

# The World Is a Prison to Believers

## *Naming and Worlds in Malcolm X*

JOEL KUHLIN & ANTHONY PAUL SMITH

---

Joel Kuhlin is a doctoral student in New Testament exegesis at Lund University.

Anthony Paul Smith is associate professor of religion and theology at La Salle University.

joel.kuhlin@ctr.lu.se – smithanthony@lasalle.edu

---

### Starting with "Failure"

Malcolm X's (1925–1965) political and theological mode of analysis is carried out through his work as rhetor. However, it is not uncommon to charge his oratory as ultimately one of "failure".<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary oratory of Malcolm X, especially during the Nation of Islam (NOI) years, is not uncommonly described as a (rhetorical and symbolic) failure: "The limits of [Malcolm X's] revolutionary rhetoric are all too clear today. X did not change the racist underpinnings of America's economic structure, nor did he have a very direct impact on altering America's political system."<sup>2</sup> Further, Condit and Lucaites write about the speeches of 1964–1965 in the following manner:

Malcolm X's failure was not for lack of trying creative solutions to the problems facing Black America [...] different possibilities, each a

---

1. This paper uses failure as a productive conceptualization of the rhetoric of Malcolm X. In short, "failure" attempts to articulate Malcolm X's rhetoric as actualizing a refusal of the White world.

2. Celeste Michelle Condit & John Louis Lucaites, "Malcolm X and the Limits of the Rhetoric of Revolutionary Dissent", *Journal of Black Studies* 23 (1993), 308.

dead end, dominated his thinking in his last year [...] Malcolm X was eloquent and relentless in his analysis of the problems facing Black America, but he never spoke of a solution.<sup>3</sup>

Formulating failure in this manner demarcates a difference between the pre- and post-1964 oratory (that is, after the *hajj* experience of April 1964) and the stated goals of each period. According to this view, the less revolutionary Malcolm X became, the more internationalist and so the better. Yet, his legacy is that of failure, in one sense or another. Malcolm X never lived to carry out the reform of his rhetoric and never lived to see the potential fruits of such labour:

A rhetor must [...] finally abjure a true revolution, which calls for an unfettered and absolute rejection of all that is, in favor of a torturous path through the constructive vision of what might be. This was the path that Malcolm X chose, and it is a path that those who today recall his appeals to “the ballot or the bullet” and to “all means necessary” as rallying cries for contemporary political action would do well to reconsider.<sup>4</sup>

Malcolm X’s oratory above follows a trajectory from an immature articulation of apocalyptic revolution (“and absolute rejection of all that is”) to a more constructive stance towards questions of race and political action (“a torturous path through the constructive vision of what might be”). Malcolm X’s rhetorical style is described as generally counter-cultural, in contrast to Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1929–1968) “culturetypal”,<sup>5</sup> and as too revolutionary.<sup>6</sup> The most intense revolutionary oratory is naturally located in the pre-1964 speeches, and the NOI period generally. Condit and Lucaites therefore conceptualize the oeuvre of Malcolm X to be either rhetorical failure or failed rhetoric.<sup>7</sup>

---

3. Condit & Lucaites, “Revolutionary Dissent”, 305.

4. Condit & Lucaites, “Revolutionary Dissent”, 309.

5. Celeste Michelle Condit & John Louis Lucaites, “Reconstructing ‘Equality’: Culturetypal and Counter-Cultural Rhetorics in the Martyred Black Vision”, *Communication Monographs* 57 (1990), 6, 13.

6. “Malcolm X’s rhetoric was initially too hostile to achieve any serious consideration as a viable avenue of change for most audiences, and it only received careful inspection and consideration in the wake of growing discontent with the perceived ineffectiveness of King’s rhetoric.” Condit & Lucaites, “Reconstructing ‘Equality’”, 19.

7. For a study of the resonance of Malcolm X’s rhetoric within a wider social semiotic field, see Anders Ackfeldt, “The Semiotics of Malcolm X from Harlem to Tahrir”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 47–60.

In this context, Malcolm X is bound to a notion of unproductive failure, evaluated through the later speeches and post-*haji* identity. This might in part be due to the rhetoric of the post-1964 speeches themselves, where he reflects on the earlier period as restricted by Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975), for example, in terms of developing ideas. The “emancipated Malcolm X” of the 1964–1965 period is taken to be an improvement to the revolutionary, earlier period, and when Malcolm X becomes Malik, the new name displays a newfound hope in mankind through the *ummah* and a universal conception of Sunni Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Failure has at times been described in religious terms, and located specifically with Malcolm X’s NOI period, as heretical and even false consciousness.<sup>9</sup> There are those who would identify Malcolm with failure in relation to a trajectory of “spiritual evolution”.<sup>10</sup> Malcolm X, on these readings, is a religious failure. The characterization of this failure differs based upon the author’s own particular stance and theological investment on where Malcolm X *ought* to stand in relation to them. Reading Malcolm X as a religious failure generally accords with the progress narrative that locates the NOI as a necessary, but in the end, insufficient step for Black Americans to come to Islam. This progress narrative sees Elijah Muhammad’s son and successor, Imam Warith Deen Mohammad (1933–2008), reject many of his father’s teachings in order to redirect the movement to Sunni Islam, thereby reforming the heterodox, if not heretical, NOI.<sup>11</sup>

