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Article

# The Creation of the Devil and the End of the White Man's Rule: The Theological Influence of the Nation of Islam on Early Black Theology

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**Abstract:** This article examines the emergence of the Black Theology movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the context of the religiously diverse milieu of Black political movements during the same period. In particular, the theology of the Nation of Islam was widely understood by contemporary commentators as a major source of the confrontational rhetoric and tactics of the Black Power movement. Drawing upon the writings of the radical Black nationalist minister Albert B. Cleage, Jr., this article examines the importance of what Cleage termed the Nation of Islam's "Black cultural mythology" in providing the possibility of a break in identification with white Christianity. In particular, it traces the influence of the Nation of Islam's proclamation of God's imminent apocalyptic destruction of white America on the theology of James H. Cone and Cleage. In doing so, this article argues for the importance of examining questions of racial and religious difference in American history alongside one another. It was precisely through creative appropriation of a non-Christian framework of biblical interpretation, rooted in faith in God's complete identification with Black humanity and the consequent imminent judgment of white America, that early (Christian) Black Theologians were able to retain their Christian identity and sever its entanglement with white supremacy.

**Keywords:** Black Theology; James Cone; Albert Cleage; Black religion; religious diversity; Black Power movement; Malcolm X; Elijah Muhammad; Nation of Islam; African American Islam; theology and race

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In his groundbreaking 1969 text, *Black Theology & Black Power*, the theologian James H. Cone judged both the "Black Church" and the "White Church" as having betrayed the gospel of Jesus Christ. In contrast, it was Black Power, the slogan increasingly embraced since 1966 by more radical participants in Black social movements, that was "Christ's central message to twentieth-century America" (Cone [1969] 1997, p. 1). In his later work, Cone would come to characterize this turn to the Black Power movement (especially in the form preached by Malcolm X) as a necessary complement of Christian faith with Blackness. "From [Martin Luther] King," he wrote, "black liberation theology received its Christian identity ... [whereas] Malcolm X ... identified the struggle as a *black struggle*" (Cone 1999, p. xviii). It would be easy to interpret this assessment as a description of a religious thinker incorporating nonreligious communal and political concerns into his work. This interpretation, however, is belied by Cone's enthusiasm, expressed in *Black Theology & Black Power*, for two religious communities that he did not categorize within the "Black Church" he criticized. "Black Muslims," he wrote, "through allegiance to Islam, have demonstrated more than any existing black religious community, the relationship between religion and the suffering of black people" (Cone [1969] 1997, p. 117). Similarly, he praised the Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr., a Detroit-based Black Christian nationalist minister heavily influenced by the Nation of Islam, for "seeking to reorient the church community on the basis" of Black Power (Cone [1969] 1997, p. 116).

Examining the interreligious context of the emergence of Black Theology is significant for the study of both American religious diversity and movements for Black liberation in America in the twentieth century, precisely because a closer look at the evidence demonstrates that one cannot be completely understood in isolation from the other. Recourse to non-Christian frameworks of theological interpretation was crucially important for the development of radical Black politics in the second half of the twentieth century. It was also fundamental for the construction of a distinctive Black Theology as articulated by Cone, Cleage, and others. Cleage described the syncretistic, Black nationalist<sup>1</sup> “cultural mythology” of the Nation of Islam as enabling a new self-understanding among Black Americans, divorced from a religious worldview steeped in the American Christian mythology of white supremacy (Cleage 1972, pp. 98–99). As will be demonstrated in this article, the Nation of Islam’s “messianic-nationalist” proclamation of imminent judgment for white America and imminent exaltation of Black America, a theology rooted in the apocalyptic and prophetic narratives of both Christianity and Islam, was profoundly influential on the political rhetoric of the Black Power movement and the theological production of the (Christian) Black Theology movement.<sup>2</sup>

By examining the theology of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and its impact on Black revolutionary politics, this article aims to situate the Black Theology movement in one of its primary original contexts, which is to say, the religiously diverse, grassroots theology of resistance to white racial terror in the Black urban centers of the North. In doing so, it demonstrates the importance of examining the entanglement of racial and religious identification (and nonidentification) in American history and society.

## 1. Methods

This article adopts a historical methodology in its intervention in ongoing conversations about theological approaches to religious pluralism. As theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher has argued, the ways in which religious narratives have been utilized in the construction of racial identity and especially racial hierarchies in the United States have “been fundamentally ignored in the narrative telling of interfaith progress in America” (Hill Fletcher 2016, p. 54). Hill Fletcher is concerned particularly with the “intersections of Christian dominance and White supremacy”, which have been central to American racial and religious self-understanding (Hill Fletcher 2016, p. 71). As such, in her book, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (2017), Hill Fletcher traced the historical relationship between the development of discourses of Christian supremacy and white supremacy (Hill Fletcher 2017). Following Hill Fletcher’s example, this article takes a similarly historically-conscious approach, recognizing that we cannot discuss intersections of racial and religious

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there is debate among scholars about the use of the term “nationalism” in describing what is typically referred to as Black nationalism. Even one of Black nationalism’s most important theorists, E.U. Essien-Udom, expressed concern about the imprecise nature of this term with regards to the diverse movements and trends it is used to describe. Essien-Udom defined nationalism in general, and Black nationalism in particular, as “the belief of a group that it possesses, or ought to possess, a country; that it shares, or ought to share, a common heritage of language, culture, and religion; and that its heritage, way of life, and ethnic identity are distinct from those of other groups. Nationalists believe that they ought to rule themselves and share their own destinies, and that they should therefore be in control of their social, economic, and political institutions” (Essien-Udom 1962, p. 6). However, he immediately noted that “[i]t must be admitted at the outset that neither the Nation of Islam nor any other black nationalist organization wholly conforms to this definition” (Essien-Udom 1962, p. 7). As a result, Edward E. Curtis IV has adopted the term “black particularism” in order to more accurately describe trends in the conceptualization of Black identity typically referred to as “black nationalist” (Curtis 2002, p. 14). For the sake of clarity and as a result of the specific focus of multiple figures in this article on the building of a “Black Nation”, this study will generally use the term “Black nationalism” in order to refer to these movements and patterns of discourse.

