

Malcolm X: A Journey in Discovering Islam

Erin Belcourt

Malcolm X is an example of the profound impact that Islam can have on a person's life. From a childhood marked by experiences of racism and imprisonment, to an adulthood as a Nation of Islam leader, to becoming an orthodox Muslim, Malcolm's journey was never easy. After a traumatic childhood convinced him that there was no room for black people in racist America, Malcolm X joined the Nation of Islam, a group he believed exemplified hope for those African Americans who felt marginalized and endangered while living in America. The Nation of Islam gave him the strength to find his voice and speak against the injustice that African Americans endured. Eventually, in hopes of strengthening his religion after a conflict with the Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X went on *haji* to Mecca. It was on this trip he discovered that he was not truly a part of or following the religion of Islam. Rejecting the Nation of Islam for the extreme misinterpretation of Islamic doctrines, Malcolm X, now El-Shabazz, only experiences one year of living as an orthodox Muslim before being assassinated at a public speech. It is this turbulent journey that stands as an example of the changing image of Islam in America and the common misunderstandings of those who follow the religion.

The national figure known as Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska. At only four years old, Malcolm experienced his "earliest vivid memory"; his home in Michigan was burned to the ground in a fire. Malcolm suggests years later in his autobiography that a local white supremacist group had started the fire.¹ Little's childhood was littered with encounters with racism that permanently shaped his view of

¹Robert E. Terrill, *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), x. There is no official proof that the fire was started by a white supremacy group. While this is commonly what is reported the only evidence of this comes from Malcolm's autobiography.

America and white Americans. Two years after the house fire, Malcolm X's father was run over by a streetcar; once again his autobiography suggests foul play by white Americans.² Soon after this devastating experience, his mother, Louise Little, was declared insane, and Malcolm, at the age of seven, along with his eight siblings, were split into the foster care system, eventually becoming wards of the state. This turbulent childhood led him to a life "of vice and crime, including bootlegging, pimping, and selling drugs."³ While serving a sentence for these crimes, Malcolm's siblings began to write to him about a new religion they had joined. The Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, was full of strict rules that would help Malcolm develop self-discipline, something Malcolm lacked throughout his upbringing as he traveled from home to home. While still serving his sentence, Little was encouraged to give up smoking and eating pork, important Islamic principles.⁴

Malcolm was not originally convinced that this new religion was worth following as his previous experience with religion was based on the acts of the Caucasian Christians that had inflicted pain throughout his childhood. His brother Reginald explained, "in this religion God, or Allah, was a black man" in a letter that ultimately convinced Malcolm to research the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad.⁵ Devouring Islamic literature while in prison, Malcolm Little converted to Islam. These early experiences formed Malcolm X's complete distrust of what he termed "white Americans" and thus made the religion of Islam the only attractive alternative for him.

Customary to the Nation of Islam, "a new convert dropped his or her 'slave,' or last name and adopted simply an X to signify an unknown African ancestry," and thus Malcolm Little became Malcolm X, signifying his religious conversion.⁶ The Nation of Islam represented a new beginning for Malcolm and many other African Americans. For those who lived a troubled life full of exposure to racism, the Nation of Islam's religious practices and mythology allowed African Americans to realign their identity "distancing them from

² Terrill, x.

³ Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America*, (NY, Columbia University Press, 1999), 85.

⁴ Robert L. Jenkins and Mfanya Donald Tryman, *The Malcolm X Encyclopedia*, (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2002), 20.

⁵ Jenkins and Tryman, *The Malcolm X Encyclopedia*, 20.

⁶ Smith, *Islam in America*, 82.

their racist social and political context” within the United States.⁷ No other member of the Nation of Islam took advantage of the new beginning, like Malcolm X. Months after being released from prison he wrote about “the positive, liberating effect the quotidian routines in a Nation of Islam household had on him.”⁸ Following the Nation of Islam set forth a new set of expectations and rules that gave followers a sense of positive self-worth and unity. This unity was also seen globally by followers as all Muslims “pray facing the East to be in unity with the rest of our 725 million brothers and sisters in the entire Muslim world.”⁹ Malcolm X flourished following the Nation of Islam, and due to his devotion and studies, he began to travel all across the country giving lectures and organizing on behalf of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.¹⁰ His influence in America did not end there; Malcolm also helped found *Muhammad Speaks*, the national newspaper and official voice of Islam.¹¹