Our wager is that these readings of Malcolm X as failure – be it symbolic-political or religious – miss a more fundamental problem raised by his thought. This problem haunted Malcolm X, failure or not, but also haunts any attempt at a positive political programme that would address anti-Blackness and any religious project that would seek to construct or gather together universal humanity without anti-Blackness. This is the problem of world. Note that these evaluations of Malcolm X’s assumed failures come from the perspective of a rhetoric that operates within, and with relation to, a contemporary cultural world as well as from the perspective

---

8. For a more detailed history of Malcolm X’s weaving together of Black Nationalism and Islam, see Emin Poljarevic, “The Political Theology of Malcolm X: Between Human Dignity and Returning the Gaze”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 11–27.

9. Amiri Yasin Al-Hadid, “Al-Qur’an and Sunnah: From Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz”, in Lewis V. Baldwin & Amiri Yasin Al-Hadid (eds.), *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin*, Orlando, FL 2002, 50.

10. Emin Poljarevic, “Malik al-Shabazz’s Practice of Self-Liberation”, in Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016, 227.

11. See Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection*, New York 2005, 60–62.

of a “constructive” agenda. We are told that Malcolm X is not constructive enough, and his words simply were not sufficient and/or lacked a political programme (in contrast to Martin Luther King Jr. for instance) or lacked knowledge of the correct religious path.

Malcolm X’s pre-1964 rhetoric, we hold, articulate refusal. Specifically, refusing the world of the White. If Malcolm X or his project “failed”, it is because the world he articulates as a problem makes thinking something other than failure an impossible task. For, as a famous *Hadith* reminds us: “The world is a prison for a believer and Paradise for a non-believer.”<sup>12</sup>

### Given Names and Taken Names

The problem of world was approached first by Malcolm through his experience of being named. This arises from a fundamental operation brought into relief by the analytical field of political theology. While this term does not refer to a specific discipline, it does refer to a constellation of concepts and tools for understanding the *dispositif* of the contemporary order. Sovereignty, and the machinations that prop it up, is a central political-theological concept in the strand of political theology that arises out of and in response to Carl Schmitt’s (1888–1985) original reactionary and conservative analyses. For Schmitt, the sovereign and sovereignty, which stands at the heart of Western governmentality, are only conceivable through analogy with God.<sup>13</sup> The act of naming and the legitimacy of such naming is one such analogical power of the sovereign, regardless of whether that power produces contradictions or untenable tensions as it does in liberal states.

Yet, contra Schmitt, there are also counter traditions to such analogical political theologies. Instead of moving from God to ruler through analogy, such counter-political theologies are singular and vectorial. That is, they do not constitute a distinction between God above and the sovereign here below that are then united through the concept of sovereignty, which emerges at the same time from their distinction.<sup>14</sup> The counter-political theology to such an analogical shell game begins by turning attention to violence and suffering. For, underlying the trappings of sovereignty are acts of terrible and mundane violence.

---

12. Sahih Muslim Book 55, Hadith 1.

13. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Chicago 2005, 10.

14. This structure has been analyzed at greater length and named by Smith as “weaponized apophaticism”. See Anthony Paul Smith, “Against Tradition to Liberate Tradition: Weaponized Apophaticism and Gnostic Refusal”, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 19:2 (2014), 131–144.

A singular violence is concealed by the rules that structure whether we will be able to recognize that violence or not. All suffering is singular, but some experiences of suffering are integral to the functioning of the same structure that produces suffering. The logic of exclusion – the goal of the sovereign act of naming – serves to create a fixed, hallucinatory identity. I am an American citizen because I am not an illegal immigrant or an incarcerated delinquent. I am Swedish because I am not Roma or Bulgari or even Muslim. I am male because I am not female. I am white because I am not black. Thus, while suffering is singular, some experiences of suffering are left unintelligible because their unintelligibility makes intelligible the suffering of the dominant community, abject names are given to some so that others might find honor in their name. In our examples above those cast as unintelligible for the purpose of one's own intelligibility are the subject positions of the illegal, the incarcerated, female, black. Yet, these subject positions are not equivocal or flowing from one to the other, there is a unilateral specificity to the function of these distinct subject positions. Those who constitute their own pursuit of happiness upon the unintelligible suffering of these others are served by the equivocal confusion of these subject positions, for when a cry against violence goes up they are able to shift emphasis (“well at least you are not incarcerated”, “at least you are not a woman”, “at least you are a citizen”, and so on). Those who suffer are absent to themselves within this structure of (mis)recognition. The structure of (mis)recognition takes the political-theological name, “the World”. We will return to this later.