<sup>2</sup> The term “messianic-nationalist” was coined by social scientists Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer in their influential essay, “Religious Diversification during the Era of Advanced Industrial Capitalism” (1992). Baer and Singer described the core features of “messianic-nationalism” as the following: “(1) belief in a glorious Black past and subsequent ‘fall’ from grace; (2) vocal opposition to and criticism of American society and whites in general; (3) anticipation of divine retribution against the white oppressors; (4) assertion of Black sovereignty through the development of various rituals and symbols, such as national flags, anthems, and dress, and a separatist economic base as well as, plus at least in some cases, an interest in territorial separation or emigrationism; and (5) chiliastic and messianic expectations of a new golden age for Black people” (Baer and Singer [1992] 2003, p. 525).

diversity in the contemporary United States without close attention to the ways in which racialization has mapped onto religious identity in American history.

Rather than focusing on the historical relationship between white Christian discourses of race and religion, however, this article examines the appeal of non-Christian traditions to radical Black thinkers in the politically explosive period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In doing so, it brings the work of scholars of Black religion such as Edward E. Curtis IV, Richard Brent Turner, and Jacob S. Dorman, who have foregrounded the histories of Muslim-identified Black communities in twentieth century America, into a theological context, noting how the Christian theological projects of Albert Cleage and James Cone fundamentally relied upon theological discourses developed within Muslim-identified Black communities. In this endeavor, I am indebted to the work of Mark L. Chapman, who has comprehensively established that the Black Theology movement in large part can be understood as a response to the Nation of Islam's critiques of Christianity (Chapman 1996). I build upon Chapman's work through examining the specific influence of the Nation of Islam's apocalyptic language on Black radical politics and early Black Theologians. As will be shown, a close examination of historical sources demonstrates that the radical rhetoric, which came to prominence among Black American communities during this time, necessarily relied upon non-Christian religious imaginations and frameworks, due to the inextricable connection many commentators perceived between Christianity and whiteness in America. This specific historical example is examined in order to demonstrate that no racially neutral plane for an examination of religious diversity in an American context is possible.

## 2. The Theology of the Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam, despite its predominant status among Black nationalist movements in the 1960s, was situated within a broader context of what Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer described as "a rapid process of religious diversification" in Black religion in the early twentieth century as a direct result of the Great Migration (Baer and Singer [1992] 2003, p. 495). The historian Jacob S. Dorman has argued that the "black Orientalism" of the Muslim, Jewish, and Spiritualist sects that emerged in this milieu served as a powerful resource for the formation of alternative communal self-understanding in the face of relentless white supremacy (Dorman 2009, p. 132). Many non-Christian Black religious movements in the United States trace their histories to these twentieth-century sects. These groups represent, and have always represented, a very small minority of Black religious practitioners in the United States overall, but they have nevertheless had a significant influence on the religious and political life of the communities of which they are a part. This influence was in part a result of these non-Christian groups' intertwinement with Black nationalist and Pan-African ideologies that rose to prominence in the same milieus (Turner 2003, pp. 73–80).

The Islam professed by the Nation of Islam is idiosyncratic in many respects, diverging from a uniform definition of Islam that, as Benjamin F. Soares for instance has argued, was the result of a process of "standardisation and rationalisation" of diverse local Islam ideologies during the colonial period (Soares 2005, p. 10). The theological and ritual originality of the Nation of Islam has led many interpreters of the movement to label it as pseudo-Islamic or un-Islamic, criticism that has also been directed against the other major early Muslim movements in the United States, i.e., Moorish Science adherents. Much of the early scholarship on Islam as practiced by Black Americans, and on the Nation of Islam in particular, tended to take for granted that these Muslim-identified sects founded in the twentieth-century could only with real reservations be interpreted as legitimately Muslim (or even legitimately religious!)<sup>3</sup> Edward E. Curtis IV, however, has taken this assumption

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, C. Eric Lincoln, the author of the first major study of the Nation of Islam in 1961, argued that religious content of the NOI was of "secondary importance" to its social/political role in articulating a foundation for opposition to white America (Lincoln [1961] 1994, p. 26). In terms of its "Islamic" identification, Lincoln noted the malleable interpretation of Islam in the history of the tradition, but argued that "[the NOI's beliefs about the inherently doomed character of the white race and the assertion that Black people are destined to inherit the earth] are in flagrant contrast to the orthodox Moslem

to task for its uncritical and indeed anachronistic acceptance of “a modernist and reformist view of Islamic religiosity” (Curtis 2009a, p. 78).

