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Has X Marked the Spot or Not?

Islam in America Since the Assassination of Brother Malcolm

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Introduction: The Question of the "X" Factor

Today marks the 55th anniversary of the assassination of brother Malcolm X. A year before his death, he left the Nation of Islam and embarked on a global and spiritual journey, only to locate himself within orthodox Islam and unite people of color around a common cause. During his pilgrimage to Mecca when he performed the Hajj in 1964, he found a state of peace and hope in the midst of Islamic fellowship with many men of various colors, languages, and nationalities, all united in their devotion to God, not man. For his beloved wife, Dr. Betty Shabazz, who performed the pilgrimage within a few weeks after her husband's assassination, we learn that her experience during the Hajj was different. In identifying with Hajar, the wife of Prophet Abraham (pbuh), Dr. Shabazz experienced the perseverance of faith through suffering, how to salvage endurance through

loss, and how to embrace solitude within the crowd. We often speak of Malcolm's transformative journey but are silent about Dr. Betty's, however, it is through reflecting on both their journeys and legacies that we come to better conceptualize them and what they both lived and died for. The question then is, how well do we know our teachings? Has "X" marked the spot for us or has it simply retained its algebraic designation as an unknown variable, thereby rendering brother Malcolm's and Dr. Betty's legacies irrelevant for us? This inquiry is devoted to initiating a conversation about assessing what they have left behind, as well as understanding our current condition in light of their legacies.

Part One: The Shabazz Legacy: The Common Cause of American Islam

In reflecting on their legacies, we see that the Shabazz's¹ left our community in my view with a common cause for American Islam that was constructed on three pillars: 1.) the situating of faith at the intersection of resistance with submission; 2.) the reorienting of a tension between being religious and being worldly; 3.) the domestication of Islam framed by distinctly Black American experiences and perspectives.

Regarding the initial pillar, the Shabazz legacy leaves us with the understanding that faith is not the passive acceptance of a condition of

¹ I shall from here on use the term "The Shabazz's" when referring to both brother Malcolm and Dr. Betty collectively, while employing their names when my intent is to refer to them individually.

oppression and injustice but the active resistance of it. Submission is directed towards the help, support, and outcomes that Allah brings about. When a questioner once asked brother Malcolm who would protect him, he replied, "Allah will protect me!" At the same time, he continued to persist in speaking truth to power and trying to free his people from ideological enslavement. Faith therefore is employed by the believer to propel them forward in resistance while rooting them firmly in a conscious awareness that Allah is always with one – and if Allah is with one, no other company is necessary. This is consistent with the Quranic and Prophetic teachings, and it is sufficient to recall the incident when the Prophet (pbuh) and his companion Abu Bakr fled Makkah and sought refuge in the cave. The Quran records the most important lesson of the incident:

"Even if you do not help the Prophet, God helped him when the disbelievers drove him out: when the two of them were in the cave, he said to his companion, 'Do not worry, God is with us, and God sent His calm down to him, aided with forces invisible to you, and brought down the disbelievers plan. God's plan is higher: God is almighty and wise.'"²

The Quran also mentions how Prophet Moses (pbuh) adopted the same approach:

² Quran 9:40.

“Moses’ followers said, ‘We shall definitely be caught.’ Moses said, ‘No. My Lord is with me: He will guide me.’”³

The sole difference being that in the incident with Prophet Moses (pbuh), he affirmed his faithful resistance by affirming God being with him, whereas the in the incident with the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), he affirmed his faithful resistance by affirming God being with us. The Moses paradigm of faith as resistance was restricted to him alone while the Muhammadan paradigm of faith as resistance was extended beyond him, to his community also. If we externally are in a state of submission, internally we protest thru our faith and conviction in Allah Most High. Put differently, we take the means, by any means necessary, to change our environments, but in doing so, we are to rely solely on Allah to bring forth the fruits of those means. This latter point stems from brother Malcolm’s shift from reliance on a person to reliance upon the Divine. Brother Malcolm reinterpreted the significance of where Black self-esteem should be placed. He had seen and experienced the harm of misplaced esteem on leaders who were in the end, fallible. Attachment to the ideologies of human beings not only can be dangerous, but also inhibiting of true potential. He was eloquent about this observation ironically enough in Mecca, a telling fact that only through physical, mental, and