While presented abstractly above, this schema of naming is identified by Malcolm X in his own life. His struggle against anti-Blackness can be plotted through the antagonism of his given names and his taken names. Malcolm X, as the descendants of Africans captured and forced into slavery, was born carrying a given name that was forced upon his parents and their forbearers. This last name, Little, does not mark out Malcolm in relation to his kin, but marks out that they are not recognized as his kin. So when his father was killed, likely by anti-Black racists and white supremacists, the life insurance company was able to find ways to deny payment to the family and the strain upon his mother was taken by the anti-Black state as a sign of her “true identity”, as one who cannot help but fail to be a mother.

Malcolm narrates his transition to taking the name Malcolm X as one of finding himself debased in the white world and transformed in his finding God in the religion of Islam: “I am spending many hours because the full story is the best way that I know to have it seen, and understood, that I had sunk to the very bottom of the American white man's society when –

soon now, in prison – I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life.”<sup>15</sup> That is, when he was imprisoned he was so angry with God that those incarcerated with him gave him the name Satan (though it is worth asking, after the analyses we will undertake below, at which God was Malcolm X angry). This anger was channelled against the white world through his reversion to Islam and the name that all Muslims in the NOI take: X.

The NOI practice of replacing the given name by taking the common and empty name X is a powerful act of refusal as well as a powerful negation of the sovereign act of naming. The legacy of Elijah Muhammad has not been given much theoretical attention outside of a very small group of academics, despite the continuing importance of his work outside of the academy. Elijah Muhammad’s thought can be read as a form of ideology critique, seen most clearly in his critique of the various manifestations of religious belief in a “mystery God”.<sup>16</sup> It was this critique of the mystery God, which is used to undergird white sovereignty, where the power of names became clear for Malcolm X. In his autobiography, he related learning from Muhammad what the sovereign naming of Black Americans as “Negros” constitutes:

Elijah Muhammad spoke of how in this wilderness of North America, for centuries the “blue-eyed devil white man” had brainwashed the “so-called Negro”. He told us how, as one result, the black man in America was “mentally, morally and spiritually dead”. Elijah Muhammad spoke of how the black man was the “Original Man, who had been kidnapped from his homeland and stripped of his language, his culture, his family structure, *his family name, until the black man in America did not even realize who he was*”.<sup>17</sup>

There were a number of responses to this capture and (mis)naming in the NOI and they were not all of a piece. There were certain attempts, of course, to reclaim language, culture, and family structure. There was a qualified and understandable acquiescence to the white pathologization of blackness. Yet, at the level of the political theology of naming in the NOI, there is a strict refusal by evacuating the name, leaving the name empty with the symbol “X” (no doubt calling upon the mathematical variable). Malcolm explains

---

15. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York 1992, 150.

16. See Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, Phoenix, AZ 1973, 1–67. This insight does not feel original, but we have been unable to locate the original source of the idea.

17. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 197. Our italics.

this refusal beautifully, again in his autobiography, through the retelling of his receipt of his X:

My application had, of course, been made and during this time I received from Chicago my “X”. The Muslim’s “X” symbolized the true African family name that he *never could know*. For me, my “X” replaced the white slave-master name of “Little” which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebearers. The receipt of my “X” meant that forever after in the NOI, I would be known as Malcolm X. *Mr. Muhammad taught that we would keep this “X” until God Himself returned and gave us a Holy Name from His own mouth.*<sup>18</sup>

The apocalyptic temporality is important here. For the “true family name”, that is, the sovereign name that emerges from the household, is not recoverable in this schema. This particular element of sovereignty and the world it would require are forever lost and only after the apocalypse, the overturning of this world, will that name be given.

The refusal of the white sovereign’s act of naming plays out at the level of theory and practice at once. We can see this in a particularly antagonistic interview on Chicago’s WMAQ-TV *City Desk* where Len O’Connor (1912–1991), one of the panel of interviewers, demands to know Malcolm X’s “real name”. He responds with a simple, “Malcolm. Malcolm X.” O’Connor then invokes the law, “Is that your legal name?” Malcolm X, refusing to recognize the authority of that law, responds by saying, “As far as I’m concerned, it’s my real name.” O’Connor continues and now invokes the force of law, “Have you been to court to establish [...]” and, before he can finish, Malcolm X interrupts to condemn that same force of law for its passivity in allowing for the capture of those “true African names” and thereby the way such force of law supports that capture by saying, “I didn’t have to go to court to be called ‘Murphy’ or ‘Jones’ or ‘Smith’.” After repeating the history of the capture of true African names as part of the process of enslavement, O’Connor, who should be chastised and shamed by this history, asks with annoyance and invokes the spectre of kinship contained in the name of the father, “I get the point. Would you mind telling me what your father’s last name was?” The trap is easily sidestepped by Malcolm X, knowing that his father was subject to the same exclusion from full kinship, saying “My father didn’t know his last name. My father got his last name from his grandfather, and his grandfather got it from his grandfather, who got it from the slave-master. The real names of our people were destroyed