The central teachings of the Nation of Islam were transmitted in the form of lessons that were expected to be memorized by members, including passages from the Qur’an and, more regularly, from a handful of documents passed down from W.D. Fard, the enigmatic founder of the Nation of Islam (Essien-Udom 1962, p. 202; Curtis 2006, pp. 157–58). Under his successor Elijah Muhammad’s leadership after Fard’s disappearance in 1934, Muhammad’s insistence that Fard had revealed that he was God in person gave these lessons additional significance. At the heart of these materials are the “Lost-Found Muslim Lessons No. 1 and 2” which consist of questions asked by Fard and answers provided by Elijah Muhammad. These lessons contain the seeds of most of Elijah Muhammad’s later teachings in some form. The first lesson begins with a declaration that would remain the core of the NOI’s theology: “the Earth belongs to the original Black man . . . The Colored man or Caucasian is the Devil” (“Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1,” answer 1). The term “Devil” had a very specific meaning, which is to say, that one “has lost the knowledge of himself and . . . is living a beast life” (“Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1,” answer 2).

The NOI made ample use of the religious terminology common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (e.g., creator God, Satan, prophets, messiah, day of judgment), but for the NOI, all of these terms were interpreted through a unique mythological framework exemplified in the narrative of Yacub, the maker of the Devil. According to these lessons, the white man is the Devil because the category of human that is the white man is the end result of a long process of deliberate, intergenerational violence, resulting in complete loss of self-knowledge. The story of Yacub is detailed in the second lesson of the NOI: Yacub, one of the original people, “was born with a determined idea to make a people to rule the earth for a term of six thousand years” (“Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 2,” answer 24). In order to achieve this end, he set out on an aggressive, centuries-long experiment in eugenics in which darker-skinned children were killed and lighter-skinned children were cared for and then bred with other lighter-skinned people, eventually producing the abnormality of white skin and a category of human being that is both “weak and wicked” (“Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 2,” answer 33). The process of manufacturing the Devil required immense cruelty, which Lesson No. 2 describes in depth:

The Nurse’s law was to kill the Black babies at birth by sticking a needle in the brain of the babies or feed it to some wild beast; and tell the mother that her baby was an angel baby and that it was only taken to heaven, and some day when the mother dies, her baby would have secured her a home in heaven. But save all the brown ones and tell their mother that she was lucky that her baby was a holy baby; and she should take good care of her baby, educate it, and that some day it would be a great man. All nurses, doctors and ministers—Yacub put them under a death penalty who fail to carry out the law as it was given to them. Also the Cremator, who would burn the Black babies when the nurse brought it to him. (“Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 2”, answer 28)

The story of Yacub vividly portrays the historical association of white identity with violence, mirroring specifically the history of violence towards Black bodies in the United States.

Malcolm X expanded upon this connection in a speech in 1962 entitled “Black Man’s History”, in which he related the story of Yacub to explain the origin of white violence:

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ideal of an all-embracing unity of humankind... Are these contradictions so extreme that the Black Muslims must be said to have excluded themselves from Islam? The question will have to be answered by Moslem theologians, but it seems likely that they will find the Black Muslims to be within the pale—a legitimate if somewhat heretical Moslem sect” (Lincoln [1961] 1994, p. 221). Other scholars have been even more forthright in their characterization of the NOI as illegitimately Muslim. To give a characteristic example, Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., a scholar of Malcolm X as a religious figure, has written that “the Nation of Islam has never correctly taught its followers about the religion of the Qur’an, and neither has it ever encouraged them to become traditional Muslims” (DeCaro 1998, p. 3).

The Book says concerning the devil: “He was conceived in inequity and born in sin.” What does this mean? At the outset the nurses had to kill the little black babies, but after a while it got so that the mother, having been brainwashed, hated that black one so much she killed it herself . . . In order for the white one to come into existence, the darker one was always murdered, murdered, MURDERED! This went right into the nature of the child that was being born. The mother wanted a light baby when the child was being conceived. This went right into the baby. The mother hated black when the child was being conceived. This went right into the baby. So that at the end of the six hundred years, after planting the seed of inequity right into the brain, right into the mind, right into the heart, right into the nature of these people, by the time they got the white man, they had someone who by nature hated everything that was darker than he was . . . And right to this very day the white man by nature wants to murder off the black, brown, and yellow. You don’t have to teach him to kill the black man. He does it for sport. He does it for kicks. He does it because it’s his nature to do it. Do you understand that? (X 1971, pp. 83–84)

Malcolm interpreted the story of Yacub as providing a key to understanding “the white man,” which is to say, a form of human being produced by a long process of habituation to killing and complicity in the murder of nonwhite people. Malcolm would later expand upon the historical meaning of the classification of “white devil” that the Yacub story provided: “We are speaking of the *collective white man’s historical* record . . . You cannot find *one* black man, I do not care who he is, who has not been personally damaged in some way by the devilish acts of the collective white man!” (X and Haley 1965, p. 266).

The language of these early lessons of the Nation of Islam is often cryptic and there are numerous sections that were interpreted metaphorically by the vast majority of NOI members. This was especially true of the statement that “all Muslims will murder the devil because they know he is a snake and, also, if he be allowed to live, he would sting someone else . . . Each Muslim is required to bring four devils” (“Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1”, answer 10). This statement, if taken literally, would emphatically contradict the policy of the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad, who ascribed the destruction of the Devil solely to God in the Day of Judgment, and forbade Muslims even to own and carry weapons.<sup>4</sup> Sonsyrea Tate, in her memoir of her childhood in the Nation of Islam, described her fear upon hearing the militant language of the Nation’s lessons before understanding their rhetorical purpose within the organization:

I didn’t know that at eleven and twelve years old, my uncles already were beginning to understand that Elijah Muhammad wasn’t talking about physically going out and killing four white people. Their teachers had explained to them that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet and that prophets don’t always mean exactly what they say because prophets tend to speak in parables—symbolisms. He might have meant for his followers to go out and kill four people’s devilish ways. (Tate, Sonsyrea 1997, p. 42)

It was in this form as a “parable”, with rich imaginative potential to disclose the nature of racial evil, that the Yacub story inspired many Black activists and artists who at times had no affiliation with the Nation of Islam.