³ Quran 26:62.

spiritual liberation can a person truly realize their human potential. Malcolm explains himself that:

In Mecca too, I had played back for myself the twelve years I had spent with Elijah Muhammad as if it were a motion picture. I guess it would be impossible for anyone ever to realize fully how complete was my belief in Elijah Muhammad. I believed in him not only as a leader in the ordinary human sense, but also I believed in him as divine leader. I believed he had no human weaknesses or faults, and that, therefore, he could make no mistakes and that he could do no wrong. There...I realized how very dangerous it is for people to hold any human being in such esteem, especially to consider anyone some sort of 'divinely guided' and 'protected' person.⁴

Malcolm's entire perspective and approach as a founder of American Islam may be understood as containing both a universal and a particular element. The universal element according to him was that Islam is the single most effective source of spiritual guidance for all people in all places in all times. It's universally applicable to all. The particular component to his thought is that each individual person must develop their sense of self-worth because the reality is that, in the words of Malcolm:

⁴ Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 372-373.

Here in America we're in a society that doesn't practice brotherhood. It doesn't practice what it preaches. It preaches brotherhood, but doesn't practice brotherhood...We realize that we have to fight against the evils of a society that has failed to produce brotherhood for every member of that society. This in no way means that we're anti-white, anti-blue, anti-green or anti-yellow. We're anti-wrong. We're anti-discrimination. We're anti-segregation. We're against anybody who wants to practice some form of segregation or discrimination against us because we don't happen to be a color that's acceptable to you. We believe in fighting that.⁵

The second pillar involves reconciling the apparent tension between religion and the nature of the world, a phenomenon that philosophers and theologians refer to as theodicy. Here the Shabazz legacy leaves us with a different take on how to reconcile with injustice and evil. The purpose of religion is not to transcend the world but to traverse it. Islam therefore teaches how to get through the world but not to be worldly; how to be in the world but not have the world in us. Suffering, oppression, and exploitation are evil and, as people of faith, we are dutybound to do what we can to alleviate suffering. Brother Malcolm specifically pointed out that as a matter of faith, we must believe that Islam combines the best political, social,

⁵ Malcolm X, *The Final Speeches* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 168 (speech entitled: *Not Just An American Problem, but a World Problem*, Corn Hill Methodist Church, Rochester, February 16, 1965).

economic, and philosophical teachings in the world to solve our human problems! Religious expression occurs and spirituality is cultivated in accordance with the degree of work that a person is engaged in that contributed to the alleviation of suffering. In order to effectively accomplish this, institutions are needed that created spaces which trained and developed American Muslims for this. And it is here where the third pillar of the common cause emerges: the domestication of Islam in America.

This domestication of Islam would involve rendering Islam an indigenous part of the American experience, and in order to accomplish that, it would need to be framed by distinctly African American experiences and perspectives. These experiences and perspective would be urban, protest-oriented in nature, and possess a highly sensitive, allergic reaction to racism and injustice everywhere.

In order to accomplish this domestication, there were two fronts required development and attention: the first front was the general theoretical work on what Islam and Muslims in America, were going to look like as a communal whole. The second front involved identifying specific, targeted needs related to uplifting and developing a sense of self-worth and dignity, and developing institutions to accomplish that task, so that each individual American Muslim could reach their full potential; for if we abandoned the development of our community to other apparatuses and institutions that did not have our best interest at heart, we would not only

lose out on achieving our own potential but instead we would become subjugated to the interests of others, divided and broken by factionalism amongst ourselves.

