and attain their own land, form their own society, and govern themselves. For the Nation of Islam, religion was thus not an instrument of assimilation but a prophetic call for whites to repent by paying a penance (giving land to blacks) and for blacks to prepare for their divinely ordained salvation by joining the Nation of Islam.

The prophetic message of the Nation of Islam in the 1950s and early 1960s was powerfully voiced by one of its young, charismatic converts, Malcolm X. Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, joined the Nation of Islam

³⁵ "What the Muslims Believe," printed regularly in the issues of *Muhammad Speaks*.

³⁶ Malcolm X, "Who are you?," Youtube video clip, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7iHxAWPhpU> (accessed January 28, 2010). A brief excerpt of the speech is cited in Benjamin Barber and Patrick Watson, *The Struggle for Democracy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1988), 91.

while he was in prison for robbery from 1946 to 1952. Upon leaving prison, Malcolm met with Elijah Muhammad and became one of the most active members of the Nation. He quickly rose through the ranks to become the national spokesperson for the Nation of Islam. Malcolm travelled throughout the country lecturing and organizing on behalf of Elijah Muhammad. He helped found *Muhammad Speaks*, which was first published in 1961 and served as the mouthpiece of the Nation of Islam. Within a few years, *Muhammad Speaks* became the best-selling black newspaper in the nation, claiming a circulation of 600,000 copies every other week.³⁷ During the 1960s, it served as the main sources of news from the Middle East and Africa for African Americans.³⁸

Malcolm's publicity efforts were propelled by a 1959 PBS documentary on the movement called *The Hate that Hate Produced*.³⁹ This documentary introduced Malcolm, Elijah Muhammad, and the Nation of Islam to America. As the title of the documentary suggests, the film intended to condemn racism and segregation, but more significantly, it effected fear in white America by presenting the Nation of Islam as the angry, intractable monster child of white racism. White Americans assumed that, given black Americans' dehumanizing experiences in America, the Nation of Islam labeled whites the devil because of their suppressed anger against white brutality, and many feared the unleashing of this rage. This fear, however, was misplaced. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Nation of Islam was not so much concerned with taking revenge as it was with uplifting black Americans by fostering a new black self and society through religious beliefs and practices, with clear analogues in the Protestant work ethic of middle class America.

The sensational portrayal of the Nation of Islam in *The Hate that Hate Produced* brought national notoriety to the movement. The fiery speeches of its charismatic and articulate spokesperson attracted thousands of new members to the Nation of Islam and tens of thousands more sympathizers, who were not ready to convert to the Nation of Islam but certainly agreed with its assessment of race relations in the United States. Consequently, Malcolm X became a leading figure in the civil rights

³⁷ Clegg III, *An Original Man*, 160.

³⁸ Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 53.

³⁹ The publication of C. Eric Lincoln's *The Black Muslims* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1961) also brought much attention to the Nation of Islam. Lincoln's assertion that the popularity of the Nation of Islam pointed to the failures of the church to deal with the problem of racism shaped how the significance of this movement was interpreted for many years to come.

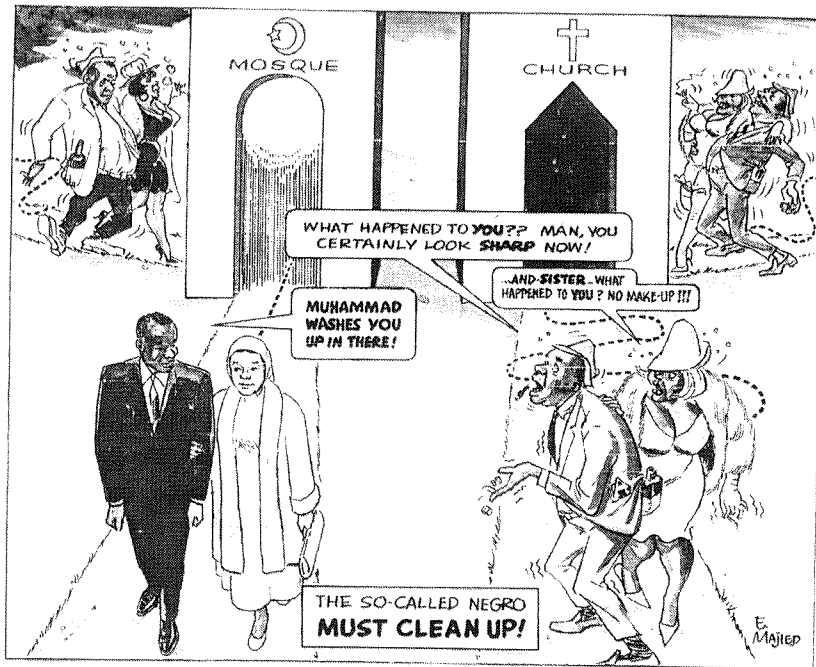


FIGURE 16. Cartoon by E. Majied from *Muhammad Speaks*, April 16, 1965, 8.

struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, and the Nation of Islam became one of the most successful black nationalist movement in American history.