During the twelve years that Malcolm X spent touring the country, he spoke primarily on the Nation of Islam to an audience comprised mainly of African Americans. The timing of his speeches made Malcolm X a critical voice in the Civil Rights Movement. Malcolm began “speaking nationally and internationally about the circumstances of blacks in American society and about the opportunity presented by the NOI to alter those circumstances.”¹² While both the Nation of Islam and the Civil Rights Movement wanted to help African Americans achieve equality and a better quality of life, the Civil Rights Movement sought to reach this goal through “integration- a goal which Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X denounced in favor of independence, self-help, and separatism.”¹³ The Nation of Islam hoped to create a place for African Americans separate from Caucasian Americans; this was in accordance to the Nation of Islam’s mythology that the black race would become dominant again. Leaders such as Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X did not believe that

⁷ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 232.

⁸ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam*, 232.

⁹ Ibid, 232.

¹⁰ Ibid, 243.

¹¹ Ibid, 243.

¹² Smith, *Islam in America*, 86.

¹³ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam*, 282.

equality let alone dominance would be possible in traditional America. Malcolm X spoke about his frustration with America stating, “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?”¹⁴

In 1959, the frustrations of Malcolm X and the movement were brought to national attention through the WNTA-TV documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced*.¹⁵ While the film hoped to deter Americans from segregation and racism, it instead brought upon fear in white Americans that the Nation of Islam was the violent and revengeful child of racism.¹⁶ The Nation of Islam, while firm in its stance on injustice, was not rageful; instead, the Nation sought to reach equality through “uplifting black Americans by fostering a new black self and Society through religious beliefs and practices.”¹⁷ As misunderstood as the documentary was, it propelled Malcolm X into the spotlight and made him a leading figure in the Civil Rights movement, despite his differing views. It also led the Nation of Islam to become “one of the most successful black nationalist movements in American history.”¹⁸ However, toward the end of his career, “Malcolm came to realize that the NOI’s goals of racial and religious separation were ineffective in advancing the African American community in the United States” and began to seek a more moderate solution by partnering with other Civil Rights leaders.¹⁹ This realization foreshadowed the eventual departure of Malcolm X from the Nation of Islam.

The popularity of Malcolm X, the documentary on the Nation of Islam, and associated media in which Malcolm X spoke gave many Americans their first exposure to the religion of Islam. This new exposure caused many issues as the Nation of Islam and the actual religion of Islam were based on contradictory principles. These differences start with the “doctrine of human

¹⁴ Ibid, 242.

¹⁵ Ibid, 243.

¹⁶ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam*, 243.

¹⁷ Ibid, 244.

¹⁸ Ibid, 244.

¹⁹ Jenkins and Tryman, *The Malcolm X Encyclopedia*, 28.

origin.” The Nation of Islam believes the black race was created in Allah’s image, and the white man was a descendant of the devil.²⁰ This is a drastic difference from Eastern Islam, which identifies as a part of the Abrahamic religion. Eastern Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, all follow the origin story that the human race was started by Adam and Eve, in the story, there is no indication of the race of the couple. This major difference was one that few members of the Nation of Islam realized. This contradiction goes beyond the doctrine of human origin as even in the days “of the Prophet Muhammad...all people in all races are equal before God,” making the belief that white people are the devil a further step away from what traditional Islam intends. The Nation of Islam’s leader Elijah Muhammad took the separation lightly explaining, “my people must be dealt with on a special basis, because their background and circumstances are different from those prevailing elsewhere in the world. You cannot use the same medicine to treat altogether different diseases.”²¹ Despite knowing the differences between traditional Islam and the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad made no effort to unite these groups. In fact, Elijah divided the groups even farther by claiming that he was a prophet sent by God to lead the African American people. To those from true traditional Islam, the preachings of Elijah Muhammad are blasphemy as the “Qur’an affirms that Muhammad is the seal and the last in a long line of prophets,” not Elijah Muhammad.²² These differences made the Nation of Islam very different from traditional Islamic principles. This proves to be very problematic as The Nation of Islam is the first widely publicized interaction that Americans had with the religion. The dramatic differences were not discussed amongst followers of the Nation of Islam or widely publicized, leaving Americans to make assumptions that the entire religion believed in these principles.

In 1963-1964, Elijah Muhammad was accused of fathering children with two of his former secretaries while serving as the leader of the Nation of Islam.²³ These rumors of adultery shocked Malcolm X.²⁴ Once a devoted

²⁰ Smith, *Islam in America*, 81.

²¹ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam*, 260.

²² Smith, *Islam in America*, 82.

