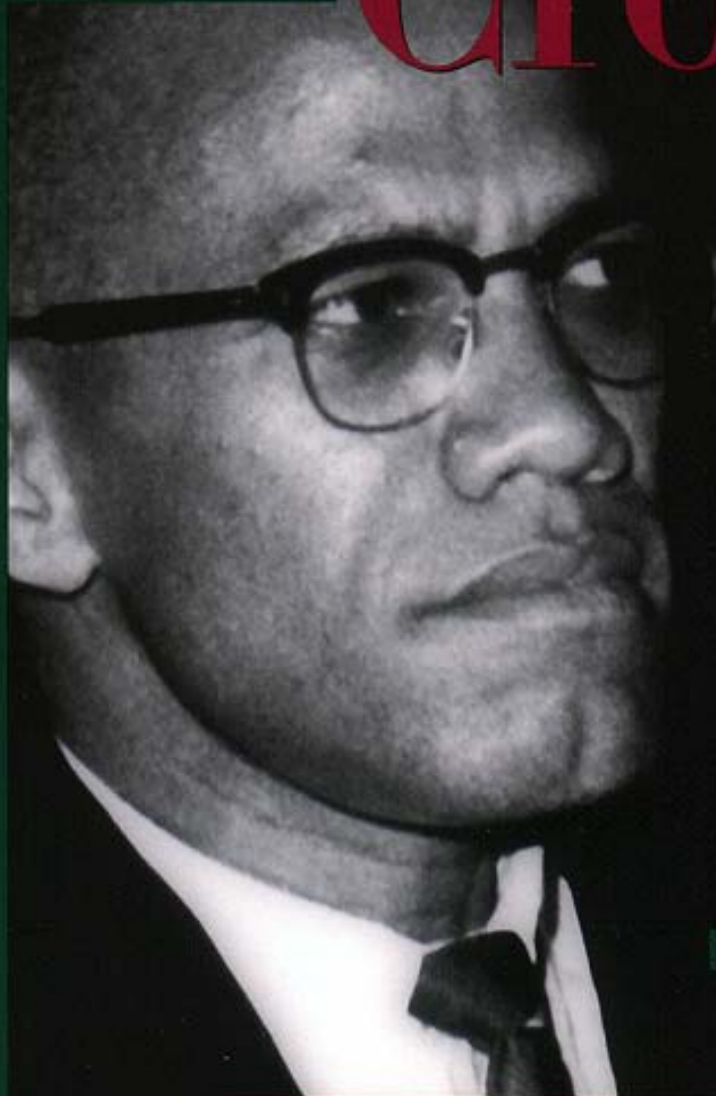


# Malcolm

AND THE

# Cross



THE

NATION

OF

ISLAM,

MALCOLM X,

AND

CHRISTIANITY

LOUIS A. DECARO, JR.

# Malcolm and the Cross



# Malcolm and the Cross

*The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X,  
and Christianity*

Louis A. DeCaro, Jr.



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*For my godchildren*

*Britney Meteney*

*Shanae Smith*

*Zuri Cudjoe*

*New wine for new wineskins*



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## Preface

*In this secular, not to say cynical, age few tasks present greater difficulty than that of compelling the well educated to take religious matters seriously.*

—Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974)

While I was preparing my first book, a religious biography of Malcolm X, I made the decision to put off discussing the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X in the context of Christianity and give primary focus to Islam. While this was an editorial expedient, I also recognized the importance of paying singular attention to Malcolm and Islam since this relationship is central to his life as a religious revolutionist. On the other hand, a religious analysis of Malcolm X is hardly complete without discussing his story in relation to Christianity. Although his eclectic religious upbringing blunts his own stylized claim to having been a Christian,<sup>1</sup> the issue of Malcolm and Christianity remains relevant. Malcolm never received an orthodox Christian upbringing and was consequently incredulous toward doctrinal Christianity from the time of his youth. Nevertheless, Malcolm was exposed to the Christian church—at least to the many denominations of Protestantism—and dealt with Christians throughout his life. As a leader, both in the Nation of Islam and as an independent activist, Malcolm apparently recognized that as long as the Christian church was relevant in the black community, it was worthy of critical attention. To be sure, Malcolm's analysis of the Christian church while in the Nation of Islam was bound up with the theological peculiarities