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<sup>4</sup> e.g., see Muhammad 1973, p. 158: “[The Prophet] must overcome [the enemy] with nothing but the Truth and the power and guidance of Allah as Moses did with Pharaoh and his well-armed army, because he is not in a position to arm himself and his followers with carnal weapons. The enemy controls the manufacture of arms.” “We are forbidden by Allah to carry weapons. It is well-known that this is our rule. No armed person is to sit in our meetings, and because of this rule we have been successful in enjoying a peaceful assemblage wherever we have gone” (Muhammad 1973, p. 215). “I have said many times that the solution to our problem is divine . . . Please do not think that they can be conquered by brickbats, shotguns, a few arms or homemade bombs. It takes the forces of nature and the confusion of minds and thoughts, which are controlled by the power of Allah. Be wise and submit to Allah, who has the power to defend you and destroy your enemies who are too powerful for you” (Muhammad 1973, pp. 224–25).



Cleage described this “profound cultural influence” that Muhammad’s teachings had on Black Americans, and explained the Yacub story’s appeal as a psychologically liberating creation narrative (Cleage 1972, pp. 98–99).<sup>5</sup> Through Malcolm’s influence, Cone and Cleage themselves would adapt the NOI’s theology of the “white devil”, with Cone describing, for instance, “the beastly behavior of the ‘devil white man’ (Malcolm X’s designation)” (Cone [1969] 1997), and Cleage adjusting Malcolm’s language for his own political stance:

I can accept the teachings which [Malcolm X] abstracted from the cult philosophy and mythology of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. I do not believe in the story about Yacub and creating the white man as the devil in 6000 years, but that has nothing to do with the essential truth . . . It is closer to the truth to say that he is a beast, and that is what Malcolm said . . . On the basis of the way the white man has treated black men in America and throughout the world for 400 years, you cannot deny that he certainly had a truth there when he said that the white man is a beast. But not a devil. A beast is lower than a man, a devil is higher than a man. Certainly the white man is not a devil, but he is in many instances a beast. (Cleage and Breitman 1968, pp. 7–8)

Although Cleage became critical of the way this language could obscure mechanisms of power, he continued to insist that Elijah Muhammad’s cultural mythology was crucial for the construction of new theological and political vantage points divorced from association with the white power structure (Cleage 1972, p. 101–2).

God’s imminent exaltation of Black Americans and destruction of the power of the white Devil, the reversal of the work of Yacub, was the central object of faith for the Nation of Islam, as interpreters of the movement have observed (see especially Lee 1996). Muhammad understood his role as conforming to the Qur’anic pattern of the prophet as a “warner” who is largely rejected by his hearers (see, e.g., Qur’an 2:213, 4:165, 6:48, 34:34, 35:42, 43:23). “To keep you from getting confused over the truth and the lie,” declared Muhammad, “a plain Warner, says the Holy Qur’an [14:4], will be sent to you whose words will be easy for you to understand . . . He raises up a Warner or a prophet from among the people He warns, so they will have no excuse saying that they don’t understand that stranger” (Muhammad 2002, p. 1). Muhammad’s followers understood him within this context, drawing examples of earlier prophets, mostly those depicted in both the Bible and the Qur’an. “He is a warner to our white oppressor,” explained Malcolm X in 1963, after comparing Muhammad to Noah, Lot, and Moses, “but a savior to the oppressed” (X 1971, p. 191). This messianic attitude towards the imminent exaltation of Black Americans would, especially through the conduit of Malcolm X’s thought, become highly influential on the development of radical Black politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

### 3. Malcolm X and the Political Application of the NOI’s Theology of Divine Judgment

The political implications for the NOI of living in this time of “prophecy fulfillment” were ambiguous. On the one hand, Muhammad’s and the NOI’s official policy of political noninvolvement was clear (Clegg 1997, p. 163). However, as Claude Andrew Clegg has noted, this was at odds with the more radical orientation of the early Nation of Islam under Muhammad, which had translated its messianic-nationalist theology into widespread draft resistance and courtroom riots following the

<sup>5</sup> “[The story of Yacub] is not that different in kind from the Christian story of Creation; they are both myths. We do not throw one out because it is a myth and keep the other because it is true . . . Those who believe in the myth of Yakub are waiting for the end of the white man’s rule . . . Many Black people do not have any religious basis for their belief. Without a religious myth, they affirm that the white man is a beast. Some reject all religions but give a passing nod to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the myth of Yakub. The Yakub myth actually underlies much Black poetry that is being written today. Black drama also reflects this position, as does Black creative dance . . . This new Black cultural mythology is important to Black people at this time in history when we are trying to break our identification with white people” (Cleage 1972, pp. 98–99). It should be noted tangentially that the theologian Jawanza Eric Clark has built upon Cleage’s focus on the necessary “psychic conversion” away from identification with white Protestantism in order to construct an indigenous Black theology rooted in African heritage. (See Clark 2012, p. xi).

