A Case for Thinking and Living Theologically:

Faith, Imagination, and Malcolm X

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Are our lives as we wish them to be? Are our lives as they *ought* to be? I pose these questions, of course, with a life of faith in mind. Were tomorrow to mark the end of our time on this earth, could we name the days that had come before as having been lived in the fullness of faith, or, at the very least, lived in earnest seeking of it? Our answer, naturally depends on what a life of faith means and therefore entails. I pen these words in hopes that we might listen and consider thinking over these questions *theologically*.[1] Put another way, this is an essay that proposes that thinking and living theologically is how we seek to live in close accord with the will of God and in intimate imitation of the prophets who came before us. This is an essay that places theology at the heart of a life of faith. It is also an essay that will argue that faith and righteousness are inseparably joined—not just for each of us individually, but for us collectively as a community.

Theology

What precisely, then, do I mean by theology? What exactly does theology do? Why does it matter? For most Muslims living in the English-speaking world, the word "theology" points to the stuff of faith—it is what we confess, it concerns what we believe. Thus, theology is often understood to be an enumeration of our beliefs: that we believe in God, in angels, in scriptures, in prophets and messengers, in the Last Day, and that God decrees all things, both the good as well as the bad.[2] It is a belief that our time on this earth is brief and that all that we do on it is not lost before God. It is a belief that at the end of all things we shall be held to account—that we shall stand before the Almighty to be judged. It is a belief that either Heaven or Hell awaits us in the time after, *al-Ākhira*.

1. The main arguments of this essay arise from an earlier book, *Modern Muslim Theology*. This essay invites the reader to engage with that work, where the ideas shared here are explored in greater depth.

2. This is drawn from the definition of *īmān* provided in the hadith of Jibrīl. Al-Nawawī, *Al-Arba'in al-Nawawiyya: The Forty Hadiths of Imam Nawawi*, trans. Khalid Williams (Ihya Publishing, 2022), 27-28; al-Nawawī, *Al-Nawawī's Forty Hadith*, trans. Ezzedin Ibrahim & Denys Johnson-Davies (Dar al-Ilm, n.d.), 30-31.

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And so, when it comes to theology we often turn to creed (*ʿaqīda*) that attempts to profess for us the most fundamental aspects of faith to which we are bound (invoking that root meaning of "binding," *ʿ-q-d*). Or we might think of philosophical theology (so much "talk"), *ʿilm al-kalām*, which so often consists of apologetics and polemics, or, in other words, the drive to declare our beliefs correct (apologetics) and to argue how those of others are incorrect (polemics). Of course, these fields of learning are a part of the Islamic tradition and have proved important at different times for preserving our community's fidelity and integrity. This is why such care and consideration continues to be exerted in translating *ʿaqīda* and *kalām* texts into our everyday vernaculars. These words continue to speak to us. They remain useful, if not critical, for refining our philosophical capacity and acumen.

Yet theology, I contend, is more than this. It also entails the felt and embodied conviction that God loves,[3] that God forgives (Q. 4:110, Q. 39:53), that God's mercy outweighs God's wrath,[4] that God's mercy encompasses all things (Q. 7:156), that God desires our faith and our righteousness together (Q. 4:124, Q. 5:93, Q. 10:9, Q. 16:97, Q. 18:30 *passim*), that God is closer to us than our jugular vein (Q. 50:16), that whithersoever we turn, there is the face of God (Q. 2:115), and that when we approach God by a handbreadth, God approaches us by an arm's length, when we approach by an arm's length, God approaches by a fathom, and that when we come walking, God comes running.[5] These are dimensions of our faith that we are blessed to experience throughout the course of our lives, within and beyond the realm of reason. Muslim theology, then, is also our belief that the Divine is not a power distant and disinterested in our lives, but a God of revelation and response, a God of palpable proximity, a God who hears all, sees all, and speaks to each and every one of us. Theology is our living before the overwhelming presence of the Merciful.

As I hope I am making clear, theology is more than an enumeration of articles of belief. It is far more intimate, existential, and direct. It steals into the interstices of our being. I am proposing that we understand theology from a deeply relational perspective, specifically that theology is, first and foremost, *how we human servants respond to God, in both the most fundamental and fullest of ways*. It is what Muslims often capture through words such as *dīn* and *īmān*.[6] Throughout human history God has continually disclosed Himself to us through revelation, through prophets and messengers, through the testaments of scripture, through signs in creation, and through signs latent within our human selves (Q. 41:53). God speaks to us always and everywhere, and in this sense, His speech is eternal and ongoing.

