

Malcolm X - (1925 - 1965)

"I am and always will be a Muslim. My religion is Islam." - Malcolm X

Early Life

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska. His mother, Louis Norton Little, was a homemaker occupied with the family's eight children. His father, Earl Little, was an outspoken Baptist minister and avid supporter of Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. Earl's civil rights activism prompted death threats from the white supremacist organization Black Legion, forcing the family to relocate twice before Malcolm's fourth birthday. Regardless of the Little's efforts to elude the Legion, in 1929 their Lansing, Michigan home was burned to the ground, and two years later Earl's mutilated body was found lying across the town's trolley tracks when Malcolm was only six. Louise had an emotional breakdown several years after the death of her husband and was committed to a mental institution. Her children were split up amongst various foster homes and orphanages.

Malcolm was a smart, focused student and graduated from junior high at the top of his class. However, when a favorite teacher told Malcolm his dream of becoming a lawyer was "no realistic goal for a nigger," Malcolm lost interest in school and eventually dropped out at the age of fifteen. Learning the ways of the streets, Malcolm became acquainted with hoodlums, thieves, dope peddlers, and pimps. Convicted of burglary at twenty, he remained in prison until the age of twenty-seven. During his prison stay he attempted to educate himself. In addition, during his period in prison he learned about and joined the Nation of Islam, studying the teachings of Elijah Muhammed fully. He was released, a changed man, in 1952.

The 'Nation of Islam'

Upon his release, Malcolm went to Detroit, joined the daily activities of the sect, and was given instruction by Elijah Muhammad himself. Malcolm's personal commitment helped build the organization nation-wide, while making him an international figure. He was interviewed on major television programs and by magazines, and spoke across the country at various universities and other forums. His power was in his words, which so vividly described the plight of blacks and vehemently incriminated whites. When a white person referred to the fact that some Southern university had enrolled black freshmen without bayonets, Malcolm reacted with scorn: When I "slipped," the program host would leap on the bait: "Ahhh! Indeed, Mr. Malcolm X -- you can't deny that's an advance for your race!" I'd jerk the pole then. "I can't turn around without hearing about some 'civil rights advance'! White people seem to think the black man ought to be shouting 'hallelujah'! Four hundred years the white man has had his foot-long knife in the black man's back -- and now the white man starts to wiggle the knife out, maybe six inches! The black man's supposed to be grateful? Why, if the white man jerked the knife out, it's still going to leave a scar!"

Although Malcolm's words often stung with the injustices against blacks in America, the equally racist views of the Nation of Islam kept him from accepting any whites as sincere or capable of helping the situation. For twelve years he preached that the white man was the devil and the "Honorable Elijah Muhammad" was God's messenger. Unfortunately, most images of Malcolm today focus on this period of his life, although the transformation he was about to undergo would give him a completely different, and more important, message for the American people.

The Change to True Islam

On March 12, 1964, impelled by internal jealousy within the Nation of Islam and revelations of Elijah Muhammad's sexual immorality, Malcolm left the Nation of Islam with the intention of starting his own organization:

I feel like a man who has been asleep somewhat and under someone else's control. I feel what I'm thinking and saying now is for myself. Before, it was for and by guidance of another, now I think Malcolm was thirty-eight years old when he left Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Reflecting on reflects that occurred prior to leaving, he said:

At one or another college or university, usually in the informal gatherings after I had spoken, perhaps a dozen generally white-complexioned people would come up to me, identifying themselves as Arabian, Middle Eastern or North African Muslims who happened to be visiting, studying, or living in the United States. They had said to me that, my white-indicting statements notwithstanding, they felt I was sincere in considering myself a Muslim -- and they felt if I was exposed to what they always called "true Islam," I would "understand it, and embrace it." Automatically, as a follower of Elijah, I had bridled whenever this was said. But in the privacy of my own thoughts after several of these experiences, I did question myself: if one was sincere in professing a religion, why should he balk at broadening his knowledge of that religion?