of that movement. However, even after he was ejected from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm continued to make critical observations about Christianity, especially regarding its impact upon and relevance to the black community. In a different sense, Christianity was always of great interest to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam—as is the case with its predecessor and successor movements of the same name. Despite his early rejection of Christianity, Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the second Nation of Islam, spent much of his time as a religious leader discussing Christianity and the Bible. Indeed, it was Elijah Muhammad's ostensible theology that provided Malcolm with the raw material he would need to fashion his own superlative polemic against white and black Christianity as the Nation of Islam's spokesman.

In discussing Martin Luther King, Jr., Nathan Huggins once noted that historians “are ill at ease with true religious phenomena.” King believed in the Christian God, Huggins continued, “and his life was shaped by that fact, from the inside out. For most of us, that belief remains a mystery. We are products of a secular age in which religion is trivialized or popularized to make it palatable to all.” Unfortunately, he concluded, “we have few scholarly examples to show us the way” to look deeper into the spiritual dimensions of Martin Luther King, Jr. Certainly the same could be said for Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Political science and psychology are not adequate in themselves to provide a complete understanding of the religious and spiritual issues undergirding this story and, as Huggins also pointed out, social scientists, historians, and other humanists are often “poorly equipped to discuss the inner terrain of spirit and mind” typified by pivotal religious experiences in the lives of great leaders.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, many of Malcolm's scholarly admirers and avowed political disciples seem inclined to deemphasize his religious life—a prejudice they unfortunately share with his critics. In a pluralistic society where religion is increasingly privatized, perhaps people are simply uncomfortable recognizing religious experience as worthy of critical study.

Some may object to my calling the Nation of Islam a cult and prefer the movement's self-justifying claim of being an Islamic movement tailored to the needs of African Americans.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, most

African American traditional Muslims have not required the cultic doctrines of the Nation of Islam as a prerequisite to accepting Islam, and some might even resent such a notion. Indeed, the claim that African Americans need a skewed version of Islam before accepting is also demeaning: as if black people are incapable of understanding the religion of Muhammad without some distorted version being fed to them first. Furthermore, the Nation of Islam's relationship to traditional Islam in some ways parallels the relationship of the Mormons to orthodox Christianity in the United States. All their claims to the contrary, the Black Muslims<sup>4</sup> and the Mormons have always existed outside the pale of the religions they tend to imitate.

*Malcolm and the Cross* is divided into two parts. The first is devoted to background material on the Nation of Islam movement. Those who have recognized the importance of observing the Nation of Islam in the context of Islam worldwide should also appreciate the value of understanding the birth and development of the movement in its Christian context. The second part is devoted to Malcolm's religious development, again with a focus on Christianity and his interaction with it.

Amiri Baraka has written that Malcolm "was a path, a way, into ourselves."<sup>5</sup> While he was undoubtedly writing from the perspective of black people in the United States, it is possible to expand his words to include all those who share an appreciation of Malcolm X and his life, development, and contributions. The sincere study of Malcolm X inevitably leads toward introspection, a gift that Malcolm seems to bestow even beyond the grave. Always a few steps ahead, Malcolm X is hard to catch up to, though one is surely a better human being for the pursuit, no matter what religious worldview one happens to embrace. "What follows, then, are the reflections of one believer's sojourn with Malcolm X—if you will, an attempt at an *X-ology* of the cross.