3. H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, *Love in the Holy Qur'an* (Kazi Publications, Inc., 2010), 15-30, 37-53.

4. Muhammad Amin Abu Usamah Al-Arabi bin Razduq, trans., *Commentary on the Riyad-us-Saliheen*, 2 vols. (Darussalam, 1999), 1:386; *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.

5. Ezzeddin Ibrahim & Denys Johnson-Davies, eds. & trans., *Forty Hadith Qudsi* (n.p., n.d.), 78-79; *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, *Sunan Ibn Majāh*.

6. Consider, for instance, al-Bayhaqī's (d. 458/1066) treatise called *Shuʿab al-īmān*, which enumerates seventy-two branches of faith or *īmān* and takes as its inspiration the well-known hadith: "Faith has seventy-some branches or sixty-some branches, the highest of which is saying 'there is no god but God' and the lowest of which is removing harm from the road…" (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 35). More contemporaneously, Syed Muhammmad Naquib al-Attas has articulated an expansive understanding of *dīn* that is similarly-spirited to the present undertaking. Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Shuʿab al-īmān*, ed. Muḥammad Saʿīd Basyūnī Zaghlūl, 9 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2000); Syed Muhammmad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2001), 41-89.

Indeed, God speaks like no other. The revelation of the divine possesses a multivocality and multivalency that is unmatched. During the time of its initial revelation upon the earth, the Qur'an was addressing those in that immediate moment: our Prophet and Messenger ﷺ, his faithful followers, his enemies, the hypocrites, and all those near and far, all at once. And yet, in all the moments afore and after, the Qur'an still addresses each and every one of us as we traverse the span of this life and this world that we are afforded. In the Qur'an and through it, God speaks directly to each of us. This is no address locked in the past, but one that still speaks. It speaks to us now. What, then, is our response?

Theology is how we choose to live in response to revelation. Not just convictions or beliefs, theology is all that we do: every devotion, every deed, and every act great and small.

It is within this reality—where the weight of God's revelation continuously addresses us, invites us, and confronts us—that theology arises. We are called to respond. What will we "say" back? Theology encompasses the many ways that we creatures struggle to respond to our Creator. Derived from *theos* ("the divine") and *logos* ("speech, word"), it is, in one sense, "speech about God" or our "account of divinity." That, however, is too limiting. Theology is more directly what we are saying *back* to God. It is more existentially the very *account* of our lives lived before the Divine. In other words, theology is how we choose to live in response to revelation. Not just convictions or beliefs, theology is all that we do: every devotion, every deed, and every act great and small. It encompasses the ethical, the relational, and the jurisprudential (or matters of *fiqh*) within our lives. It includes the care we extend to (or withhold from) others and the works of good we seek to do or fail to fulfill because we are never outside of revelation's address. We are ever within it. Think not of theology, then, as just the bedrock of what it means to be human. It is, at the same time, something more immediate. Theology is what we are doing now and in every moment—all of us—whether we are conscious of it or not.

Living in the World

With respect to our lives of faith we must also take into account our place in this life and this world. God does not address us in a void—we abide in the particularities of the *dunyā*. And the *dunyā*, for its part, is far from a still and quiet place. It is thick with noise. It is turbulent. *And We will indeed test you with a touch of fear and famine, and loss of wealth, lives, and fruits* (Q. 2:155). *We try you with evil and good, as a trial, then unto Us shall you be returned* (Q. 21:35). Our time in this *dunyā* is a time of vicissitudes. The Almighty is ever testing us as long as we dwell here. Disparities and difficulties abound. Ceaselessly and cyclically, we are beset with war, violence, loss, and harm. Disease, disaster, and deprivation assume varied forms. Even the wrongs we commit against one another have their distinctive traits, shapes, and genealogies—wrongs wrapped in hubristic ideas like nation, race, and individuality. The houses of Pharaoh are many and we abide within them. Consider too the more personal tragedies that beset us periodically: fortunes foiled, lives lost, and trusts broken. The very face of our tribulations is ever changing, uniquely attuned to the circumstances of our lives. What we face now are catastrophes particular to our moment and our place in this life at this time.