arrests of NOI members (Clegg 1997, pp. 39, 98; Essien-Udom 1962, pp. 63–68). Clegg concluded that it was Muhammad's four years in prison for draft resistance that had "subverted many of the activist tendencies he had exhibited during the 1930s" (Clegg 1997, p. 98). Following his release, he was determined to avoid the devastating effects of government suppression and incarceration on the movement and its members, and vehemently insisted upon the NOI's peacefulness and unthreatening nature to the American government, even as he continued to preach the imminent destruction of white America.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 would serve as a flash point for the tensions between the Nation of Islam's conception of the apocalyptic destruction of white America and its passive separatist politics. This event would become the immediate catalyst for Malcolm X's exit from the Nation of Islam, as Elijah Muhammad publicly distanced himself from Malcolm's characterization of Kennedy's assassination as America's "chickens coming home to roost" (Marable 2011, pp. 269–96; X and Haley 1965, pp. 300–3).

Malcolm's public comments about the presidential assassination in 1963 were entirely consistent with his own developing theology, which stressed that the divine judgment preached by the NOI was *already occurring* in the form of worldwide resistance against racism, colonialism, and oppression. This theology can be seen clearly in the speech that Malcolm gave just before making his infamous comments about President Kennedy's death, entitled "God's Judgment of White America" and delivered at the Manhattan Center on 1 December 1963. Malcolm began by contextualizing the divine judgment of America in relationship to God's judgment of past imperial powers: just as slavery caused the fall of Egypt and Babylon, and colonialism had caused the fall of white European powers, "the enslavement of millions of black people in this country is now bringing White America to her hour of judgment, to her downfall as a respected nation" (X 1971, pp. 179–80). Malcolm encouraged those resistant to his warning in the audience to "search the Christian Scriptures" and, in parallel, to "search even the histories" of former empires (X 1971, p. 185). "If God's unchanging laws of justice caught up with every one of the slave empires of the past, how dare you think White America can escape the harvest of unjust seeds planted by her white forefathers against our black forefathers here in the land of slavery!" (X 1971, p. 185). Malcolm read divine judgment into historical instances of imperial collapse; slavery and oppression constituted a "bill owed" to the enslaved and oppressed "that must be collected" (X 1971, p. 218), and, if America proved unwilling to atone, would be collected by "divine will and divine power" (X 1971, p. 180).

Following Malcolm X's departure from the Nation of Islam, he developed this theology in concert with new interlocutors in the Muslim world, the African diaspora, and revolutionary movements across the globe.<sup>6</sup> While not always as decisively wed to theological language as before his exit from the NOI, his fundamental articulation of this theology remained largely intact during the final year and a half of his life. "Every power that has participated in slavery of any form on this earth, in history", he told interviewer Bernice Bass in December 1964, "has paid for it, except the United States . . . The Bible, in the Book of Revelations, says that he that leads into captivity shall go into captivity . . . This is justice. So I don't think that any power can enslave a people and not look forward to having

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<sup>6</sup> Curtis in particular has demonstrated the precarious situation Malcolm was in as he became a Sunni Muslim convert during the "Arab Cold War", in which Saudi Arabia increasingly promoted an Islamist ideology and Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser was increasingly associated with revolutionary socialism. In the midst of competing definitions of Muslim identity, Malcolm "resisted the Islamist views" of his Saudi-associated friends, who insisted that promotion of Islam itself was sufficient for achieving racial equality (Curtis 2009b, p. 58). Possibly in order to distance himself from this race-neutral, Islamist ideology, Malcolm began generally to separate discussion of his religious beliefs from his discussion of his internationalist, revolutionary, Black nationalist politics (Curtis 2002, pp. 103–4). At the same time, as Zain Abdullah has demonstrated, Malcolm remained committed to articulating a version of Islam grounded in the struggle for freedom and the right to self-defense, what Abdullah called "a kind of Islamic liberation theology" (Abdullah 2015, p. 214).



that justice come back upon itself" (X 1989, p. 109). Malcolm continued to portray revolutionary justice in apocalyptic terms, and the demand for restitution remained the same.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Divine Judgment, the Black Power Movement, and the Influence of the Nation of Islam

By the late 1960s, in part due to the influence of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X, language expressing intimations of an imminent divine reckoning for the nation had become commonplace among Black commentators on the state of racial conflict in the United States. The civil rights activist and historian Vincent Harding, for instance, in his influential essay "The Religion of Black Power" (1968), described the Black Power movement as at heart conveying this "messianic" theme (Harding [1968] 1993, p. 48). He cited Nathan Hare's prediction of a "Black Judgment Day around the corner" for America" and other Black Power advocates' demand that the nation "either 'straighten up' or face the fire of judgment" as intrinsically religious sentiments (Harding [1968] 1993, pp. 48–49). In an earlier essay published in *The Christian Century* in January 1967, Harding himself had made use of this rhetoric:

If God is yet alive we cannot afford time to reminisce about the good old days of the civil rights movement when everybody knew the words of the songs. The time of singing may be past. It may be that America must now stand under profound and damning judgment for having turned the redeeming lover of all men into a white, middle class burner of children and destroyer of the revolutions of the oppressed. (Harding 1967, p. 13)

Crucially, Harding attributed the apocalyptic tenor of the movement in large part to "the black Messianic hope" that Malcolm X had revived in the Black American consciousness, which itself was intrinsically connected with the Nation of Islam's promise of a spiritual resurrection of Black people and their deliverance from white bondage (Harding [1968] 1993, pp. 47–50).