*Marana Tha*



## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Niko Pfund, director of New York University Press, for encouraging me to follow up my first book on Malcolm X with a second book and then helping me to conceptualize it as a manuscript. Certainly, Despina Papazoglou Gimbel, managing editor of New York University Press, once again proved gracious and extremely helpful in bringing the manuscript to publication, and I would like to thank her as well. Indeed, I would like to express my thanks to all the staff at New York University Press for their kind assistance whenever I have called or stopped by during the preparation of this manuscript. Likewise, I am very grateful to Henry R. Lewis (“H.R.”) for offering his advice, encouragement, and insightful perspective, not only on the subject, but on the author and his approach to the subject. Similarly, I greatly appreciate Paul Lee’s unrelenting commitment to the betterment of my work—his generous assistance, his sometimes brusque criticisms, and his compelling devotion to the spiritual and scholarly disciplines of his work have proven that commitment. In my association with Messrs. Lewis and Lee over the past six years I have undoubtedly learned a great deal about a world quite foreign to the one in which I was born and came to manhood. As African American men with a reverent commitment to what Malcolm called “the black secret soul” they have treated me with a generosity of spirit apropos of the noblest of the ancestors.

I continue to be blessed in having access to and friendship with Wilfred Little Shabazz, who has patiently taken many phone calls from me, thoughtfully explaining and reflecting upon matters pertaining to his brother Malcolm and his family history. Wilfred personally models the principles of humanity and spirituality to which

he subscribes, and I am blessed to know him. In Harlem, I have spent many hours discussing Malcolm and the Nation of Islam with the Rev. Charles Kenyatta (formerly Charles 37X Morris). I am grateful for his unselfish sharing of his recollections. In particular, I will never forget the day in June 1997 (only days before Dr. Betty Shabazz succumbed to the horrendous burns resulting from a tragic fire in her home) when Kenyatta and I drove north of New York City to visit Malcolm's grave. It had been two decades since Kenyatta had been to Ferncliff Cemetery and I proved to be of no help in locating the plot, even with a map. In my quest to find Malcolm's resting place, however, I remember looking up to see Kenyatta standing in the midst of the cemetery, his head turned in such a way as if he were listening once again to the voice of his friend. Slowly the elder moved to the exact site of the grave and called me to join him there. I am grateful for his friendship.

Harold Dean Trulear, a superb scholar, clergyman, and esteemed friend has allowed me to bounce many ideas off of him, and has challenged my thinking in many respects during the preparation of this book. Similarly, Andrea Clark and the members of the Racial Unity Ministry (R.U.M.) of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan have provided me great fellowship and encouragement. Finally, as I assumed the pulpit of my own pastorate, I have been greatly encouraged by my ordaining pastor, Archbishop Wilbert S. McKinley, of the Elim International Fellowship in Brooklyn, New York, who first welcomed me to his church in my days as a graduate student. In my quest to understand the black experience and the black church especially, Bishop McKinley spent many hours over many cups of coffee at Junior's Restaurant answering questions, and in a very real sense pointing me toward the study of Malcolm X. Without the four years I spent at Elim, learning to worship and also understand something of the black Christian experience and the breadth of the black diaspora, perhaps I could not have properly approached my work. Likewise, I have also been a part of Bethel Gospel Assembly in Harlem, where Bishop Ezra N. Williams is pastor, and Carlton Brown is associate pastor. My involvement in Bethel involved writing, teaching, and prison ministry, though I was enriched in ways far greater than

anything I could have offered the church. The pastoral and ministry staff embraced me as a brother and nurtured my interests, exemplifying the kind of inclusiveness that the white Christian church has consistently failed to demonstrate in this society. Finally, I salute my congregation at the Vroom Street Evangelical Free Church for giving me room to write and extend my work while adjusting to new pastoral duties. I am blessed to have loving, supportive parishioners, and while some of them might not understand why their pastor would write about an infamous “Black Muslim” they have demonstrated a willingness to let me do my work as an aspect of my calling. Ultimately, I hope they will not be disappointed.





# Introduction

## *The Nation of Islam and Christianity*

Who in their native beauty most delight  
And in contempt doe paint the Divell white.

—“Jetty Coloured,” 1621, in Winthrop Jordan,  
*The White Man’s Burden* (1974)

Farrakhan knows that as soon as he says Jesus, he’s lost. So he  
goes about it differently.

—Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt, in Guy Trebay,  
“Sins of Omission,” *Village Voice*, October 2, 1996

One of the least noticed aspects of the legacy of the Nation of Islam is that in calling white people “the devil,” belief in the metaphysical Satan is nullified. Of course, in a society where this and other doctrines so essential to traditional forms of Abrahamic religion (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have been discarded, perhaps the loss of the “personal devil” of the Bible seems irrelevant. However, given the fundamental religiosity of African American culture—so distinct from the prevalent “post-Christian” orientation among many European Americans—the denial of the biblical devil was quite a coup for the Black Muslims. From Sunday morning sermons to Friday night tales, the devil has always been perceived as a real person in the preponderantly Christian-oriented culture of black America. One day in 1930, however, a mysterious “white” man appeared in Detroit, Michigan, with a new cosmology—and a new devil. His legacy,

passed down to and embellished by his black successors, was zealously crafted on behalf of African Americans. However, this legacy was as determinedly anti-Christian as it was anti-white, though for most journalists and historians the latter agenda has been its defining factor.

Given the lead of the media, we are often so focused on the Nation of Islam's "race hatred"<sup>1</sup> that few appreciate how decisively and thoroughly the teachings of the Nation of Islam have challenged the Christian church, manifesting itself as a dramatic *religious* alternative within the African American community. It is not merely that the Nation of Islam dismisses Christianity as "the white man's religion," though this characterization is central to its assault. Rather, the Black Muslim movement has also taught that Christianity is *doctrinally* incorrect—that it is in conflict with science and logic as well as with the supposed original revelation of Allah. In the religious sense, the Nation of Islam is not merely a movement, but a bona fide cultural phenomenon. The Black Muslims are not merely an occurrence—nor even a remarkable occurrence on the landscape of religious life in black America—but perhaps the most successful religious departure from classical black Christianity originating within the community itself.

African Americans have long been found in varying numbers along the full spectrum of religious life in the United States, and many have rejected doctrinal Christian belief in following one or another religious alternative, whether cult or mainstream. However, the Nation of Islam phenomenon perfected the previous experiments in black "Moslem" rebellion against Christianity and gave to African Americans a religious idea that has continued to work for the better part of a century—manifesting itself in three definitive Nation of Islam organizations and a number of lesser or related ones.<sup>2</sup> As distinct as Louis Farrakhan's present-day Nation of Islam is from Elijah Muhammad's organization, what links them is not only a fervent commitment to black nationalism but also the kind of apostasy (and I use this term in its pure definition) it represents with regard to the black Christian church and the Bible itself.

It seems that the founder of the Nation of Islam phenomenon was

not soundly rooted in the religion of Muhammad ibn Abdullah. Though he claimed to be a descendant of and a spiritual successor to Islam's great prophet, the *paterfamilias* of the "Lost Tribe of Shabazz in the wilderness of North America" advocated an "Islam" that would prove to be as disturbing to believers in the Qur'an as to believers in the Bible. However, the difference between the founder's conflict with traditional Islam and his conflict with Christianity was that from the beginning the Nation of Islam was aggressively and openly anti-Christian and it was the influence of Christianity that he tried to uproot. Some would argue that the original intent behind the founding of the Nation of Islam was to prepare the way for an authentic Islamic endeavor among African Americans, but this seems more romance than historical fact. In its various manifestations since the beginning, the cultic nature of the Nation of Islam as a religious phenomenon is constant because the religious and spiritual DNA of the movement lacks the gene of orthodoxy in either the Muslim or Christian sense. To be sure, many Black Muslims eventually found their way into traditional Islam, and no one can deny the inclination the Nation of Islam provided toward traditional Islam for many of its adherents. Still, this says more about the orientation of the adherents than about the theological continuity of the Nation of Islam with traditional Islam. 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. Those African Americans who moved from the Nation of Islam into traditional Islam might credit the Black Muslims for pointing them eastward, but they cannot retrospectively apply religious legitimacy to their Black Muslim experience in light of the teachings of the Qur'an. Furthermore, in many cases the move toward traditional Islam by former Black Muslims is equally a testimony to the religious bridges burning behind them. In other words, the Nation of Islam is far more proficient at demeaning Christianity than it is in introducing people to the religion of the Qur'an.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the fact that former adherents like Malcolm X, Warith Mohammed (Elijah Muhammad's son), and Muhammad Ali all became zealous proponents of Sunni Islam does not prove the Nation of Islam is proto-Islamic but suggests rather that it is pseudo-Isl-