Those orthodox Muslims whom I had met, one after another, had urged me to meet and talk with a Dr. Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi. Then one day Dr. Shawarbi and I were introduced by a newspaperman. He was cordial. He said he had followed me in the press; I said I had been told of him, and we talked for fifteen or twenty minutes. We both had to leave to make appointments we had, when he dropped on me something whose logic never would get out of my head. He said, "No man has believed perfectly until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."

The Effect of the Pilgrimage

Malcolm further continues about the Hajj: The pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, is a religious obligation that every orthodox Muslim fulfills, if able, at least once in his or her lifetime. The Holy Quran says it, "Pilgrimage to the House [of God built by the prophet Abraham] is a duty men owe to God; those who are able, make the journey." (3:97)

Allah said: "And proclaim the pilgrimage among men; they will come to you on foot and upon each lean camel, they will come from every deep ravine" (22:27).

Every one of the thousands at the airport, about to leave for Jeddah, was dressed this way. You could be a king or a peasant and no one would know. Some powerful personages, who were discreetly pointed out to me, had on the same thing I had on. Once thus dressed, we all had begun intermittently calling out "Labbayka! (Allahumma) Labbayka!" (Here I come, O Lord!) Packed in the plane were white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair -- all together, brothers! All honoring the same God, all in turn giving equal honor to each other.

That is when I first began to reappraise the "white man." It was when I first began to perceive that "white man," as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, "white man" meant specific attitudes and actions toward the

black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been. That morning was the start of a radical alteration in my whole outlook about "white" men. There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white...America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white -- but the "white" attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.

Malcolm's New Vision of America

Each hour here in the Holy Land enables me to have greater spiritual insights into what is happening in America between black and white. The American Negro never can be blamed for his racial animosities -- he is only reacting to four hundred years of the conscious racism of the American whites. But as racism leads America up the suicide path I do believe, from the experiences that I have had with them, that the whites of the younger generation, in the colleges and universities, will see the handwriting on the wall and many of them will turn to the spiritual path of truth -- the only way left to America to ward off the disaster that racism inevitably must lead to.

I believe that God now is giving the world's so-called 'Christian' white society its last opportunity to repent and atone for the crimes of exploiting and enslaving the world's non-white peoples. It is exactly as when God gave Pharaoh a chance to repent. But Pharaoh persisted in his refusal to give justice to those who he oppressed. And, we know, God finally destroyed Pharaoh.

I will never forget the dinner at the Azzam home with Dr. Azzam. The more we talked, the more his vast reservoir of knowledge and its variety seemed unlimited. He spoke of the racial lineage of the descendants of Muhammad (PBUH) the Prophet, and he showed how they were both black and white. He also pointed out how color, and the problems of color which exist in the Muslim world, exist only where, and to the extent that, that area of the Muslim world has been influenced by the West. He said that if one encountered any differences based on attitude toward color, this directly reflected the degree of Western influence.

The Oneness of Man Under One God

It was during his pilgrimage that he began to write some letters to his loyal assistants at the newly formed Muslim Mosque in Harlem. He asked that his letter be duplicated and distributed to the press:

Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this ancient Holy Land, the House of Abraham, Muhammad, and all the other Prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors.

You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to

toss aside some of my previous conclusions. This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have always been a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth.

During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) -- while praying to the same God -- with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the "white" Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.

We were truly all the same (brothers) -- because their belief in one God had removed the "white" from their minds, the 'white' from their behavior, and the 'white' from their attitude. I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man -- and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their "differences" in color.

With racism plaguing America like an incurable cancer, the so-called "Christian" white American heart should be more receptive to a proven solution to such a destructive problem. Perhaps it could be in time to save America from imminent disaster -- the same destruction brought upon Germany by racism that eventually destroyed the Germans themselves.

They asked me what about the Hajj had impressed me the most. . . . I said, "The brotherhood! The people of all races, color, from all over the world coming together as one! It has proved to me the power of the One God. . . . All ate as one, and slept as one. Everything about the pilgrimage atmosphere accented the Oneness of Man under One God.

