The Political Theology of Malcolm X: between human dignity and returning the gaze

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This article makes a limited attempt to explain a part of the reason why Malcolm X's radical activism for freedom, justice, and equality presumably resonates with a large number of disempowered people around the world today. The analysis presented herein is based on a modified understanding of political theology that captures some of the appeal of Malcolm X's message and his pursuit of human dignity. Two components of his political theology stick out as arguably the most relevant for a number of contemporary civil rights movements in a wide range of places around the world. One is the distinction between friends and enemies based on people's support for or opposition to a collective pursuit of human dignity, oftentimes expressed as human rights, religious freedoms, economic justice, and so on. The other component is the returning-the-gaze argument, which points towards Malcolm X's ability to articulate an unapologetic and empowering indictment of the majority society and its overbearing political, cultural, and economic power structures. This argument represents a moral and ethical effort to gain human dignity in a socio-political context perceptibly premised on repression and inequality. The underlying political theological argument is thus found in Malcolm X's empowerment discourse. This discourse is today oftentimes decontextualized, which adds to its resonance among the global Muslim youth who seek inspiration for mobilization against apparent injustices beyond the traditional voices, and in a variety of socio-political, linguistic, and cultural contexts.
Malcolm Little excelled in junior high school but dropped out after a white teacher told him that practicing law, his aspiration at the time, was “no realistic goal for a nigger.”[17] Later Malcolm X recalled feeling that the white world offered no place for a career-oriented black man, regardless of talent.[17] The American public first became aware of Malcolm X in 1957, after Hinton Johnson,[G] a Nation of Islam member, was beaten by two New York City police officers.[76][77] On April 26, Johnson and two other passersby—also Nation of Islam members—saw the officers beating an African-American man with nightsticks.[76] When they attempted to intervene, shouting Malcolm X’s expressed beliefs changed substantially over time. As a spokesman for the Nation of Islam he taught black supremacy and advocated separation of black and white Americans—a stark contrast with the civil rights movement’s emphasis on integration. After breaking with the Nation of Islam in 1964, saying of his association with it, “I was a zombie then pointed in a certain direction and told to march” and becoming a Sunni Muslim, he disavowed racism and expressed willingness to work with civil rights leaders, though still emphasizing black self-determination and s As Malcolm X’s national prominence grew, so did a rift between him and Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm X far overshadowed his mentor in the public sphere. He also grew disillusioned by Elijah Muhammad’s scandalous personal behavior; the Messenger fathered several children through affairs with his secretaries. The political philosophy of black nationalism only means that the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community. The time when white people can come in our community and get us to vote for them so that they can be our political leaders and tell us what to do and what not to do is long gone. [applause].