This world has presented us with a ceaseless stream of tribulations, has it not? The earth groans under our weight as we teeter on the brink of climate collapse. War and genocide are very much alive around us. The plight of Palestine stands as an enduring and poignant reminder. Widespread destruction, death, and ruination are not hidden from view but rolled into our daily scroll. To pursue the life of faith, then, is to respond to the world as well. It too cries out. It too has its demands and challenges for us. We respond to creation and the Creator at once.

Faced with a multitude of worldly injustices and iniquities, arguably from a frame and on a scale fundamentally different than in times past, we are ever engaged with navigating and negotiating the trials that seek to overtake us. Yet, we are not addressed alone. God has placed us within so many circles of community. We are to one another, children, parents, and partners, neighbors and strangers, providers, caretakers, and recipients in kind to an array of other souls. We are part of a community of faith. Our response to God and the world, then, must account for these relationships and the responsibilities and duties that they oblige.

This is all to say, there are as many theologies possible as there are ways of living that nurture our connection to the Divine and maintain

our relations with the rest of creation. What the manifold prophets of God and the companions of our beloved Messenger ﷺ show us is that the life of faith can be pursued in different ways. While each was unstinting in their devotion to the Divine and unwavering in their observance of worship, each offers a different example of how to enact and embody righteousness in the world. Likewise, no theology formed in line with the prophetic paradigm stands categorically above the rest. The nature and form of how we respond to God, our theology, is shaped by the circumstances and challenges of our time, place, and person. Our responses to God will differ—they must—if we each are to be attentive to our particular place and purpose in this life. We must ask ourselves: what challenges confront us most pointedly? Then, how ought our lives unfold accordingly? What will be the form of our faithfulness? How will we work righteously through the troubles and trials of this world?

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Imagination

To answer these questions, I would have us consider another key element. To respond well—to live one's theology faithfully—requires a faculty that we often overlook: vision. By vision, though, I am not referring to that ocular faculty that grants us sight so often referred to in the Qur'an (Q. 16:78, Q. 23:78) and so carefully studied and observed by our physicians and philosophers.[7] Rather, I am referring to our ability to imagine, to *envision* within our minds that which is not immediately before us. I believe the imagination, with all its energy and capaciousness, is needed now more than ever.

Historically, reason and rationality have commanded greater attention when it comes to theology. Reason, of course, has its place. It will always be important. The thinkers of our past gravitated to reason as that faculty which set human beings apart from other creatures, the beasts of the land, sky, and sea. But the world today is a dramatically different place. Algorithms and machines of human design possess a

7. See for instance Ibn Sīna (d. 428/1037), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 687/1288).

greater fidelity to reason than our own. Computers and automation dominate our everyday existence. Our lives are hyper rationalized. Reason is so pervasive it no longer serves as it once did as a point of human distinction. Do the banks of servers we build really serve us or have we become their servants as we cede to them space and resources? Out of convenience and complacency, we seem to be submitting ourselves more and more to digital determinations, rather than to the One to whom we ought to surrender. Human reason alone is not enough.

Resurfacing in significance are our other faculties—the imagination, I contend, in particular. We use this subtle faculty all the time in order to anticipate things to come or help determine a course to follow. The imagination is the engine behind our ability to envision possibilities. From it, springs both creativity and insight. The imagination illumines untried avenues and overlooked connections. It shapes our sense of beauty and propels us towards dreams. Indeed, its function is foundational for faith itself.

Our community of faith has never been without it; the imagination has been with us since the beginning. While often unnamed, it hides in plain sight. It underlies that well-known counsel of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ related in the hadith of Jibrīl: "Worship God as if you see Him, for though you do not see Him, He sees you."[8] The Prophet ﷺ offers these words in response to a query about the nature of *iḥsān* or spiritual excellence. For our purposes, his response is telling because the imagination is here, just beneath the surface of this prophetic utterance. Although the word "imagine" does not appear here or elsewhere in the account, the Messenger of God ﷺ is inviting us to do just this: "Worship God *as if* you see Him…." We are asked to imagine that we can see God—that we can *envision* Allah—*as if* the Divine could be visibly manifest, even though the Almighty is unseen. We are being instructed that the imagination is precisely the means for pursuing spiritual excellence, *iḥsān*, in our lives. This is what the imagination does, it summons into our consciousness that which is not immediately present. This faculty, endowed by the Divine, is our access to the realities of the Unseen. And in this life, foremost of the Unseen is the transcendent Creator, our Lord and Sustainer. In this way, we are directed to "Worship God *as if* you see Him…." We are directed to imagine this. Imagination, then, is not incidental to theology. It can animate the entire enterprise. For through the imagination, we are able to envision those relationships to which God is ever calling us. Our imaginations light the way.

8. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4777.

Malcolm's Theology

Until now I have dealt primarily with ideas—theology, revelation, imagination, and our response. To put it plainly, I have been speaking of theology in theory. What I hope will be more compelling is to behold theology in practice—to *imagine* it—unfolding in the lives of those around us. We need only look to the past to find so many examples. With that in mind, allow me to describe a theology lived not too far distant from our present lives. Consider with me the theology *lived* by El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, our brother, Malcolm X. Having left us sixty years ago, we have reached what would have been his one hundredth year, had God allowed more time. Although many decades have passed since his death, the faith and works of Malcolm continue to resonate with us.

Without question, Malcolm's presence continues to loom large on our horizon. We invoke his words regularly. We continue to share his critiques. His image, striking and uncompromising, has become a symbol of challenge and an icon for struggle. Malcolm endures, in part, because the injustices that he confronted during his lifetime have yet to be undone. They continue to beleaguer us. How Malcolm lived and died—his theology—speaks as much to us now as it did to those who lived alongside him. What of his wisdom, words, and works can we draw from in the formation of our own faith right now? While there are many lessons we might learn from Malcolm's life, I would have us consider one aspect in particular. But to appreciate it, we must first concern ourselves with how his life is commonly shared.

How Malcolm lived and died—his theology—speaks as much to us now as it did to those who lived alongside him.

Malcolm is, of course, far from an unknown. The general contours of his life have been conveyed through so many popular accounts and portrayals. Media coverage abounds. In the main, the narrative unfolds in three acts. Act One: While still a child, Malcolm Little loses his parents. His father, Earl, dies in unclear circumstances, either as the result of an accident or escalating hostilities from white supremacists. Then, his mother, Louise, is institutionalized through state antagonism. The children, Malcolm included, are separated from one another and forced into foster care. Unfortunately, for the young, searching, and impressionable Malcolm, waywardness takes

hold. Soon enough, he strays. Reckless and spiraling, Malcolm lands in jail, as much a result of his race as the life of vice that he pursued. Yet it is there, at the bottom, that he begins his climb.

Act Two: Malcolm, now a young man, finds discipline and liberation during his imprisonment through the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Upon his release, he joins the Nation of Islam as a true believer, quickly becoming an earnest minister. It is at this time that Malcolm X replaces Malcolm Little. Recruiting, organizing, and inspiring, Minister Malcolm rises through the ranks, eventually elevated by Elijah himself to National Minister. At the same time the country is embroiled in a period of roiling racial turmoil (did it ever end?), during which Malcolm erupts on the American stage. He is outspoken. He is unrelenting. In body and voice Malcolm is an incisive critique of white America: Race disfigures you. He calls them to righteous account. At the same time, he calls his own Black community together towards unapologetic uplift.

Act Three: Then, comes scandal—not from without but from within. Discoveries of immoral behavior set Malcolm at odds with his former mentor. His faith in the Nation is shaken. He is cast out. He cuts himself free. Unmoored, Malcolm turns to the broader swath of the Muslim *umma*—that global community of faith—and journeys abroad. A humbling visit to the holy city of Mecca catalyzes another cascade of changes. Attracted by the gravitational force of the Qur'an and Kaʿba, Malcolm is drawn into a new orbit. His transformation continues. He turns increasingly to the promise of the wider Third World struggle and the potential of an imagined Muslim International. He sets the name El Hajj Malik El Shabazz alongside Malcolm X. But then, before another year passes, Malcolm X is assassinated on February 21, 1965. In full view of his community and family, he is slain on the stage of the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. God calls him back and we now live in the wake of Malcolm's passing from this life to the next.