lamic. Malcolm and Warith both faced opposition from the Nation of Islam for raising the banner of Islam, and Ali later acknowledged that Malcolm had chosen the right path while he had chosen to remain with the Black Muslims. Less than a week before his assassination Malcolm told an audience that “what Elijah Muhammad is teaching is an insult to the entire Muslim world.”<sup>4</sup> As Malcolm’s story particularly demonstrates, then, the one who would understand and embrace the Qur’an will by necessity flee the shores of “the Nation.” Those who continue to hope for a reconciliation between traditional Islam and the Nation of Islam have a long wait ahead.

There are those who would likewise blur the lines between the teachings of the Nation of Islam and those of the Christian church. In some instances Christian ministers have worked cooperatively with the Black Muslims. With the triumph (and it *was* a triumph) of the Million Man March in October 1995, Louis Farrakhan successfully gathered a million black men under his wing in Washington, D.C.—many of whom probably had Christian backgrounds and some of whom were Christian clergymen or laymen. And early in 1997, Benjamin F. Chavis, formerly of the NAACP and a Christian clergyman, announced he was joining Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam. Standing before the assembled Black Muslims with a Bible in one hand and a Qur’an in the other, Chavis displayed an amazing amount of wishful thinking when he declared, “I find no theological contradiction between being a black Christian and a black Muslim.” Even if Chavis (who wants to retain his credentials with the United Church of Christ) is successful keeping one foot in the church and one in the mosque, the “new paradigm for black leadership” he desires to demonstrate, religiously speaking, would be abortive.<sup>5</sup>

The undeniable favor enjoyed by the Black Muslims among African Americans today was foreshadowed a generation ago in the quiet and qualified sympathy of many blacks toward Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. The present popularity ranges from self-identified Christian clergy and laity who openly cooperate with and support the Black Muslims to those, like many of the brothers at the Million Man March, who would differentiate between the man who led the march and the unity and well-being of black people in the United

States. Fundamental to that distinction, however, is the moral high ground that has been claimed by Louis Farrakhan—not only as a social critic but as a minister who “works” the Bible so effectively that his rhetorical force is mistaken for theological and spiritual integrity. It is this confusion of force with integrity that is the defining theme of the rarely told story of the Nation of Islam and Christianity. When Louis Farrakhan credits Malcolm X as his teacher and Elijah Muhammad as “the Messenger,” it is this religious sleight of hand that represents both the lesson and the message of the Nation of Islam.

As a leader in the black community, Louis Farrakhan longs for the very thing he shall never possess: the mantle of the black church. Like the leaders of the precursor Nation of Islam organizations, Farrakhan is hopelessly at odds with the black Christian church. He may win the hearts of individual Christian pastors and may even enjoy the arm’s-length favor of many Christian people, but, like Simon Magus of old, he is caught in the galling trick bag of his own religious legacy. One discerning rabbi noted shortly after Farrakhan’s World’s Day of Atonement in October 1996:

Let’s face it, the Million Man March and the World’s Day of Atonement are really about getting people to attach to Farrakhan religiously. The religious power buttons he’s jealous of aren’t really held by Jews. They’re held by the black Christian leaders. That’s the constellation he wants. Farrakhan knows that as soon as he says Jesus, he’s lost. So he goes about it differently. He’s not really after the Pharisees, he’s after Jesus. Jews are just the effigy.<sup>6</sup>

No doubt, the black clergy recognize this also, but like Wyatt Tee Walker, pastor of Harlem’s Canaan Baptist Church, they have perhaps refrained from fighting Farrakhan in the name of black solidarity or because they feel he is saying things that need to be said to whites. In “An Open Letter to Louis Farrakhan & Others,” published not long before the Million Man March, Walker demanded that Farrakhan make public redress for “past intemperate remarks” about the black church “with a pledge to cease and desist in the future.” Walker wrote:

There is no way for me and others similarly situated, in the name of unity, to set aside the twenty-five years of caustic criticism that you

have leveled at Black Churches and Black preachers. If unity is the goal, then reconciliation must proceed first. I have always been offended by your criticism of Black [c]hurches and Black preachers but I held my peace in the name of unity. It was a mistake of judgment.<sup>7</sup>

According to one witness<sup>8</sup> to a meeting between Farrakhan, Walker, and other black clergy in New York City prior to the Million Man March, the former made some satisfactory gestures of reconciliation to Walker and the black church. They were apparently accepted, especially in light of the great opportunities afforded ministers who wished to appear with the Black Muslim leader at that momentous gathering in the nation's capital. However, Walker probably realized that as tempered and pacific as Farrakhan may present himself to the black church, his doctrines actually assume the Nation of Islam's perennial invective against Christianity. Detente may be possible for the black church and the Nation of Islam, but genuine reconciliation remains out of reach.

Well-attended marches and somber days of atonement notwithstanding, a Black Muslim cannot acquire the religious devotion that is entitled to the black Christian minister because African American Christians have always known the fundamental difference between *their* faith and that of the white Christian, just as they know the irreconcilable difference between Christianity and the Nation of Islam. In sheer chronology, the Nation of Islam was born too late, its founders and proponents appearing in history long after the black community recognized the duplicity of white Christianity in the spiritual wilderness of North America and decided to cling to Jesus nonetheless. This is something that Malcolm X came to learn and respect, especially after he was free of the "strait-jacket religion" of the Nation of Islam. The greatest defense against the simplistic charge that *Christianity* is the "white man's religion" and a "slave-making lie" is found in the integrity of black Christian faith. On the day of judgment it will be neither Moses nor Jesus who will rise up to rebuke Elijah Muhammad, but it will be David Walker, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth who will stand to make accusation.

The story of Malcolm X and Christianity, then, is instructive, first, because it represents an important if not essential aspect of his life as

a religious revolutionist as well as the religious context in which Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam existed. Second, the Nation of Islam's religious themes continue to resound in the doctrines and preachments of Louis Farrakhan's contemporary Nation of Islam (along with his lesser known "Muslim" rivals). The story of Malcolm and Christianity, however, is unique, not identically resembling the experiences of those who abandoned the Christian church for "Islam." Malcolm's story rises above the cultic narrative of the Black Muslims, his quest for religious integrity—like his quest for human rights—having been compelled by sincerity, self-criticism, and a selfless agenda that have rarely been characteristic of the Nation of Islam or the people who have benefited most from it.

Malcolm X saw the Nation of Islam committing the most heinous sins at the point of its greatest institutional strength, and many of the same charges he once leveled at the black Christian church he ultimately was forced to aim at his former Black Muslim brethren. Even more tragically, in the end it was Elijah Muhammad's movement that brought about his death. Even factoring in government culpability by way of surveillance, infiltration, and propagandastic exacerbation, Malcolm's assassination was brought about by the same "Nation" he had helped to build. Louis Farrakhan may decry the shameful work of the FBI in provoking hatred for Malcolm within the Black Muslim movement, but almost three decades later he issued a stylistic rejoinder to those outside of the Nation of Islam that suggested the public tears he has shed for Malcolm contain more salt than sorrow: "Was Malcolm your traitor or was he ours? And if we dealt with him like a nation deals with a traitor what the hell business is it of yours?"<sup>9</sup>

The tragic fact remains that Malcolm was crushed, not by the cross but by the star and crescent of the Nation of Islam. The final irony is that Malcolm's death, almost messianic to many,<sup>10</sup> may also serve as a living, indeed dying reminder of the cultic dependence of the Black Muslims upon the Christian message and also the spiritual vitality that former black Christians have brought with them from the church into traditional Islam. Malcolm's altruism kept him from hiding comfortably and safely abroad while the Nation of Islam advanced its disingenuous "Islamic" message among African Ameri-



cans. His integrity led him back to the United States and onto the stage of death where his final witness poured forth, not in words but in martyr's blood. In finding his own tragic death on behalf of others, then, Malcolm X perhaps drew closer to the cross than he had ever done in life.