As for the first front, brother Malcolm theorized six principles that marked the contours of what Islam in America should look like. And for brother Malcolm, the proper site for the development of these principles was the mosque. The first of these six principles is sincerity of intention and motives, for the Prophet (pbuh) said, "All actions are governed by their intentions". Sincerity of intention was to be one of the defining characteristics of Islam here. The harm of hypocrisy has arguably become far too common today. The Shabazz's did not leave what I call the "*insha-Allah*-syndrome"⁶ as a legacy for us. If we commit to something, we should keep to it; when we give our word, we should abide by it. The second principle is the significance of learning and maintaining the prayer, in both form and content. Prayer was about both ritual and reform; both penitence and protest; situated in both the private and public sphere. The focus on prayer was not meant to reduce Islam to mere rituals but was to teach the community that religious reform emerges through persistent knocking at the gate of the Merciful One, a reminder of who we truly are devoted to. The third principle outlined by brother Malcolm was the centrality of education for the purpose of modernizing the methods of propagating and explaining

⁶ Meaning, "God-willing, I'll be there!"

what Islam is. It was clear that for him, the current methods were not only outdated but required creative ingenuity on our part. The Quran implores us to, "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way and who is rightly guided."⁷ Fourth was the elimination of all forms of coercive mechanism from our Islamic practice. Recall the Quranic verse, "There is no compulsion in religion.: true guidance has become distinct from error".⁸ Brother Malcolm said that Islam was made easy and therefore, ensuring that coercive cultural elements that were applied to Islam from abroad did not become rooted here was important for facilitating and reaffirming human dignity. The fifth principle was displaying a proper balance and harmony between material and spiritual progress. The key part here which strikes me is "display of balance", for far too often are we pulled into other forms of display that situate us on either the extreme of self-righteousness or personal glory. Brother Malcolm here was calling for us demonstrate to the world that the American Muslim community possessed wealth but was not possessed by wealth. Here we are reminded of the Prophetic hadith, "How wretched is the slave of a dinar or dirham or piece of clothing!" The final principle is the importance of emphasizing the fellowship and equality of all people. Brother Malcolm informed us that it was not

⁷ Quran 16:125.

⁸ Quran 2:256.

enough to talk brotherhood and sisterhood but that we must practice it. Far too often, we do not.

Regarding the second front, brother Malcolm posited three aspects there were critical for developing ourselves properly through effective and meaningful communal engagement: 1.) that we should adopt a human rights-focus, not just civil rights; 2.) that we should use political action for good and this means the removal of injustice; 3.) and that we needed to develop our own social, economic, political, and philosophical orientation that emerged from mining the landscape of Islam. To summarize differently, three reforms were needed: reform of communal interaction; reform of political action; and reform of our understanding of Islam.

We see a complimentary gift bequeathed to us in the legacy of Dr. Betty, for she is representative of Black American Muslim women's struggle for survival in the American context. And in doing so, what emerged from her life and leadership was that Black American Muslim women don't just struggle against macro-issues of suffering related to social justice and racial oppression, but they also must struggle for personal, individual survival and inclusion in an often cruel and selfish world. The struggle for Black American Muslim women's empowerment lies at the heart of Dr. Betty's story and legacy. From her story, we see how Islam became empowering for Black women. She rose from the death of her husband on her own, through her own journey in strengthening her faith and conviction and her contribution to

American Islam is just that. She was a pioneer in demonstrating that Islam can empower individually (not just collectively), regardless of gender or condition, by Islam's teaching a person how to engage with the world despite the desire to escape it, and by using rituals in Islam to fashion empowerment. Hajar's story comes to life through the Dr. Betty's Hajj as an action-oriented plan for the embodiment of struggle coming to an end. Ritual no longer became ritualistic, routinized. For Dr. Betty, it was instrumental for inspiration and light in times of darkness. This action of reading and interpreting the pillars of Islam through the perspective of engagement with the world and surviving the world, became paradigmatic in the Black American Muslim community, and specifically for Black women.

Part Two: Have We Become Post-Malcolm Muslims and Post-Betty Believers?