---

18. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography*, 199. Our italics.

during slavery.” O’Connor’s last attempt to make Malcolm X acknowledge his given name is weakly given through an appeal to ease, “Was there any time – any point in the genealogy of your family when you did have to use a last name, and, if so, what was it?” Malcolm X makes clear that such names are not simply unacknowledged, but refused and rejected: “The last name of my fore-fathers was taken from them when they were brought to America and made slaves. And then the name of the slave-master was given – which we refuse, we reject that name today.”<sup>19</sup>

This practice of refusal is not accidental to Malcolm X’s understanding of Islam. In a speech central to understanding Malcolm X’s analysis of naming and world, “Black Man’s History”, he locates this refusal of the world’s naming in the name of Islam itself. For in Malcolm X’s polemical philosophy of religion he identifies Islam as nameless in a very specific sense. Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism all take their names from the proper names of an individual and specifically with that man’s death:

This name [writes “Islam”], if you’ll notice, has no connection, no association, with the death of a man. This is not a man’s name, this doesn’t come from a man [...] Islam is not connected with any name. Islam is independent of any name. Islam is an act which means submit completely to God, or obey God.<sup>20</sup>

### **Shabazz, Gnosis, and the Creation of the Human**

“Black Man’s History” is a crucial piece of oratory for many reasons. Most important for the present purposes, Malcolm here developed a clear gnostic rhetoric and theology of naming. Gnosis resists the concept of the world. Theologians of early Christianity, like Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–202), sometimes used the Greek term γνῶσις (“knowledge”), in opposition to what they considered false knowledge among rival Christian groups.<sup>21</sup> One such group, the Valentinians, were labelled gnostics in Irenaeus’s magnum opus *Adversus Haereses* (“Against Heresies”) because they (purportedly) claimed to

---

19. The full video of this interview is available online. “Malcolm X Interviewed on City Desk”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-2QLuAvhJ8>, accessed 2020-02-09. The interview is permanently archived at The Museum of Broadcast Communications. This is our transcription and we consulted that created by Lybio.net, <https://lybio.net/malcolm-x-our-history-was-destroyed-by-slavery/interview/>, accessed 2020-02-09.

20. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches*, New York 1971, 47.

21. For an influential, but now outdated, discussion on gnosticism and Irenaeus, see Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma I*, New York 1961. For a history of the use of the term gnosis in church history and among Protestant theologians (such as Harnack), see Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge, MA 2003.

possess extra-biblical insights (*gnosis*) on the events of human creation.<sup>22</sup> In Valentinian protology (speech about the first things, in contrast to eschatology), the creation of man – along with the greater material and visible world – is not the result of the highest God. Further, the Supreme Being was thought of as beyond the scope of human rationality, and by extension, the entire cosmological order. A gap was envisaged between the (material) world and (the spiritual) God. Still, ancient Christian “gnostics”, like Valentinians, are nonetheless remembered for having constructed protologies in which a god principle, or principles, constructs the human, rather than the highest God itself. Although much more can be said about the intricate and sophisticated manner of this gnostic creation story, the fundamental protological gap between the world and God is reified into the origin and life of the human.

Protology is an essential part of the “Black Man’s History” speech, also known as “Yacub’s History” (December 1962).<sup>23</sup> “Black Man’s History” goes through many of the important loci of the Book of Genesis, through a distinct gnostic and allegorical hermeneutic. Malcolm X demonstrates that the creation of the white man was in fact not the act of Allah, taken as the one true God, the greatest and highest of Lords, but of a scientist named Yacub. Sixty-six trillion years ago, Yacub lost a dispute with another scientist, over the issue of uniting the world of (exclusively black) humanity and plotted to destroy the earth. The failure to convince the scientists of essentially constructing Babel’s tower not only ended with the creation of the Moon through a gigantic explosion, but more importantly, “a new tribe, a weak tribe, a wicked tribe, a devilish tribe, a diabolical tribe, a tribe that is devilish by nature”.<sup>24</sup> In short, Yacub creates the White man.

