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Malcolm and US Muslim Legacy Abused

[Edited portions of this article have appeared in the Islamic Horizons Magazine published by the Islamic Society of North America, commemorating the legacy of Malcolm X].

As-Salaam-Alaikum.[1]

Let me begin by listing just a few names in a test of your recognition skills. If you recognize the name, just nod your head: Malcolm-Jamal Warner, Kareem Abdul Jabber, Jamal Wilkes, Muhammad Ali, Ahmal Jamal, the singer Kashif, the sports commentator Ahmad Rashad. Perhaps you can help me with more names.

The point we are making here is that the Islamic influence among African-Americans is an acknowledged fact and growing. If you would visit any daycare or kindergarten class you would find often up to 30 percent of the class with names such as Sheriff, Saudi, Jasillah, Kareem, Akbar, Ahmed, Ali, Muhammad, Daud and others. These reflect the phenomenal growth, saturation and permanency of the Islamic movement in America. This aspect of American and African-American history has been neglected, and we feel quite deliberately. Even when it is acknowledged, it is distorted or slanted in such a way that it is portrayed as an aberration rather than a major factor in the development of positive self-awareness or social and economic advancement of African-Americans.[2]

Knowledge of Islam

I am sure that if I asked a non-Muslim, to expound upon his or her knowledge of Islam,[3] they would perhaps say that they have heard of Malcolm X or had read his biography. Or Perhaps they would say that they have read newspaper accounts of the 'Black Muslims,' Louis Farrakhan, or have met some Muslim followers of Imam WD Mohammed, or perhaps a noted immigrant Muslim scholar.

What is really known or understood, however, about Islam or its true relationship to the African-American thrust for freedom and equality?

Let us look at the material on Malcolm X. How much of this material deals with Islam - that is, the fundamental beliefs, the values, morality and traditions of Islam - that made him the man he later became? Frankly, we hear only of his militancy, only of his nationalism. He is in fact, disconnected from Islam, the religion, except that he was known to have been a member of the Nation of Islam the better part of his life and reportedly accepted its universal aspects in the last days of his life. Most do not attribute the values of Islam, its inspirational message and other aspects to Malcolm's rise from the seamy life to that of a role model.

Is this not the same with Muhammad Ali? Notice that the focus is on the heroics, and the man, and not on the principles of his belief nor his practice of his faith. Let us look at the case of Alex Haley, the 'as told to ' author of Malcolm's biography, and the author of Roots. [Actually Roots was written because of a Muslim challenge to Haley suggesting that he did not have true knowledge of himself nor his Islamic heritage. When Haley was able to get funding, he proceeded to do the research - and behold it turns out that his ancestors were in fact Muslims!]

As you recall, however, this fact was presented in a very minuscule way in the movie Roots. When the TV series was completed, we recall the Islamic aspect was all but forgotten. At one news conference, I reminded Haley of the challenge and his findings. I asked, whether, in the light of his heritage, he would consider himself a Muslim. He countered that since his "immediate ancestors" had adopted Christianity, he would remain Christian out of respect for them.

Distortion of History

Nevertheless, returning to Malcolm's history (I might say - the exploitation of his life's struggle) and to assess the impact of the Islam which he embraced, (first narrowly and then universally), we must ask many uncomfortable questions. What do we mean by exploitation?

We need only to notice the literature initially published on Malcolm following his assassination. Who were the authors? What was their persuasion? You will find that they mostly were socialists, communists, or otherwise miscreants. They were clever promoters of their unstructured genocidal 'revolution.' They were in fact, cooperating with other antagonists of Islam and the African-American struggle.

These sycophants portrayed Malcolm primarily as a 'militant revolutionary,' an image that negated his emphasis upon constructive community building which stemmed from his Islamic orientation. Their focus distracted a significant number of the African-American community from the serious work of social, moral and economic reform needed to succeed in the future.

The culprits knew that the elevation of Malcolm to the "tragic hero" image and the deification of the rhetoric, in the abstract, would satisfy the emotional character of the African-American. They assumed that they (African-Americans) would revel in hero worship and forget the economic and social responsibilities inherent in the message Malcolm sought to convey.

These African-Americans, they also assumed, would not feel the need to investigate further the religion of Islam, but rather would become pacified by having a "hero." They seemed to know that by emphasizing the "hero," the community would begin to rely upon the crutches of ethnocentrism. Much of this we see in the extensive searches for historical kings or queens of Africa to validate the humanism of African- Americans.

Frankly, Islam represents the universal forces of change - but within a stable environment - like the gradual changes from night to day ... all within a structured span.[4] Alternatively, like the changes of the seasons from spring to winter-- -all within a structure span. the Yin and the Yang.[5]

Islamic Philosophy

Granted such history should be rendered true and historical credit given to each peoples' place and contributions in history - and especially when it exposes ethnocentric myths which have been used to psychologically enslave the oppressed - but it is no panacea for true self development, growth and human excellence. Only a fundamental and universal way of life, founded upon universal principles can serve as such a panacea - and even then, it must be practiced in its totality.