In light of the Shabazz legacy as articulated above, and in light of the current condition of American Muslim communities (and especially Black American Muslims), I find myself asking if we have become post-Malcolm Muslims and post-Betty believers? The question is meant to interrogate the nature of our current condition as American Muslims. Is "post-Shabazzianism" post-Shabazzian in the way that post-modernism is post-modern? In other words, are we to think of ourselves in simple, linear historical terms, as being merely chronologically after brother Malcolm and Dr. Betty or have we entered an era of a dialectical relationship with Brother

Malcolm where being post-Malcolm may be more analogous to being anti-Malcolm?

If we examine the general state of affairs of American Muslims, we find that our priorities have greatly shifted away from the Shabazz legacy. First, our focus is overwhelmingly civil rights oriented. Perhaps justifiably so, since the two decades since 9/11 may be characterized as the age of anti-Muslim bigotry. The criminalization of American Muslims has indeed been combated thru civil rights protections and greater litigation. However, I would posit that this approach has rendered the overall agenda of the American Muslim community an overwhelmingly suburban, middle class-focused agenda. This change of the "qibla" if you will has certainly contributed to losing sight of our legacy. Brother Malcolm's project was certainly universal in one manner but particularly urban, working class, and poor from another. The plight of the domestic poor has become dislocated away from the American Muslim consciousness. Along with this, the four critical diseases of our country (systemic racism, mass poverty, mass incarceration, and militarism) are increasingly not addressed by American Muslim leadership.

Brother Malcolm's warning about the inadequacy of civil rights was also articulated by Dr. King who, out of concern for the plight of the working class, launched the Memphis sanitation workers strike. Black civil rights

leaders in general kept one eye on the middle class and another on the working class and poor, but not so with the American Muslim community today, which brings me to the second point: reform of political engagement and involvement.

Brother Malcolm felt that political involvement must be oriented solely towards producing goodness and wellbeing and by this he meant eliminating injustice. The American Muslim community has not put forth an agenda regarding what constitutes injustice and certainly has not held Muslim elected officials (local or national) accountable for meeting that standard. More importantly I would argue that, politically speaking, we have not put forth any standard or vision for any Muslim elected official to even consider. As American Muslims, we aren't automatically Democrats nor Republicans. In fact, there is no sacred text that enjoins us to participate in any political process. Standing for what's right and forbidding what's wrong does not always nor essentially require political engagement. One does not have to political to be moral. But only the narrow-minded seem to make a habit of restricting God's wisdom and injunctions. When we engage politically, it should be with a distinct purpose and for a common cause. Some people tend to suffer from a radical "everyone for themselves" syndrome and think that just by being Muslim, by osmosis, we will achieve victory. I have seen many successful endeavors and spoken to many prominent and good people.

I have never seen, read about, or heard about anyone who has ever been successful at anything without a plan and goal.

We are certainly post-Malcolm Muslims and post-Betty believers in both the chronological and dialectical sense. But the real question is who are we and what do we stand for? If we buried Malcolm coterminous with the burial of Muhammad Ali or earlier with Dr. Betty even, then what have we resurrected in place of them? Who have become our new visionaries and exemplars in America? If "X" no longer marks the spot for us, then what are we targeting and aiming for? Or is it that we ourselves, our personal desires, our egos, have become the new "X" – constantly open to change and vulnerable to being fashioned by whatever suits us and appeals to our whims? Put differently, where are we going exactly as American Muslims and what are we doing here? Are we simply about responding to crisis tactically or are we trying to think strategically about our existence here and what should be doing?