Interestingly enough, Malcolm X later describes a scientist in Mecca, by the name Shabazz, who was originally tasked with the mission to predict the future and keep track of the past, and who counteracted Yacub’s Luciferian creation by himself bringing “about a tougher people”.<sup>25</sup> Of course,

---

22. Contemporary scholars of Valentinianism are careful to point out the lack of sources from the Valentinians themselves and we should therefore be suspicious and careful when formulating Valentinian protology from the description of *Adversus Haereses* and other heresiological writings from that time. For details on Valentinus’s life and works, see Paul Linjamaa, *Valentinianernas evangelium: Gnosticismen och den antika kristna idévärlden i ljuset av texterna från Nag Hammadi*, Lund 2017, 52–81; Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the Valentinians*, Leiden 2006; Christoph Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins*, Tübingen 1992.

23. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 18, 35–96.

24. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 66, 70.

25. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 71. Of course Malcolm X is here explicating the theology of the NOI. While some might argue that this means we should not

Malcolm X's name, Malik El-Shabazz (already in use at the time of "Black Man's History"),<sup>26</sup> is more than a mere prophetic link to the protology above and the chief antagonist of Yacub. The name Shabazz signifies a fundamental gnostic vocation of refusing (White) world-making. There is, therefore, something of a gnostic line running through, and conjoining, Malcolm X's thinking as a minister of the NOI with his later more mainstream Islamic Sunni theology.

### Worlds and Gnostic Naming

What are the gnostic elements in Malcolm X's refusal of world-making from the NOI period? In December 1963, right before his excommunication from the NOI, Malcolm X's "God's Judgement of White America" speech (famously known as "Chickens Coming Home to Roost") asked "Who will make White America know what God wants? Who will present God's plan to White America?"<sup>27</sup> Although these rhetorical questions unexpectedly emphasize the vocation of the Black Muslims, something very interesting is happening in connection to these questions and the missional identity of the NOI. Malcolm X here links Muslim knowledge of self, as the consciousness of vocation and one's place in relation to the world, to a full realization of God's name by way of revelation. As will be seen, this revelation of God's proper name creates an epistemic divide of a more common, theological knowledge and gnostic insight.

First and foremost, to know God at all is to know God's proper name. "We who are Muslims call God by his true name: Allah... The great Elijah Muhammad teaches us that Allah is the true name of the divine Supreme Being."<sup>28</sup> While this may seem like common knowledge, Malcolm X's focus on Elijah Muhammad draws attention to the need for a special revelation into the meaning of God's name. "God's Judgement of White America" links revelation with a gnosis of God as knowing God's name(s). For instance, after a brief discussion of the sacred etymology of Islam and Muslim,

---

recognize it or account for it as Malcolm X's theology, this would miss that any theology is never simply one's own. The traditions that are given and taken up by vibrant and creative thinkers like Malcolm X act as the origin and material for the ways in which they allow us to think differently. Whether or not Malcolm X "believes" in the Myth of Yacub is not at issue (just as it is not really important if Christians in the Europe of the Middle Ages believed in the literal two bodies of the king), the fact is that he thought with, taught, and used the myth in his own political theology.

26. Imam Benjamin Karim (1932–2005), who gives a speech just before "Black Man's History", writes: "I remember clearly that day in December 1962. While I was opening up I saw Malcolm come in, carrying his tan briefcase that bore in gold letters the name, Malik El Shabazz." Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 21.

27. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 180.

28. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 181.

where Malcolm X gives an uncontroversial exegesis of their Arabic origin, the themes of revelation and gnosis kick in. Divine knowledge primarily revealed to Elijah Muhammad is not that of the “‘orthodox’ Muslims”. Malcolm X claims that this is simply because non-NOI Muslims lack a proper understanding of the name Muslim.<sup>29</sup>

It is therefore not enough to simply have familiarity with semantic meaning of “Muslim”, “Islam”, and by extension even “Allah”. Why not? God’s name cannot be properly known without its connection with the present as a decisive apocalyptic temporality, and the imminent judgment of the White world:<sup>30</sup>

Just as we believe in one God, whose proper name is Allah, we believe also that this one God has only one religion, the religion of Islam. We believe that we are living in the time of “prophecy fulfillment,” the time predicted by the ancient prophets of God, when this one God would use his one religion to establish one world here on earth – the world of Islam, or Muslim world [...] which only means: a world of universal brotherhood that will be based upon the principles of truth, freedom, justice, equality, righteousness, and peace.<sup>31</sup>

Full knowledge of God’s name (gnosis) is linked to the worlds of the present age and the coming world of justice. What is meant by the end of the world here? Malcolm X makes it clear that one should not think of this cosmological event in terms of the end of the earth, but rather as a particular world: a world among worlds:

There are many “worlds” here on this earth: the Buddhist world, Hindu world, Jewish world, Christian world – Capitalist world, Communist world, Socialist world – Eastern world and Western world – Oriental world and Occidental world – dark world and white world. Which of

---

29. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 182: “‘Muslim’ is an Arabic word, and it describes a person whose religion is Islam. A Muslim is one who practices complete submission and obedience to God’s will. Here in America the word ‘Muslim’ is westernized or anglicized and pronounced ‘Moslem’. Muslim and Moslem are actually the same word. The true believers in Allah call themselves Muslims, but the nonbelieving infidels refer to Muslims as Moslems or Muhammadans. Many of the weak, backsliding Muslims who come to this country have also adopted some of these same pronunciations coined for them by the infidels. But we don’t condemn these ‘orthodox’ Muslims, because the reward of the believer, as well as the chastisement of the nonbeliever and the backslider, come only from Allah. Allah is the only judge. He alone is master of this Day of Judgment in which we now live.”

30. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 184: “God has himself declared that no one shall escape the doom of this Western world, except those who accept Allah as God.”

31. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 183.

these many worlds has come to the end of its rope, the end of its time? Look around you at all of the signs and you will agree that it is the end of time for the Western world, the European world, the Christian world, the white world.<sup>32</sup>

This imminent end is an immanent event, in terms of the exhaustion of the actual abusive and violent power of the White, European, Christian colonizer: “As the white man loses his power to oppress and exploit the dark world, the white man’s own wealth (power or ‘world’) decreases.”<sup>33</sup> World is power, and the world of the white man consists of the power of colonial, Christian, and imperial oppression over the other worlds.

To know God and God’s name is made possible through a revelatory event given to Elijah Muhammad, revealing that it is intrinsically linked to the judgment and end of oppressive worlds.

### **Naming in the Muslim World**

Something radical occurred in Mecca with Malcolm X’s apocalyptic theology. When he became Malik, the gnosis of God’s apocalyptic vision was replaced by an “inaugurated eschatology”, where the Muslim can experience here-and-now the fruits of equality and justice. It is, therefore, necessary to speak of a different cosmological theology all-together.

After completing the *haji*, the Meccan epistle (April 1964) indicates that the imminent and immanent apocalyptic event is indefinitely delayed. Consider the following statement: “In the Muslim World, when one accepts Islam and ceases to be white or Negro, Islam recognizes all men as Men because the people here in Arabia believe that God is One [...] and that all our brothers and sisters is One Human Family.”<sup>34</sup>

What happens to the White world after Mecca? Is the missive of the discourse of worlds completely replaced by a new cosmology emphasizing the presence of the eschatological Muslim World? Malcolm X now states that faith in Allah “actually removed ‘white’ from their mind”, making a juxtaposition of White and non-White possible.<sup>35</sup> The epistle reflecting on the same experience even goes so far as to mention this as a possibility for America: “If white Americans could accept the religion of Islam, if they

---

32. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 191–192.

33. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, 192.

34. For a transcription, see Malcolm X, “Letter from Mecca”, <https://momentsintime.com/the-most-remarkable-revelatory-letter-ever-written-by-malcolm-x/>, accessed 2020-02-25.

35. For a more detailed history of Malcolm X’s weaving together of Black Nationalism and Islam, see Emin Poljarevic, “The Political Theology of Malcolm X”. For an analysis of the white/black antagonism, read through the political theological distinction of friend and enemy.

could accept the Oneness of God (Allah) they too could then sincerely accept the Oneness of Men, and cease to measure others always in terms of their ‘difference in color’.”<sup>36</sup>

Again, what does this mean in relation to the White world? Malcolm X’s Meccan approach to the problem of the White world, and the removal of “the ‘white’ from their mind”, seemingly shifts the tone to a less aggressive and more spiritual key. Yet, if the white is saved by Allah through the complete removal of whiteness, is this not a manner of merely paraphrasing the destruction previously described in “God’s Judgement of White America”, only now with a spiritual and possibly mystical emphasis? A gnostic element thus remains in the wake of Malcolm X’s Meccan experience, in the sense of pointing to the need for an ascetic spiritual disavowal of the world, for the White. For instance, can the power propelling the (White) world remain for the white American after the removal of psychic whiteness and its accompanying identity? Implicit in the experience of brotherhood in Mecca is still a refusal of a White world, albeit now harboured in a more universal theological framework.

After Mecca, the mission of the Muslim was thought of differently. It was now not driven by revealed gnosis of God’s name and the apocalyptic, immanent event. For El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the identity and common name of Muslim now contained the realization of an apocalyptic promise of racial justice, at least in terms of staking out a political vocation in “this” world. In a speech shortly after the Meccan epistle, from the University of Ghana (13 May 1964), this was made clear, as Malcolm X now focussed on the need for political action against the wider problems of democracy facing the Black minority residing in America. As victims of Americanism, “we are born in a country that stands up and represents itself as the leader of the Free World, and you still have to beg and crawl just to get a chance to drink a cup of coffee, then the condition is very deplorable indeed”.<sup>37</sup>

In the Ghana address, imperialism and (neo)colonialism was again named as primary problematic for “the Black man in America”,<sup>38</sup> but now its eschatological charge was seemingly removed by a focus on how human and

---

36. Malcolm X, “Letter from Mecca”.

37. For a transcription, see Malcolm X, “Malcolm X at University of Ghana (May 13, 1964)”, [http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/university-of-ghana-may-13-1964\\_1.html](http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/university-of-ghana-may-13-1964_1.html), accessed 2020-02-10.

