

BLACK SUPREMACY AND ANTI-SEMITISM: RELIGION IN MALCOLM X

Malcolm X opens with the now famous video of the Los Angeles police beating Rodney King. Imposed over this is an American flag which starts to burn until a singed, red and white striped 'X' dominates the screen. In one of the many talk show interviews that Spike Lee did to promote the film, he said he chose to open the film with the Rodney King video to show that little had changed in America since Malcolm's time.

This is a limited truth. When inflated to represent the whole of a people's and a nation's story, it's irresponsible, a political distortion that turns history into propaganda. The Rodney King beating is only one face of black/white relations in America. Another equally important face is the fact that a number of whites were outraged by the beating and subsequent acquittal of the policemen involved. That white America could get outraged by the beating of a black man is a significant change from the indifference of the early Sixties. It's a change which the cynical take underlying the film's opening frames would want us to believe has either not occurred or is totally insignificant.

The title sequence gives us the image of the black man as victim of white America. The opening scene, however, unconsciously contradicts that sequence. In that scene Malcolm X has his hair straightened, presenting the audience with another order of victim, a man who is victimized by his own racial self-hatred. The depth of Malcolm's self-hatred is essential for an understanding of what would become his politics. The film undermines such understanding because Denzel Washington is darker than Malcolm X. In his autobiography, Malcolm states that he grew up proud because he looked more white than his siblings. And the Nation of Islam became the means by which he sought to exorcise his racial self-hatred. Despite the film's respect for this position, the adoption of black supremacist politics doesn't purge anything. It merely puts a veneer of racial militancy over the agony of one's sense of inferiority.

Lee's *Malcolm X* fails because it refuses to examine X's own politics of racial self-hatred, and has no other point of view except Malcolm's. Thus, it can mainly act only as a mouthpiece for black nationalism. This absence of another perspective leaves the uninformed viewer with the impression that Malcolm was a major figure during his lifetime. In fact, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. had a much broader following. While Malcolm received wide media coverage, on the black political spectrum he was on the fringe. In addition, the film refuses to consider information which doesn't derive from the autobiography. It presents as truth that the Klan set fire to the Little family home while Malcolm's mother was pregnant with him, and that his father was murdered by Klansmen. Both incidents make for very dramatic footage in the film. However, Bruce Perry's biography of Malcolm X, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, presents convincing evidence that it was Malcolm's father who set fire to the house, and that his father was killed while trying to climb aboard a moving streetcar as he was running from a girlfriend's husband. While it is understandable that Malcolm would create myths which granted him impeccable credentials as a victim of white racism right from the womb, it is irresponsible for a filmmaker to perpetuate those myths.

Spike Lee also maintains his anti-Semitic record in this film. In the prison scene where Malcolm confronts the chaplain, asking him: "You've been talking about the disciples. What color were they?" The chaplain demurs, but Malcolm presses on. "They were Hebrew, weren't they?" The chaplain concurs. "As Jesus was," continues Malcolm. "Jesus was also a Hebrew. What color were the original Hebrews?" The chaplain demurs again and Malcolm presses home his point, namely, the Hebrews were black, and therefore God is black.

This neat bit of sophistry implies that Judaism was originally a black religion that was later stolen by whites, a view promulgated by the Nation of Islam and assorted Afrocentrists. Such a view is an act of cultural imperialism reading back into the past a contemporary black supremacist perspective that

recreates God in its own image. It is also anti-Semitic because it implies that the Jews stole Judaism from blacks. The second anti-Semitic scene comes in the following speech by Malcolm conveyed in a voiceover:

'The white people who are guilty, of white supremacy try and hide their own guilt by accusing the Honorable Elijah Muhammad of teaching black supremacy when he tries to uplift the mentality, the social, and the economic condition of black people in tills country. And tile Jews, who have been guilty of the black people economically, civilly, and otherwise, hide their guilt by accusing the Honorable Elijah Muhammad of being anti-Semitic simply because he teaches our people to go into business for ourselves and trying to take over the economic leadership in our own community.' (By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X . . . Including the Screenplay by Spike Lee with Ralph Wiley, p. 271)

There is no denying that there were profound anti-Semitic strains in Malcolm's speeches. But Lee excluded other troubling aspects of Malcolm's public and private life from the film. The film never mentions that Betty Shabbaz left Malcolm on three separate occasions, or that Malcolm was unable to convince Muhammad All to leave the Nation of Islam with him. There is no organic reason that these words are in the film, and they serve no purpose except to further one of the worst anti-Jewish stereotypes.

The film concludes with a photograph of Malcolm X, and with his assertion that change must be brought about "by any means necessary." Slogans, however, don't make a politics. Means are at the heart of political change, and the means are the hard, unglamorous, unromantic day-to-day work of organizing people and resources around a viable and coherent ideology. "By any means necessary" was a placebo when Malcolm proclaimed it in the Sixties. It is a narcotic now, designed to give one a 'black high' and nothing more. "By any means necessary" is not a point of view; it is a cry of despair, a mewl of impotence, a fitting coda to a politics based on empty posturing.

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