Harding was not the only contemporary thinker to associate the shift to apocalyptic language with the theology of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X. As Cleage noted, the Black Arts movement was deeply influenced by the aesthetics and the theology of the NOI, particularly in its mythical portrayal of the "end of the white man's rule" (Cleage 1972, pp. 98–99). The most influential figure of the Black Arts movement, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), identified as a Muslim for a period of time as a result of the influence of Malcolm X. In an interview, he explained the influence of the NOI's worldview on his art as derived from its powerful depiction of the battle between the spiritual man and anti-spiritual forces (X and Faruk[1969] 1994, pp. 51–52). The poet Sonia Sanchez, who became a member of the Nation of Islam in 1971, described an apocalyptic vision of "Allah, the Lord of the words" sitting on his throne and judging between the "faithful and the infidels" in her poetry (Sanchez 1974, p. 55).

Much of the political leadership of the Black Power movement itself was likewise highly influenced by Malcolm X and the NOI. H. Rap Brown (later Imam Jamil Al-Amin), the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader who, along with Stokely Carmichael, gave the Black Power movement its original form, was drawn to Islam as a result of Malcolm X's depiction of the religion as militantly opposed to tyranny and oppression (Al-Amin 1994, p. xvi). Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther Party's Minister of Information, was a member of the Nation of Islam before joining the Black Panthers. His influential memoir, *Soul on Ice* (1968), made frequent use of the NOI's theology even as Cleaver insisted that "[a]ll the gods are dead except the god of war" (Cleaver 1968, p. 34). Cleaver was drawn especially to the apocalyptic language of Muhammad and Malcolm X: "The America out of

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., X 1965, p. 216. Here, Malcolm responds to the question of whether he still, like Elijah Muhammad, believes in a coming Armageddon: "I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice, and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation . . . I don't think that it will be based upon the color of the skin, as Elijah Muhammad had taught it. However, I do think you'll find that the European powers, which are the former colonial powers, if they're not able to readjust their thinking of superiority toward the darker-skinned people . . . then these lines can easily be drawn."

which Elijah Muhammad calls his people is indeed doomed, crumbling, burning, if not by the hand of God then by the hand of man" (Cleaver 1968, p. 95).

For those who found the religious language of Malcolm X unappealing, the challenge was to extricate the liberating discourse of Malcolm X from its theological shell. Thus, the leading Black social activist and scholar Angela Davis described her first encounter with Malcolm X as one of ambivalence: she was fascinated hearing Malcolm "addressing himself to white people, chastising them, informing them of their sins, warning them of the Armageddon to come," but was unable to "identify with his religious perspective" (Davis 1988, p. 127). Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the founders of the Black Panther Party, had similar reactions: inspired by Malcolm's example and the fiery rhetoric of the Black Muslim movement, both considered joining the Nation of Islam, but ultimately could not accept its theological premises (Ogbar 2004, p. 82).

In the midst of this atmosphere, in which the rhetoric of Black activists and artists reverberated with echoes of the apocalyptic expectation proclaimed by the NOI, Black Theology defended the potential of Christianity to facilitate a revolutionary overthrow of white power. Mark Chapman has demonstrated that Black Theology met the need for a Christian response to the theology of the NOI in the era of Black Power, as young Black radicals were largely convinced by the NOI's argument that Christianity was the white slave master's religion (Chapman 1996, pp. 69–70). Both Cleage and Cone, in their earliest published writings, labored to demonstrate the compatibility of Christianity with the messianic, Black nationalist theology expressed by Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad.

## 5. Early Black Theology and Malcolm X

Throughout his decades-long career as a spiritual leader and community organizer in Detroit, Albert Cleage played many roles. In the tongue-and-cheek summary of historian Peniel E. Joseph, Cleage served as "the Pied Piper of the city's scoundrels—an assorted collection of militant youth, veteran activists, and the simply disgruntled" (Joseph 2006, p. 55). Yet, he effectively organized this motley crew into political coalitions, mobilizing diverse groups of people in sometimes successful campaigns, to give some examples, against racially targeted school redistricting, urban renewal, and police brutality (see Dillard 2007, pp. 237–85). Through the Shrine of the Black Madonna, Cleage formed a political lobbying organization, the Black Slate, which was ultimately instrumental in electing a Black mayor of Detroit, Coleman A. Young (Walker 2016, p. 106). He also founded a number of Black- and community-owned cooperatives, including a food market, housing co-op, a clothing and goods store, and, just a year before his death in 2000, a farm called Beulah Land (Walker 2016, p. 101; Thomas 2016, p. 134).

These efforts towards political mobilization and community empowerment were intrinsically connected with the theological and liturgical innovations practiced by the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Cleage preached the gospel of a revolutionary Black messiah, Jesus, who fought the white Roman Empire in order to resurrect the Black Nation. Cleage was unmoved by those who insisted that Christian theology required universal love and brotherhood of all people without respect to the imbalance of power between oppressor and oppressed. "When there is justice there can be love, peace and brotherhood," he declared in a sermon. "Only the oppressor can afford to talk about the preservation of law and order without justice" (Cleage 1968, p. 16).