38. Malcolm X, “Malcolm X at University of Ghana”: “If you are a citizen, you are free; if you are not a citizen, you are a slave. And the American government is afraid to admit that she never gave freedom to the Black man in America and won’t even admit that the Black man in America is not free, is not a citizen, and doesn’t have his rights. She skillfully camouflages it under these pretty terms of second-class citizenship. It’s colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism.”

civil rights are ignored. The American government is the principal antagonist in this scheme, more of a political enemy than an apocalyptic beast.

The vocation is to act for political recognition and human rights for the Black man living in America. This is structured on action from within a pre-established political order and to be distinguished from a refusal of that order. There is only one world, and the Black Muslim is called to political action by spreading the message of Islam and working for justice, on all levels of society.

### **Double Exile of the Black Muslim**

Malcolm X's so-called failure brings forth a fundamental problem of the world that any radical is forced to confront. How do you refuse the world and still find a way to survive the necropolitical order of the world? This is a problem central to the experience of Black radicalism, carried forth in the well-known slogan of the Black Panther Party: "Survival pending revolution." Malcolm X's relationship to his own Blackness and the relation of that Blackness to the World – European or Muslim – is not simply sidestepped when he begins to look to the wider Muslim world. We have seen how, with regard to the notion of the World, there remains a continuity of refusal in his rhetoric, regardless of its gnostic or more mainstream material. What seems clear to us after this analysis is the primacy of Malcolm X's blackness over his Muslimness and that the political-theological power of his work is carried in the radical challenge of that Blackness to the World, be it (post-)Christian or some other human-made political world to come.

While the reconciliation of his rhetoric with the mainstream of global Islam marked an important evolution in his thought, it is without a doubt that Malcolm X would have had to reckon with the ways in which the Islamist project today is one of world-making. As we can see in the aftermath of American and European neocolonialism in North Africa and the Middle East, Islamist groups have brought forth the resurgence of explicit anti-blackness and re-instituted slavery in increasingly racialized ways. The Black Muslim is a figure produced by a double exclusion: first from recognition in the (post-)Christian secular (racialized here as a global savage, as a Muslim Other) and then in terms of recognition as Human (racialized here as not White but also not Arab, not Savage and so not even able to be dispossessed of land).<sup>39</sup> To further understand this distinction, consider how such double racialization speaks to the work of world-making found in the

---

39. The name "global savage" is adapted from Frank B. Wilderson III's analytical differentiation of figures within the social ontology of the White world. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham, NC 2010. By no means does Wilderson – nor do we – support the underlying racism behind these terms.

secular project and the civilizing projects of hegemonic religious traditions. The figure of the Muslim in the West today is marked as a terrorist even as they approach Europe and America in the desperate position of the refugee. The Muslim is marked as an extreme threat to the secular project, Islam comes to stand as the irrational and fanatical form of religion par excellence. Yet religion, as one marker of humanity, is still denied to those who are Black. Anti-blackness among Arab Muslims in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East is well documented by fellow Muslims and anthropologists, so that the figure of the Black Muslim is marked as exiled from both the secular world and the religious world.<sup>40</sup>

The ideology of Islamism (taken here to name a disparate movement of resistance and antagonism to the [post-]Christian European world order) operates within a world-making grammar, even as it resists the colonial world. This is clear in theoretical projects that set out to think through a decolonial Islam, like that of Salman Sayyid's *Recalling the Caliphate*. Such a project is determined by the figure of politics and the promise of a future given by politics. So it comes as no surprise when we see Sayyid claiming that the Islamic venture is "not dissimilar" to the Western enterprise of crafting a common humanity.<sup>41</sup> Such a humancrafting is part and parcel of a political project – for which Sayyid largely accepts Schmitt's definition as concerning the distinction between friend and enemy – and so this humancraft takes place via divisions of friend and enemy, of killable and not, of enslaveable and human. How are we to reconcile the claim that overturning the world