Part Three: Towards (Re)Forming a Common Cause of American Islam

If we return to the three parts of the common cause of American Islam, we are reminded that they are reform of community, reform of political engagement, and reform of our understanding of what Islam is. If we consent, and that indeed is a big "if", but if we do consent, that this is

what our agenda and vision should be – as we reflect on what 55 years post-Malcolm has meant for us – then I posit the following as a blueprint for a spirited, intellectual discourse on where we are headed and what we are supposed to do here and now. What would an American Islamic Civilization look like and what are some initial ingredients based upon the Shabazz legacy?

a.) **Courage**

A prominent American Muslim once said that “half of our challenge is courage. Islam has no use for cowards.” We must take courageous, but not compromising, stands as a community. Our default should be standing up when and where others are sitting down. But the manner and quality of our stance, when we stand, must be different from others. Courage takes conviction and we must ask ourselves whether we truly believe and accept the virtuous and standards that Islam has for us or whether we just want to believe in them but haven’t really gotten there yet? We must be honest with ourselves in this regard. If the answer is the latter, then we have internal work to do regarding enhancing the certainty of our faith. But if it is the former then we must decide where should we devote the focus our energy and time. Courage involves mustering the strength to act in the face of pain, fear, uncertainty, or when the odds are stacked against you. It’s the “Badr-moment” of the believers, to invoke the first confrontation and battle of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The odds were stacked against the early

Muslims, but their courage and conviction enabled them to witness that Allah was with them – as a community, not just as individuals. We need more courage and conviction, not more conferences and committees.

b.) Generational Thinking

What good is examining the past unless it is to give meaning to the present in order to prepare to fashion the future? If we don't keep the past before us, then why think about the future? This has been our greatest challenge. We simply do not think trans-generationally – to our own demise unfortunately. The proof of this is the absence of a communal vision. Multiple competing visions are better than no vision. Brother Malcolm and Dr. Betty's legacy is still extremely relevant for American Muslims in general. We must reclaim something of that greatness in hopes of there being a contagion in there, somewhere, that just might become viral and allow us to quarantine the worst of ourselves in favor of unleashing the greatest potential we have to offer as American Muslims. But to do this, we must learn to think and operate with a profound sense of obligation to later generations – both Muslim and not.

c.) Character

Character is a distinct quality that uniquely defines us. Far too often, we find ourselves disliking one another. We are not kind to one another; often

jealous of each other; slow to help one another; quick to condemn one another. We close our doors, metaphorically speaking, to each other and open them wide to others more wealthy or prosperous; we prefer masks too often though we criticize the Klan for wearing a white sheet. If there is one indisputable fact about the "X" factor, it is character! The Shabazz's legacy was a legacy of great character and selfless giving. If this alone were the goal of our community, what a goal it would be! Too often we focus on ritual worship but pass a neglectful eye over character development. Too often we forget our teachings in favor of wanting to be retweeted. Too often we instrumentalize one another, reducing members of our community to means to be used, by any means necessary, instead of ends to be sought for its own intrinsic value. How is it that in half a century since brother Malcolm passed away that we have lost our character along the way? Increasing mosque space in our neighborhoods and lands does not equate to an increase in Allah's space in our hearts and minds. Taqwa has a different standard of measurement. We must empower new Muslims to be better than us, not marginalized from us; we must establish healthy families based on equality not hierarchy; we must develop circles of meaning where the values of mutual respect, dignity, love (*mahabba*) and preference (*ithaar*) are learned and reinforced through action, and not only rely on traditional halaqas; and instead of teaching them people to shelve their artistic talents and instead turn to the art of facial cosmetics or the likes of Facebook, we

must as American Muslims promote the cultivation of the arts so that our youth and elderly may embrace various modes of creative expression as outlets which encourage diversity and the cultivation of internal beauty.

Conclusion

So, as we reflect on this 55th anniversary of the death brother Malcolm, we must ask ourselves, has “X” marked the spot for us? Do we have a new common cause, around which we galvanize or nothing at all? What have we accomplished in the last half-century since his death and what is to be the goal in the next half-century going forward? Let us at least pivot, beginning this year, towards some “qibla” for Islam in America so that for us, “X” marks something tangible and achievable, such that, if all the American Muslims were suddenly gone tomorrow morning, the impact of our absence would be tremendously felt on account of the weight of our presence. Let us at least take that from brother Malcolm. “Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings will you deny!?”⁹

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⁹ Quran 55:13.