Cleage highlighted biblical texts that made these power distinctions clear, making especial use of the Hebrew Bible and the teachings and actions of Jesus in the gospels. He told his congregation that Black religion in the United States "is essentially based on the Old Testament concepts of the Nation Israel, God's chosen people, and our knowledge that the problems of the black Israelites were the same as ours. When we read the Old Testament, we can identify with a black people who were guided and loved by God" (Cleage 1968, p. 111). This love for them meant that, in a real sense, God must be *against* their oppressors. Preaching on a text in the book of the prophet Jeremiah in which God promises the destruction of the Temple and the nation as a result of the people's injustice, Cleage inveighed: "All men in the sight of God have a right to dignity, and when somebody decides that he is

going to build a civilization, a world, and deny black men the right to dignity, then God is going to act to destroy that very civilization and that very nation" (Cleage 1968, p. 133).

Cleage, like Malcolm, saw God as enacting this judgment through God's empowerment of the Black nation to liberate itself. Cleage unequivocally attributed this approach to the message of Malcolm X, whom he boldly compared to Jesus as another "savior" of a Black people (Cleage 1968, p. 193).

Brother Malcolm's message offered the only basis for salvation for black people. To identify an enemy, to understand him, to realize that he is violent and to recognize the fact that we are engaged in a power struggle—this was Brother Malcolm's message . . . That's why this Church, The Shrine of the Black Madonna, is building a Nation, because we believe in Black Power. We are trying to organize for power . . . We believe in it, and we believe that this was the message of Jesus as well as Brother Malcolm. That's why there is no inner conflict when we have a memorial for Brother Malcolm in a Christian Church which is dedicated to rebuilding the Nation of the Black Messiah. (Cleage 1968, pp. 197–98)

Cleage noted with admiration that the philosophy of Malcolm X was not static, as "he was able to adjust his analysis to fit new realities" (Cleage 1972, p. 104). But Cleage was similarly inspired by the fundamental pivot on which Malcolm's thought turned: his faith in the awakening of his people to their own "humanity, to their own worth" (Cleage 1972, p. 119). For Cleage, it was precisely the non-Christian theology of the NOI, representing a complete break from white Christian interpretation of the Bible, that allowed Black Christians to identify their enemy and to awake to their own value.

This theological and political vantage point, borrowed from Malcolm X, provided Cleage with the means for reappropriating then-neglected themes that were deeply rooted in biblical texts and in the Black religious tradition. Inherent in the sermons of Black Christian preachers, Cleage declared, "was the faith that God must eventually shake white people over hell-fire . . . White people were the oppressors. They were the sinners, they were guilty" (Cleage 1968, p. 6). God required their repentance, and until then, God moved in the Black Nation to reclaim what had been stolen. "The Holy Spirit", he wrote, "gives us a sense of identification with the rage of suffering oppressed people everywhere . . . It is rage, anger, hatred, commitment. It is divine discontent. It is the mystery of a magic moment when we are touched by a power which we cannot understand" (Cleage 1972, p. 251).

One of the many Black Christians drawn into Cleage's orbit during this period was a young Black professor of theology "quietly teaching white students at Adrian College" (Cone 2018, p. 1), around seventy miles away from the Shrine of the Black Madonna. The Detroit Rebellion of 1967 had made the contrast between his course content and the realities of Black life, in which "black people were dying in the streets of Detroit, Newark, and the back roads of Mississippi and Alabama" all too clear (Cone 2018, p. 1).

During this time, James Cone found in Malcolm X what was missing in the theological outlook of his white colleagues, who "quoted to blacks Jesus' sayings about 'love your enemy' and 'turn the other cheek' but ignored their application to themselves . . . In view of white people's history of violence against humankind, [he mused,] how can their preachers and theologians dare to speak to the victims about love and nonviolence?" (Cone 1982, p. 44). It was also during this period that he began going "to hear the Rev. Albert Cleage preach a Black Power gospel at the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit" (Cone 2018, p. 14). Empowered by what he found at Cleage's church, Cone read the Scriptures in a new light, discovering a "revolutionary Jesus leap[ing] off the pages" (Cone 2018, pp. 14–15). Cleage, in return, had praise for Cone: "My very good friend Dr. James H. Cone", he wrote in 1972, "is undoubtedly a most interesting and meaningful Black theologian. His task is certainly not an easy one. He is our apostle to the Gentiles. He drags white Christians as far as they are able to go (and then some) in interpreting Black theology within the established framework which they can accept and understand" (Cleage 1972, p. xvii, n.).

Inspired by Malcolm X and Cleage, Cone's first book, *Black Theology & Black Power*, was, as he wrote in the introduction, his "word to the oppressor, a word to Whitey, [written] not in hope that he

will listen (after King's death who can hope?) but in the expectation that my own existence will be clarified. If in this process of speaking for myself, I should happen to touch the souls of black brothers (including black men in white skins), so much the better" (Cone [1969] 1997, p. 3). In his 1970 work, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone would echo Malcolm X's rhetoric in his unequivocal articulation of God's wrath at work in America:

Is it possible to understand what God's love means for the oppressed without making *wrath* an essential ingredient of that love? What could love possibly mean in a racist society except the righteous condemnation of everything racist? ... A God without wrath does not plan to do much liberating, for the two concepts belong together ... Living in a world of white oppressors, blacks have no time for a neutral God. The brutalities are too great and the pain too severe, and this means we must know where God is and what God is doing in the revolution. There is no use for a God who loves white oppressors *the same as* oppressed blacks. We have had too much of white love, the love that tells blacks to turn the other cheek and go the second mile. What we need is the divine love as expressed in black power, which is the power of blacks to destroy their oppressors, here and now, by any means at their disposal. (Cone [1970] 2010, pp. 73–74)

As with Cleage, Malcolm X provided Cone a framework for biblical and theological interpretation grounded in conflict, in a nonidentification with white Christian power structures. This act of nonidentification, as can be seen for instance in this passage, allowed for the appropriation of biblical themes (such as judgment of oppressors) widely neglected by white theologians.