As Malcolm himself describes, "My life has always been one of changes."[9] The currents of those changes can be felt in between the lines of the preceding narrative. Certainty of those currents can sweep us away. Indeed, the Malcolm X that often captures our imagination is the Malcolm of Mecca. Words so often shared are those that Malcolm pens after his hajj pilgrimage:

> Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this Ancient Holy Land, the home of

9. Malcolm X & Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Grove Press, 1965), 408.

> Abraham, Muhammad, and all the other prophets of the Holy Scriptures… During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug)—while praying to the *same God*—with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white… We were *truly* all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God had removed the 'white' from their *minds*, the 'white' from their behavior, and the 'white' from their *attitude*.[10]

These are powerful words—enamoring. They ring, almost, with a note of triumphalism. Malcolm's experience of religious brotherhood, seemingly unsullied by race, is what proves so pivotal for the changing shape of his faith. This, we might think, is *our* doing—we Muslims, exemplary in conduct, untainted, an inspiration.

Yet, a closer look reveals more of Malcolm's thinking. Other truths were becoming apparent to him during his time with the wider *umma*. Elsewhere he writes, "They say 'Insha Allah' and then wait; and as they are waiting the world passes them by."[11] These are not words composed for his autobiography nor shared in any speech. They were confided in the sanctum of his diary, a travelogue that Malcolm kept during the last year of his life. They were written on April 24, 1964, two days after the Hajj, out of the same experience that inspired those other words: "Never have I witnessed…" Although more spare, this line about "They say 'Insha Allah…'" cuts incisively because it represents an indictment—or an admonishment—of us. As moved as Malcolm was by the pilgrimage, his fellow Muslims had also given him cause for consternation, captured in that oft-uttered phrase *in shāʾ Allāh*, "if God wills."

What troubles Malcolm, however, is not the phrase itself, but the manner of its invocation—an invocation that many of us have encountered and perhaps been guilty of deploying ourselves. It is an *in shāʾ Allāh* given as ambivalent response. It is a lackadaisical, non-committal affirmation that is, in truth, no affirmation at all. Will you join us? Will you take action? Will you commit? *In shāʾ Allāh*… uttered only to mask emptiness. Malcolm received—he felt—this response all too frequently during his time with Muslims abroad.

While a single line, the diary entry reconfigures the narrative of Malcolm's life, the shape of his theology. It shines a light on an often overlooked aspect of Malcolm's later life; when Malcolm journeyed overseas, he was not only looking to recenter his faith, he was also

10. Malcolm X & Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 344-345. A different version of the letter is presented in Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (Grove Press, 1965), 59-60.

11. Malcolm X, *The Diary of Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) 1964*, edited by Herb Boyd and Ilyasah Al-Shabazz (Third World Press, 2013), 19; Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (Viking, 2011), 310.

earnestly searching for support for the cause of his Black community back home. He was seeking justice. Driven by righteousness and hope, he crisscrossed continents for the sake of this cause. Yet time and again his efforts were met with equivocation. The Muslims were no different. They were willing to pray with Malcolm, but were they willing to stand, work, and struggle alongside him as well? All too often the response was this exhausting *in shāʾ Allāh* of inaction—a response intended to distance and delay, a response that let the weight of this world continue to press and oppress. Imagine if our response to God was issued with such ambivalence. Imagine if our reply to the call of the Divine were so muted and empty! Yet when Malcolm sought to rouse his newfound community to righteousness, the answers were hollow, rather than holy.

Malcolm's vision of the faith worked differently. In a different letter written in the wake of Hajj, Malcolm spells this out:

> The Muslim world is forced to concern itself, from the moral point of view in its own religious concepts, with the fact that our plight clearly involves the violation of our *human rights*. The Koran compels the Muslim world to take a stand on the side of those victims whose human rights are being violated, no matter what the religious persuasion of the victim is. Islam is a religion that concerns itself with the human rights of all mankind, despite race, color, or creed.[12]

Here, Malcolm is not describing the Muslim world as it is, but how it *ought* to be. If Muslims hope to keep true to the faith's "own religious concepts," then they must also concern themselves with the work of justice. For Malcolm, the life of faith is inconceivable without righteousness. Rather, it requires it. This, at least, is what Malcolm hears from revelation: "The Koran compels…." It is a vision where faith and the practice of righteousness are inseparable.