In 1963–1964, Malcolm became increasingly disenchanted with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. In April 1964, he went on the Hajj, where he met with a number of Muslim dignitaries and came face to face with the discrepancies between the teachings of the Nation and the Islamic beliefs and practices upheld by millions of Muslims outside of it. He recalled later, in rather romantic terms, how revelatory this experience had been for him:

My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In two weeks in the [Muslim] Holy Land, I saw what I never had seen in thirty-nine years here in America. I saw all *races*, all *colors*, – blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans – in *true* brotherhood! In unity! Living as one! Worshiping as one! No segregationists – no liberals; they would not have known how to interpret the meaning of those words. In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of *all* white people. I never will be guilty of that again – as I know now that some white people *are* truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a

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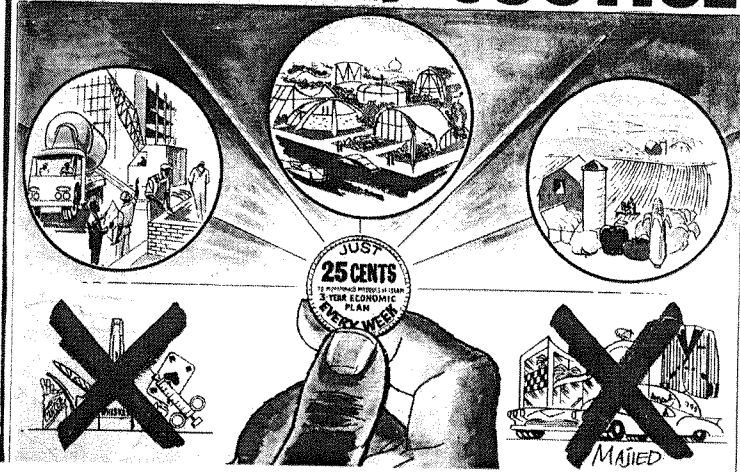


FIGURE 17. From *Muhammad Speaks*, April 30, 1965, 1.

black man... Yes, I have been convinced that *some* American whites do want to help cure the rampant racism which is on the path to *destroying* this country!⁴⁰

Malcolm X formally left the Nation of Islam in March 1964 and soon after founded an organization of his own, the Muslim Mosque, Inc., which, according to its incorporation filing, intended to propagate the “Islamic religion in accordance with the accepted Islamic Religious Principals.”⁴¹ Later, in 1965, he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity as a vehicle for internationalizing the struggles of black Americans by finding common cause with independence and human rights movements abroad. Malcolm’s founding of these two institutions, one religious, the other, political, points to what Edward Curtis has identified as his bifurcation of politics and religion following his adoption of mainstream Islamic beliefs

⁴⁰ Malcolm X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 362.

⁴¹ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 340.

and practices.⁴² Malcolm often asserted in the last years of his life that “[i]t is only being a Muslim which keeps me from seeing people by the color of their skin.” For him, race was a deeply rooted reality in human society; he could thus hardly expect a racially blind religion to address the problems of racial inequality in political and economic terms. Put differently, Malcolm’s adoption of mainstream Sunni beliefs and practices did not change his mind about the inability of American society to see past racial stereotypes. This fundamental belief about white America, which had originally attracted him to the racial mythology of the Nation of Islam, remained with him even after he became a Sunni Muslim. “Despite being a Muslim,” he told an audience at Harvard Law School on December 16, 1964, “I can’t overlook the fact that I’m an Afro-American in a country which practices racism against black people.”⁴³

Even though Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam and adopted a less radical ideology toward the end of his life, the publicity he brought to the Nation of Islam in the late 1950s and early 1960s resulted in the Nation’s teachings having a disproportionate effect on the worldview of a generation of prominent black leaders, such as the poet, playwright, and activist Amiri Baraka.⁴⁴ Its accessible critique of the structures of racism provided the intellectual foundation and popular language of the Black Power movement. The media attention the Nation of Islam received helped ensconce Islam in black America as a religion of liberation. The Nation, whose flag bore the initials for “Freedom, Justice, Equality, and Independence,” provided a way by which black Americans could uphold the values of America’s post-World War II civil religion without forgetting the injustices faced by people of color.