Let us say that I began this paper with emphasis upon the myths and distortions surrounding the life of Malcolm because the media introduced you to Islam in this way, and sought to condition your thinking through many open and subtle misrepresentations of Islamic personalities and communities.

Impact Upon Society

Islam's growth in America really represents an infusion of these universal forces in a situation that has broken down. The moral and religious community in America has allowed the neglect, distortion and misuse of the essential principles of the unity of life that only through the infusion again of those principles essential to human life and excellence will save the coming generation. Is it any wonder that Islam would not be the inheritance of the African-American? Especially when it says that 'They who seek shall inherit the earth.'

African-Americans have been trying to fight racism, bigotry and hate all of their lives. However, what has been the strategy? What have been the tools? The philosophy and way of life of the opponents has become the philosophy and way of life of the slave. There has never been a case where the oppressed truly overturned a system biased against them by incorporating the same philosophy as the system. Where this has happened you find the once oppressed slaying and killing one another as did the oppressors. You can see signs of this in the killings in South Africa and in the mountains of Afghanistan, where brother is killing brother because of their incorporation of alien philosophies - philosophies alien to their nature.[6]

African Studies

We find that many African-American study classes are simply an attempt to graft on a kind of African ethnicity to the prevalent Euro- ethnic religion. There is a strong movement among Black Catholics in this direction. I am sure you know of the Bishop Stallings movement [centered in Washington, DC] which combines an African and Islamic vernacular — "Immune" with the 'Roman' aspect of the Church.

We must be careful that African study classes do not become classes in pacification, isolation or 'feel good sessions.' If this happens, the oppressors will have completed their job.

Let us ask, however, why has Dr. King's 'Dream' gone unrealized? Perhaps because the "real" desire of the people was simply to be "accepted." There is the rub. When a people strive all their life to be accepted by their oppressors or otherwise dominant class, they, by implication, have accepted and inculcated the concept of inferiority. Now does that mean that one should go to the other extreme to become an island unto one's self? No, but it does mean that one should separate one's self from the ethics and morality of the oppressors, including conflicting religious values and practices.

Although it has not been acknowledged, the movement of Islam, which does not portray man as a 'sinner' from birth but proclaims that man was made in the best mold, has infused true dignity, confidence and well-being in thousands of African-Americans. Of course, we acknowledge that we live in a political world where heritages and roots are going to be important for a long time. We, nevertheless, must put these things in perspective, otherwise we will lose our sense of perspective and more importantly, our relationship with the universal laws that govern our existence.

Parallel Advancement

As a people, we must learn from our history: for instance, we must recognize the parallel development of the strategies of advancement. As you recall during the very early times there was the philosophy of Booker T. Washington, who called for self-help. "Put your bucket down where you are," he said. He thus advocated the work ethic and education in the existing work technologies at the time.

During that same era there was W.E.B. Du Bois, who stressed integration and education in the social and political sciences. The twain philosophies were never joined. Then during the sixties there was the Honorable Elijah Muhammad who introduced Islam in a nationalist framework and who advocated separate and economic development along the line of Booker T., but different in that it was underpinned with the Islamic philosophy of human dignity. At the same time there was Martin Luther King, following the Du Bois approach, underpinned with the philosophy of Ghandi. Still the twain remained apart.

Today, insh Allah, the twain shall meet and given the inevitable dominance of Islam, insh Allah, America shall become the "promised land," where the Dream of Dr. King and others will become a reality.

Notes:1. The greeting of Jesus was very similar in dialect. He spoke Hebrew and Aramaic.

2. Muslims, in fact, are to be credited with helping African-Americans in overcoming the stigma of \*Black' by introducing its original connotation of dignity, regality and moral excellence. African-Americans later allowed this name to re-degenerate into a fad designed to assuage feelings of inferiority: 'I'm black and I'm proud." The Islamic concept of dignity can be symbolized in a given word or slogan, but it is never a substitute for genuine self-respect and the attendant responsibility of societal contribution.

3. Islam essentially means peace or 'Submission' to the Will of Allah, the nature in which Allah has made man. A Muslim is one who submits himself to Allah (God). Moslem is a Westernized way of pronouncing Muslim. Muhammadism is an offensive label Western detractors placed upon Islam in imitation of Christianity and other religions named after its prophets or 'founders.' The basic pillars of Islam are the Belief in One God (Who has neither associates nor kindred), Prayer, Fasting, Charity, and the making of Pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in a lifetime. Muslims believe in all of the Prophets, equally, from Adam to Abraham, from Moses and Muhammad. Muslims accept Jesus as an elevated prophet and Messiah, a Word of God. The Muslims accept the Quran as the final revelation of Allah, clarifying and affirming the previous scriptures i.e., the Torah and lnjil.