Malcolm is not wrong. In verse after verse, the Almighty calls us to be among *those who have faith and do righteous deeds—alladhīna āmanū wa-ʿamilū al-ṣāliḥāt* (Q. 2:25, passim). The faithful servants of God are asked to hold faith and righteous works together in all that they do. The two are intimately connected. Faith seeks expression in the world as much as it does within ourselves. It possesses a luminousness that we are not meant to dim or contain. We are meant, instead, to kindle it to brilliance. Likewise, righteousness stutters and fails if not sufficiently fueled. Faith is that animating energy. Through it our works in the world are sustained. How else are we to enjoin the right

12. Published alongside two other "Letters From Abroad", the excerpt is from a letter that Malcolm X wrote in Lagos, Nigeria on May 10, 1964. While Malcolm X was certainly taken by the human rights discourse emerging out of the nascent United Nations of his time, his invocation of the term was pinned to recognizing and safeguarding the fundamental dignity and equality of all human beings at a global level. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, 61.

and forbid the wrong so often repeated in the Qur'an? *Perform prayer, enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and patiently persevere over whatever befalls you* (Q. 31:17).

Malcolm's critique, then, is ultimately a call for us to be prophetic—that is, to be like the prophets who came before us, may God's peace be upon them all. Just as the prophets of the past joined faith and righteousness—the prophet Moses against the house of Pharaoh, the prophet Ṣāliḥ against the excesses of Thamūd, the prophet Hūd against the self-aggrandizement of ʿĀd, the prophet Shuʿayb against the avarice of Madyan, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ against the animus of the Quraysh—so too are we summoned to follow in kind. This too is the *sunna* of the prophets. We are not only asked to worship and pray like the prophets, but to commit to the work of righteousness as they did.

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Revelation has always called us to set righteousness alongside faith, to twin and intertwine the two. Malcolm understood this well after the Hajj. The *inshāʾ Allāh* of ambivalence leaves off this labor of conjoining for some unknown other time. Yet the only time we have, the only time of which we are assured, is the present. This is what lies at the heart of the Qur'anic injunction: "*And do not say of anything 'I will do it tomorrow' except [that you add] if God wills* (in shāʾ Allāh)." (Q. 18:23-24). That is an *inshāʾ Allāh* of a different register—the right register. It is an *inshāʾ Allāh* of faithful commitment. It is an expression of conviction made in deference to the Divine. It is a resolution to act as long as the Almighty affords us a tomorrow to come. It is a response to God that acknowledges the Merciful as the ultimate determiner of all our affairs.

As a Black man in the United States, Malcolm knew this truth existentially, even if he used different words to describe it, "It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared."[13] He had no patience for empty *inshāʾ Allāh*s. Rather, those divine words were intended as a means for preparation, a faith-informed readiness. God alone knows our *ajal*, our appointed time. We can only proceed for as long as Allah decrees with faith and righteousness at the ready for a troubled world in need of both.

13. Malcolm X & Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 2.

This is what Malcolm heard from revelation. It is what revelation continues to say to us now, individually and collectively.

We may each be called to be a servant of God, but we are also called as a faithful and righteous community, an *umma*. *Let there be from among you a community calling to goodness, enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong. It is they who are the successful* (Q. 3:104). It is not that some must hold forth, while others hide behind empty *inshāʾ Allāh*s. We are called altogether to be that enjoining and forbidding community of God. Just as Malcolm sought support against the wickedness of the world in his time, so too must we do in ours. And just as his commitment to faith and righteousness was never imagined as a solitary endeavor, so too are we called to find one another in faith and the work of righteousness. God speaks to us as ever. In our response, we must bring together faith and righteous works, enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and do so as a committed community of faith, *inshāʾ Allāh*, laboring in solidarity with those in most need of such work. This is a theology imagined for today, one inspired by a theology that Malcolm etched out across the 39 years of life that the Merciful granted him.

In the end, this is an invitation to participate more deliberately and thoughtfully in our pursuit of a life of faith. It is an invitation to imagine how we are each responding to God's call for faith and righteousness in our individual circumstances but also as a prophetic community. It is a proposal for the community of faith to undertake the practice of theology with greater care, courage, and imagination. In our times, it is not enough to simply strive to live piously. We must take the time to discern our place in the world and the purpose behind the lives we choose to live. We must reflect deeply on what it means to serve God in the here and now. Ultimately, this is an invitation to the faithful and the faith-seeking to imagine theology for ourselves and *with one another* as an invigorating and meaningful mode of life. This latter part is, perhaps, the hardest task of all, for to be part of a community of faith is to live with so many measures of difference. It is one thing to live in accord with our personal vision of faith and righteousness before God, it is another to do so as a shared vision. Yet it is well within imagining. It has been so in the past, it is what Malcolm so fervently worked towards, and it is what God continues to call us to with the time that we are given. Such a life and such a community are—God willing—attainable.