As his theology developed, Cone constructed a theory of the necessary balance of three competing themes in Black religion in America: justice, love, and hope (Cone 1991, pp. 125–6). This theology in turn reflected his increased reliance upon Martin Luther King, Jr. as a theological source, departing somewhat from the earliest period of his career, in which, in contrast to other Black theologians of the time such as Major Jones and J. Deotis Roberts, Cone had turned primarily to Malcolm X over King as a source (Cone 1986, p. 107). Cone's *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or Nightmare?* (1991) was groundbreaking in its efforts to bridge the distance between King's and Malcolm's theological and political worlds. Cone lamented the general misunderstanding of both King and Malcolm X, depicting them in caricatured ways that minimize the radical aspects of King's thought and that reduce Malcolm X either to the role of a Black conservative (through a misreading of his support of Black separatism during the majority of his public life) or that of a "gun-toting black revolutionary" depending on groups' and individuals' own agendas (Cone 1999, pp. 96–110). In *Martin & Malcolm & America*, Cone emphasized to the contrary the shared concerns of both figures, and argued that, by the end of their lives, both King and Malcolm had moved towards the positions of the other: Malcolm had moved "closer to the mainstream of the civil rights movement" (Cone 1991, p. 183), while King had developed "a greater understanding of Malcolm, especially regarding black pride, separatism, and white America's lack of commitment to genuine black equality" (Cone 1991, p. 256).

Cone's articulation of this gradual convergence between the approaches of Martin and Malcolm paralleled a shift in his own theological approach. In Cone's early work, the Black religious nationalism articulated by Malcolm X during the longest period of his public life provided the essential framework for his understanding of revolutionary action as God's judgment. Over time, however, Cone incorporated this early approach into a broader theological vision in which Black Christian communities' struggles for survival played as important a role as revolutionary action (Cone [1975] 1997, p. 2); in which diverse, multiracial coalitions in pursuit of justice were crucial (Cone 1991, p. 295); in which women's, LGBTQ people's, Third World and working class perspectives were included (Cone [1975] 1997, pp. xi–xii); and in which the language of love (and hope) was given as prominent a role as that of justice (Cone 2011, pp. 165–6).

However, even within his later framework of maintaining a necessary balance between the three central themes (justice, love, and hope) of Black religion, Cone was unequivocal in asserting the importance of Malcolm X's articulation of divine judgment, noting that Malcolm X could be understood

as representing “the most prominent theme in this trinity of divine virtues”, that of justice, which was typically expressed in terms of faith in divine judgment. “African Americans”, Cone wrote,

have always believed in the living presence of the God who establishes the right by punishing the wicked and liberating their victims from oppression. Everyone will be rewarded and punished according to their deeds, and no one—absolutely no one—can escape the judgment of God, who alone is the sovereign of the universe. Evildoers may get by for a time, and good people may suffer unjustly under oppression, but “sooner or later . . . we reap as we sow”. (Cone 2008, pp. 702–3)

Malcolm X’s theology of divine judgment, Cone wrote, was inextricably connected with this specific legacy of Black religion, filtered through the specific teachings of the Nation of Islam.

[Malcolm] based his claim upon the biblical theme of justice and judgment and his analysis of the downfall of nations of the past. But whether Malcolm referred to the myth of Jacob, the Bible, or to history, his central claim regarding white America’s doom was based upon his belief that “the all-wise Supreme Being” and “the great God of the universe” was also “the God of justice.” White America’s crime was slavery and segregation, hypocrisy and deceit. According to Malcolm, justice meant that God (not Malcolm or the Muslims or black people) must destroy America for its sins. (Cone 1991, pp. 158–9)

Despite his own gradual movement from a nearly exclusive focus on divine judgment as articulated by Malcolm X, Cone continued to associate Malcolm X fundamentally with the proclamation of God’s imminent judgment against oppressors. For both Cone and Cleage, this theme remained a crucial one in their theological worldviews. This shared assessment of Malcolm X as a prophet of divine justice, however, was not at all unique to these thinkers. For those who waited in dread or hope for a “Black Judgment Day” during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Malcolm X could not be understood except as its prophetic herald. It was precisely through this apocalyptic language, grounded originally in the theology of the Nation of Islam, that Malcolm X made his signature contributions both to the Black Power movement and Black Theology.

## 6. Conclusions

The historical example of the outsize influence of a marginal Muslim-identified religious movement on the Black radical politics of the twentieth century does not only indicate, as scholars such as Anthony Pinn and William David Hart have emphasized, the importance of recognizing the religious diversity of black American communities (see, e.g., Pinn 2011 and Hart 2011). It also highlights the crucial connection between discourses of racial and religious identity in the United States.

The intimate and intricate entanglement of American Christianity with white supremacist mythologies helps explain why recourse to the non-Christian other in the form of the “Muslim” was such a fundamental aspect of Black revolutionary consciousness in the twentieth century. As Cleage indicated, an act of nonidentification with white Christianity, such as entertaining the “cultural mythology” of Elijah Muhammad, can allow for a “break” in identification with the oppressor, whose white and Christian identities run parallel. The interreligious origins of the Black Theology movement, as exemplified by Cleage and Cone, demonstrate the importance of attending to questions of racial and religious difference in tandem.

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