Malcolm returned from the pilgrimage as El-Hajj Malik al-Shabazz. He was afire with new spiritual insight. For him, the struggle had evolved from the civil rights struggle of a nationalist to the human rights struggle of an internationalist and humanitarian.

After the Pilgrimage

White reporters and others were eager to learn about El-Hajj Malik's newly-formed opinions concerning themselves. They hardly believed that the man who had preached against them for so many years could suddenly turn around and call them brothers. To these people El-Hajj Malik had this to say:

You're asking me "Didn't you say that now you accept white men as brothers?" Well, my answer is that in the Muslim world, I saw, I felt, and I wrote home how my thinking was broadened! Just as I wrote, I shared true, brotherly love with many white-complexioned Muslims who never gave a single thought to the race, or to the complexion, of another Muslim.

My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In two weeks in the 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! Worshipping 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 will never 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 black man. The true Islam has shown me that a blanket indictment of all white people is as wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks.

To the blacks who increasingly looked to him as a leader, El-Hajj Malik preached a new message, quite the opposite of what he had been preaching as a minister in the Nation of Islam:

True Islam taught me that it takes all of the religious, political, economic, psychological, and racial ingredients, or characteristics, to make the Human Family and the Human Society complete. Since I learned the truth in Mecca, my dearest friends have come to include all kinds -- some Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, and even atheists! I have friends who are called capitalists, Socialists, and Communists! Some of my friends are moderates, conservatives, extremists -- some are even Uncle Toms! My friends today are black, brown, red, yellow, and white!

I said to my Harlem street audiences that only when mankind would submit to the One God who created all -- only then would mankind even approach the "peace" of which so much talk could be heard...but toward which so little action was seen.

Too Dangerous to Last

El-Hajj Malik's new universalistic message was the U.S. establishment's worst nightmare. Not only was he appealing to the black masses, but to intellectuals of all races and colors. Now he was consistently demonized by the press as "advocating violence" and being "militant," although in actuality he and Dr. Martin Luther King were moving closer together in outlook:

The goal has always been the same, with the approaches to it as different as mine and Dr. Martin Luther King's non-violent marching, that dramatizes the brutality and the evil of the white man against defenseless blacks. And in the racial climate of this country today, it is anybody's guess which of the "extremes" in approach to the black man's problems might personally meet a fatal catastrophe first -- "non-violent" Dr. King, or so-called "violent" me."

El-Hajj Malik knew full well that he was a target of many groups. In spite of this, he was never afraid to say what he had to say when he had to say it. As a sort of epitaph at the end of his autobiography, he says:

I know that societies often have killed the people who have helped to change those societies. And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help to destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America -- then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine.

The Legacy of Malcolm X

Although El-Hajj Malik knew that he was a target for assassination, he accepted this fact without requesting police protection. On February 21, 1965, while preparing to give a speech at a New York hotel, he was shot by three black men. He was three months short of forty, the age of maturity according to the Qur'an. While it is clear that the Nation of Islam had something to do with the assassination, many people believe there was more than one organization involved. The FBI, known for its anti-black movement tendency, has been suggested as an accomplice. We may never know for sure who was behind El-Hajj Malik's murder, or, for that matter, the murder of other national leaders in the early 1960s.

Malcolm X's life has affected Americans in many important ways. His conversion must have had an influence on Elijah Muhammad's son, Wallace Muhammad, who, after his father's death, led the Nation of Islam's followers into orthodox Islam. African-Americans' interest in their Islamic roots has flourished since El-Hajj Malik's death. Alex Haley, who wrote Malcolm's autobiography, later wrote the epic Roots about an African Muslim family's experience with slavery. More and more African-Americans are becoming Muslim, adopting Muslim names, or exploring African culture. Interest in Malcolm X has seen a surge recently due to Spike Lee's movie, X. El-Hajj Malik is a source of pride for African-Americans, Muslims, and Americans in general. His message is simple and clear: I am not a racist in any form whatever. I don't believe in any form of racism. I don't believe in any form of discrimination or segregation. I believe in Islam. I am a Muslim.