Review of Lewis V. Baldwin and Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin

Daniel L. Smith-Christopher
Loyola Marymount University, dchristopher@lmu.edu

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provides the necessary background for understanding those challenges.

*Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘*
*Hartford Seminary*


Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X are quite clearly larger-than-life figures in twentieth-century American history. Attempting to capture their unique contributions in the midst of fascinating, and often tragic, social forces would be a monumental task, but undertaking a comparative analysis of their contributions is, if nothing else, courageous—all the more reason to observe that *Between Cross and Crescent* is an impressive work covering a great deal of ground, both philosophical and historical. The book represents the combined effort of two noted scholars, who divide between themselves the task of dealing with specific topics—a wise choice, given the enormity of the task at hand and the authors’ own interesting backgrounds. A look at the table of contents gives the reader a good idea of the topics covered:

1. Out of the Dark Past: Malcolm, Martin, and Black Cultural Reality
2. Al-Qur’an and Sunnah: From Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz
3. Of Their Spiritual Strivings: Malcolm and Martin on Religion and Freedom

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4. In the Matter of Faith: Malcolm and Martin on Family and Manhood
5. The Character of Womanhood: The Views of Malcolm and Martin
6. A New Spirit of Resistance: Malcolm and Martin on Children and Youth
7. The Great Debate: Multiethnic Democracy or National Liberation
8. Reluctant Admiration: What Malcolm and Martin Thought about Each Other
9. Toward a Broader Humanism: Malcolm, Martin, and the Search for Global Community

The work has excellent notes and has a full bibliography and index.

In the opening chapter, the reader becomes acquainted with the parameters of the study and the inherent problems with the approach. Often, there are gaps in the specific information about each of the two figures precisely when one wishes to make a comparison between them. Obviously, Malcolm and Martin did not always speak on the same subjects or refer to the same influences. Still, it is a bit disconcerting to read phrases like, “Malcolm undoubtedly became familiar” or “Martin must have had some exposure.” This, however, is not typical of the study as a whole, and the writers are, as a rule, dedicated to their sources. The very fact, however, that one is occasionally pushed to the limit of the sources seems inevitable, given the stature of Malcolm and Martin. The authors are well aware of the status of the two figures as “cultural icons” and acknowledge the difficulties that this presents. Another way to express this is to note that definite “popular orthodoxies” have grown around these figures, their meanings, and their continued significance—making dispassionate analysis nearly impossible. The authors, however, are up to the task.
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Al-Hadid’s analysis of Malcolm X from an Islamic perspective is both informative and challenging. He is clearly willing to consider some of the hardest issues with regard to African American interest in Islam, both historical and contemporary, but this reviewer would have hoped for a somewhat more critical analysis of the role of Sunni Islam in the life of Malcolm X. Sadly, of course, we will never be able to have a full appreciation of such a matter, but we rely on scholars like Al-Hadid to tell us what can be known, given an understanding of the wider Islamic context. There is somewhat of a tendency to be apologetic about the post–Nation of Islam experience of Malcolm X (on page 103, Baldwin raises this issue quite strongly), although one also appreciates the strong conviction that more mainstream Islamic influences led Malcolm X to reconsider his earlier criticism of King and be more open to wider involvement in his efforts with the founding of organizations like the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

In the section entitled “Of Their Spiritual Strivings,” the writers raise serious and important issues and are often willing to be critical of their respective traditions. An important contribution of the work consists in the consideration it gives to the role of various streams of Christianity within the African American communities that were most certainly part of the context of King’s development and of those traditions that clearly had a negative impact on Malcolm X. Baldwin begins to look at the hypocrisy of certain expressions of Christianity and the impact of this on Malcolm X (88), but I would have appreciated even more in-depth analysis of this issue from a scholar of Baldwin’s stature. Finally, the issue of Jewish involvement, particularly in King’s campaigns, has assumed greater importance of late, but, certain comments (119-121) excepted, it is largely set aside in this work. For obvious reasons, this is an area requiring further examination; it has potentially
important ramifications for the relationship of three significant American communities.

The chapter on womanhood raises all the right issues of King’s and Malcolm X’s relation to the women’s movement then and now. Here is, perhaps, where the two leaders were at their weakest, especially in the hindsight of modern analysis in feminist and womanist contexts in contemporary theory and debate. This excellent chapter is critical, insightful, and, most certainly, suggestive of the need for further analysis. This chapter also leads, quite naturally, into an analysis of the role of the family in the life and philosophy of the two great leaders. As is often the case with leaders who are thrust into the center of historical forces, we learn that their idealism and practice are often wrenched apart from the realities of being leaders of movements. The rhetoric of the centrality and importance of the family, sadly, is often accompanied by the regrets of leaders who find that their own families suffer a great deal from these public figures’ notoriety and their struggle to fulfill their calling.

Especially for the interested nonspecialist, the book’s final chapters examine the political philosophies of Black Nationalism and civil rights struggles in the twentieth century in their various formulations and suggest some helpful and hopeful ways in which the legacy of these two figures can become a part of creative work toward contemporary struggles in African American and global contexts. In the area of social and political philosophy, the only major weakness of the book is that neither Baldwin nor Al-Hadid seem to have much sympathy with, or much interest in, the depth of King’s philosophy of nonviolence or the possible misrepresentations of nonviolence in some of the public pronouncements of Malcolm X. At times, the whole subject of nonviolence is dealt with somewhat tangentially, which, in my opinion, is a failure to appreciate the strategic value of nonviolent direct action in King, or even in Gandhi, as well as of the historical precedents for success that advocates of
nonviolence throughout history are clearly able to marshal if given voice to do so. Nonviolence theory is a huge area that has received, in this reviewer’s opinion, insufficient attention, given its centrality to King’s philosophy and Malcolm X’s reactions to King. A complete chapter on King and Malcolm X on nonviolence would have been justified. In general, however, this book contributes a great deal to our appreciation and understanding of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and, even more clearly, of part of the agenda that continues to confront Christians and Muslims in American and global contexts. It is a timely work indeed!

Daniel L. Smith-Christopher
Loyola Marymount University


This revised version of the book, first published in 1951, restates much of the author’s original thesis about the significance of Iqbal’s life and thought. In the original version, the title, The Ardent Pilgrim, conveyed something of the author’s active response to the passion of the poet’s call for reinvigorated Muslim minds and hearts. One did not, and does not, need to be a Muslim to feel the compelling urgency of Iqbal’s poetry. Singh writes of the “crystalline beauty” of much of Iqbal’s’ work (17). Singh first worked on this manuscript in Europe in 1947, when the violence of the partition of India into two countries was tearing the subcontinent apart. In that context, he may well have felt tormented in his own mind by contradictory feelings—his love for Iqbal’s poetry and his grief over the horrors of the