4. Islam, like the home thermostat becomes is a self-regulating system or physical, spiritual and emotional balance. The month, of 'Ramadan,' a month of fast, is an essential part of Islamic principles and is an example. During this period, the excesses caused by gradual deviations from Islamic essentials over the year are brought into balance by a strict self-discipline practice of fasting, prayer, charity and emotional restraint.

5. Islam's introduction into America has actually served to brace the country against run-away debauchery and immorality although this is not immediately evident. Nevertheless the Islamic emphasis upon basic morality, discipline and industry in the lives of its adherents has had a lifesaving effect, especially upon the African-American who desires to imitate or integrate into the 'mainstream," has cost him his traditional moral high-ground.

6. The Islamic philosophy of dignity and self-respect is rooted not in cosmetic self-adulation or motivational self-esteem, slogans and rhetoric, but in a fundamental and basic principle of submission to the Creator. A Muslim is considered 'Abd', servant or slave of the Creator. His personal confidence thus derived, not artificially, but by his knowledge that no man can be his master and needs no 'acceptance' from others to enhance his feeling about his worth as a human being.

7. The Nation of Islam movement began in 1930. The founder, WD Fard, also known as Wallace Fard Muhammad and W.F. Muhammad remains an enigma today. He was said to be have been of Arab or Indian ancestry. His features were also noted to be quite oriental. In 1930 terms, he was like a 'Negro who could pass for white.' This mixed identity aided the mystique in portraying his as a person acceptable to all of the range of colors of the Black race. He was light enough, for instance to appeal to the black's love and obedience of a white image, inculcated by the worship of Jesus as blond and blue eyed. In early Muslim literature, Fard was cited as a 'Savior of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the West. After his mysterious disappearance in 1933 and the ascendance of Elijah Muhammad (born Elijah Poole) as leader, he was referred to as not only a Savior, e.g. Jesus imagery, but the spirit of God in his person. This characterization was later shorthanded into 'Allah in the person of Master Fard Muhammad,' although the catechism remained unchanged in its original portrayal of his.

8. Although the 'Islam' of the NOI was characterized as 'trappings,' 'pseudo,' shirk (heretical), by Islamic orthodoxy, there was an unusual toleration of the movement. The NOI suffered none of the public condemnation, threats or attacks usually reserved for nontraditional factions in the Muslim Ummah (community). Perhaps this was due to the suspicion that the movement actually was a strategically arrangement to forego traditional orthodox methods of propagation to deal with the 'peculiar' situation of the African-American as a target of conversion. Some claim that this toleration has been rewarded in the fact that today the majority of the indigenous Muslims have accepted the universality of Islam (not just for the Black man) over the racially oriented projections of the earlier days. Today, Islam among the African Muslim-Americans is flourishing. Imam WD Mohammed, the son of Elijah Muhammad has been able to bring about a near miraculous "transition," (often referred to as the "second resurrection), among thousands of African-Americans who have accepted the tenets of Islam from varied perspectives.
9. More importantly, Islam in America appears to be setting the stage for the long-desired "unity of Muslims" around the world. With the indigenous Muslims we have a homegrown community, familiar with the Western mentality (America in particular), joining forces with Muslims arriving in greater numbers from around the world. The media (often in alarmist terms) now proclaim that "Islam is the fastest growing religion in America." Although not officially acknowledged by the last census, the Muslim population has clearly succeeded those of the American Jewish community. .See also related article at: http://www.ummah.net/bicnews/BICNews/Kashif/kashif12.htm
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*[About the Author: Currently, he is the Imam for Masjidush-Shura Washington DC, and Vice-Chair for the Coordinating Council of Muslim Organizations (CCOMO) for the Washington Metropolitan Area (VA,DC,MD). He was the first Muslim writer for the Original Muhammad Speaks and later DC Bureau Editor. During the Mid 70s-80s he was invited by Imam W.D. Muhammad to serve as the Chicago-base Editor for Bilalian News, later to be renamed Muslim Journal. He later became one of the founders of the American Muslim Council and served as in-house editor for the International Institute of Islamic Studies in Virginia, USA.

[As a writer, his writings have been published in scores of Muslim and non-Muslim publications. His Hajj experience, (Sacred Journey) is "required" reading for prospective Hajjis. He is listed in WHO'S' WHO in Black America and WHO'S WHO among International Authors and Writers. His main interest lies in the rise of Islam in USA and the effects of international foreign policy upon Muslims in USA. He has traveled widely and has had acquaintance with such noted personalities as Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm (X) Shabazz, Muhammad Ali and W.D. Mohammad, etc., all [past & present] founders and/or current leaders in the Islamic movements in America.]*