²³ Jenkins and Tryman, *The Malcolm X Encyclopedia*, 15.

follower of Elijah Muhammad, these rumors made Malcolm question the leader he once blindly followed. Malcolm then began to be more vocal about politics and civil rights issues, speaking on behalf of the Nation of Islam without the consent of Elijah Muhammad and offering no explanation to the rumors circling the Nation of Islam leader. When Malcolm X commented “that John F. Kennedy’s assassination was a case of chickens coming home to roost, the natural outcome of a violence prevalent in America,” this statement “was interpreted as his somehow sanctioning the president’s death.” Malcolm X’s comment gave Elijah Muhammad the means to punish him.²⁵ Elijah Muhammad used this bold comment to silence Malcolm X from talking to the media for three months, hoping that forcing Malcolm X into silence would allow him enough time to convince Malcolm X to speak of his innocence. Additionally, during that time, “Malcolm was removed as a minister of New York’s Temple number 7” as Malcolm was no longer thought fit to lead a Nation of Islam congregation.²⁶

As a result, Malcolm X in 1964 went on Hajj.²⁷ It was on this journey to the holy land of Mecca that Malcolm X “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” for the first time.²⁸ Malcolm X, a previous leader of the Nation of Islam, found that he was not adequately trained and could not perform “the ritual for prayer or some of the basic requirements of living an Islamic life.”²⁹ Upon returning, Malcolm X wrote about his experience explaining his shock to see “all races, all colors, - blue-eyed blondes to black skinned Africans- in true brotherhood! In unity! Living as one! Worshipping as one!” while completing Hajj.³⁰ His previous

²⁴ Known in Muslim countries as Zina, the act of adultery is seen as a highly offensive sin. Zina is apart of the hadd crimes, meaning that the punishment of 100 lashes, is Quranically specified. The rumors that Elijah Muhhamad had committed zina not once, but with two separate secretaries resulting in the birth of children, showed the Nation of Islam leader in direct violation in the laws of his religion.

²⁵ Smith, *Islam in America*, 88.

²⁶ Smith, *Islam in America*, 88.

²⁷ Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is trip required of all able-bodied muslims in which followers travel to the holy land to participate in holy rituals which trace the steps of the Prohphet Muhammad.

²⁸ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam*, 244.

²⁹ Smith, *Islam in America*, 88.

³⁰ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam*, 244.

convictions that the African American population needed to be separated from the Caucasian devil were completely destroyed. To symbolize these changes, his official departure from the Nation of Islam and his conversion to an orthodox Muslim; Malcolm X “changed his name to El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.”³¹

El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz was still a national icon in the United States. His focus switched following his departure from the Nation of Islam. The once stubborn separatist now wanted to work together with civil rights leaders in order to better the lives of African Americans. El-Shabazz founded his own organization, the Muslim Mosque Inc. He hoped to attract membership from all classes and groups and the African American community, however, this organization was legally created as a religious organization that did not meet the full needs of the African American people.³² El-Shabazz created another organization called the “Organization of Afro- American Unity as a vehicle internationalizing the struggles of black Americans.”³³ Unfortunately, El-Shabazz did not get to complete his vision. El-Shabazz, formerly known as Malcolm X, was assassinated while addressing a crowd in New York in February 1965 by rival Black Muslims.

It is hard to imagine what could have happened if El-Shabazz had not been killed. His strong opinions and dynamic public persona had drawn global attention to the Nation of Islam. With only one year between his conversion to an orthodox Muslim and his untimely death. El-Shabazz had just begun to make new organizations and motions toward peace and unity. Being a public figure, El- Shabazz was not given a lot of time to adjust to his new beliefs. He was trapped in the spotlight, with new ideas that directly contradicted the points that he had once stubbornly fought over. The followers of Malcolm X were confused, should they make their own conversion toward peace and the mainstream civil rights movement or should they stay with the Nation of Islam and fight for separation. There, unfortunately, was no middle ground for the former followers of Malcolm X. The Nation of Islam faced mass scrutiny as the new statements of El-Shabazz

³¹ Smith, *Islam in America*, 89.

³² Jenkins and Tryman, *The MALcolm X Encyclopedia*, 29.

³³ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam*, 245.

directly contradicted their belief system. This growing web of conflicting religious and political beliefs is ultimately what trapped El-Shabazz. The death of El-Shabazz is a tragedy. Had El-Shabazz not been killed for his silence, the civil rights movement and the image of Islam in the United States would have been changed for the better.