*Malcolm and the Cross* will inevitably fall short of fully explaining this compelling “anti-quest” since, as St. Paul has written, “who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of a man, which is in him?”<sup>11</sup> With Malcolm gone we will never know many things about his inner pursuit of religious truth, especially in regard to Christianity. Nevertheless, this book may at least highlight a valuable facet of an extraordinary sojourn that ultimately transcended the often parochial worlds of race and religion—a journey that men and women will retrace in the pages of Malcolm's story for generations to come.

PART I

## Fires Which Burnt Brightly

### *The Nation of Islam in a Christian World*

*Malice and habit have now won the day.  
The honours we fought for are lost in the fray.*

*Once proud and truthful, now humbled and bent,  
Fires which burnt brightly, now energies spent.*

*Our flowers and feathers as scarring as weapons.  
Our poems and letters have turned to deceptions.*

—Excerpted from Keith Reid's  
“Fires (Which Burnt Brightly),”  
from Procol Harum’s *Grand Hotel*  
(Chrysalis Records, 1973)



## A Rumor from the East

### *The Fard Muhammad Movement and the Problem of the Bible*

But rumors from the East and from the North will disturb him, and he will go forth with great wrath to destroy and annihilate many.  
—Daniel 11:44

Within a few years of his appearance in Detroit, Michigan, in 1930, the founder of the original Nation of Islam had become a divine icon.<sup>1</sup> Having first appeared in the urban black community in the guise of a peddler, he quickly implemented an agenda of proselytization and organization that likely reflected previous involvement in other movements.<sup>2</sup> Obviously a man with strong racial convictions, W. D. Fard, also known as Fard Muhammad, quickly sought to exert his influence among his customers. Guiding them from informal conversation to house groups, and finally to rented facilities, Fard molded his trusting followers into an organization within a short time. He trained assistants, devised a catechism, and recycled the frustration of racist victimization and the desperation of economic plight into the fuel needed to propel them out of the Christian world and into the world of “Islam.”

Fard played the *mysterioso* to the hilt. Despite the fact that he qualified as a “white” man, he was not of European background and certainly held racial sentiments that were as foreign to most white Americans as the religion of Islam. His first success in the eyes of his

followers was perhaps his own profile as a man who had peeled away the appearance of whiteness from the mentality of whiteness—a distinction Malcolm X would elevate many years later in his descriptions of “white” Muslims abroad. What could be more mysterious than a “white” man with religiously charged sentiments that easily rivaled the most militant “race men” of the era? Indeed, so successful was Fard at this profile that his followers accepted him as a virtual non-white. “Professor Fard had straight hair . . . and [he had] very light features,” recalled the son of Fard’s greatest follower. “He was not presented to us as a Caucasian, mind you, we were told that one of his relatives was Caucasian.” As to his “white” relatives, Fard painted the most exotic family tree, telling some of his black followers that he was from the lineage of the Hashimide sheriffs of Mecca; he told others that he was from the tribe of Koreish, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. Interestingly, police records suggest that Fard was of a mixed racial background, being either of Hawaiian or Polynesian/British heritage, though other theories suggest Fard was of Syrian and Caribbean background, or of some other eastern extraction.<sup>3</sup>

The mystery of Fard’s race was exceeded by the mystery of his past. Within the movement, Fard seems to have fed the fascination of his followers not only with tricks and illusions that gave him a mystical aura, but also by making himself out to be older than he actually was and by glamorizing his mission with claims about his accomplishments. He reportedly told some of his followers that he had studied for twenty years at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, in preparation for his saving work among blacks. He elsewhere claimed that he had worked among dark people for twenty years before he “made himself known to them.” Fard’s past was not what he portrayed, though it may have been equally as interesting. Active on the West Coast, it appears he had mixed race politics with criminality and served three years at San Quentin before embarking eastward to Detroit.<sup>4</sup>

Still, Fard was a thoroughgoing “race man,” and there is every reason to believe that his interest in black liberation was sincere and that his agenda, however peculiar, was informed by conviction. Understandably, Fard attacked the hypocrisy of white Christendom, but it