---

40. Much of the academic literature on this topic focusses upon the ways it plays out between "immigrant Islam" and "indigenous Islam" (terms used by Sherman Jackson to name South East Asian and Middle Eastern Muslim immigrants to the United States and Blackamerican Muslims, respectively). In this vein Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, New York 2016, traces how Blackness is rendered "un-Islamic" in the US context. Chanfi Ahmed, *AfroMecca in History: African Societies, Anti-Black Racism, and Teaching in al-Haram Mosque in Mecca*, Newcastle 2019, gives historical attention to the contemporary use of *abd* (Arabic for "slave") to refer to black-skinned peoples common throughout North Africa and the Middle East. For a more journalistic account, see Michael Muhammad Knight, *Journey to the End of Islam*, Berkeley, CA 2009, which contains details of his own experience of witnessing anti-Blackness while travelling in Muslim-majority countries and during his *hajj*. A number of online venues also host such reflections. See Fatima Dinec, "Anti-Blackness in the Ummah", <http://between-borders.com/anti-blackness-in-the-ummah/>, accessed 2020-02-10; Eman, "Here's One Muslim Girl's Take on Racism in the Ummah: It Does Exist", <https://muslimgirl.com/racism-in-the-ummah/>, accessed 2020-02-10; The Culture Critic, "Let's Talk: Anti-Blackness in the Muslim Ummah", <https://www.amaliah.com/post/31317/lets-talk-anti-blackness-muslim-ummah>, accessed 2020-02-10; Nabil Abdulrashid, "Sudan & Acknowledging Anti-Blackness in the Ummah", <https://blackdawahnetwork.com/2019/06/sudan-acknowledging-anti-blackness-in-the-ummah/>, accessed 2020-02-10.

41. Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and World Order*, New York 2014, 23.

order of Europe is to be a political project (necessarily operating on a decisional basis of separating friend from enemy) with the generic declaration that “Islam is meant for all”?<sup>42</sup>

The lesson of Malcolm X’s so-called failure is that there is no reconciliation between this form of politics and true justice. Here we find ourselves caught in the bind between politics built around distinctions and a form of ethics and justice that abolishes those distinctions, like that given in Malcolm X’s eschatological vision that abolishes the White world as such. Another way to speak about this philosophically is to say that we move from an existence rooted in the Worldly philosophy of Being and move towards the Worldless existence of Oneness. A Muslim notion of Oneness that Malcolm X draws upon as the political-theological name for the destruction of the White world in his later speeches. Malcolm X’s irreconcilable Blackness points to the only true universality within a theological-political World built upon distinctions. One must begin with the oppressed and excluded term, not as a positive identity, but as the abolition of those identities, as the wiping away of all worldly names. As the standing forth of one without all that comes with a name, be it land, kin, or even respect. Precisely because, unlike global Islamism which says “everyone must become Muslim”, Black Islam points to the absolute deracination of Oneness and says every White must become Muslim and every Muslim must become Black.<sup>43</sup> ▲

#### SUMMARY

In this paper, we look at the terrain of Malcolm X’s “failed rhetoric” as producing an apocalyptic refusal of world, and world making. This refusal finds its intensity from a distinct gnostic calculus, driving Malcolm X’s political theology of names and worlds, seen in his oratory from the years 1962–1964. First, Malcolm X’s nominal history is discussed in relation to the violence of naming and political theology. Then, by turning to the speech “Black Man’s History” (1962), we look at fundamental aspects

---

42. Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 51.

43. We will expand upon the intentionally provocative theoretical claims of our conclusion in a forthcoming expanded version of this essay. One potential criticism of our claim here is that we are being too hyperbolic, since global Islamism does not demand the conversion of everyone even as it does call for a social and political order that follows Divine commands. Everyone does not have to become a Muslim in the sense of belonging to that community, but a central claim of our criticism of Sayyid and Islamism generally is that it is a world-building project kin to the Christian-secular world-building project, where there are differences allowed within the overarching hegemony of a single form of power. So global Islamism does not require conversion – after all the Caliphate still needs its worldly tax earnings through higher taxes placed upon those who have not converted – but the name Muslim comes to overdetermine all other names while relying upon the difference created by the existence of those names to provide the foundation of the worldly name “Muslim”.

of his gnostic theology of names and worlds. As we turn to the speech "God's Judgment of White America" (1963), a gnostic calculus is seen as intrinsically bound to the names of Muslim and Allah, and to refusal of the (White) World. With Malcolm X's *hajj* experience, best seen in the "Letter from Mecca" (1964), the rhetorical landscape of worlds shift into a discourse of a single Muslim World. As Malcolm X's rhetorical mood shifts from a gnostic indicative, of displaying and exemplifying the imminent end of worlds, into the imperative of political action for Black Muslims in the World, are fundamental elements of the 1962–1963 oratory transposed into a different key, or simply removed? We argue that much of Malcolm X's gnostic tendencies remain in the Meccan epistle, in terms of an unbending refusal of oppressive Whiteness. With the concept of being "double Muslim" of the Black Muslims, we finally turn to Salman Sayyid's *Recalling the Caliphate* in order to think a lasting problematic of the failure of Malcolm X's apocalyptic refusal of the world.