

# 'Reversion' to Islam:

A study of racial and spiritual empowerment among  
African-American Muslims

by

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## ABSTRACT

African Americans have historically turned to Islam, and continue to do so, in larger numbers than other Americans. This project details the history of African-American Islam, and ethnographically explores contemporary attitudes of practicing black Sunni Muslims, in order to understand particular aspects of Islam that appeal to black Americans. This thesis focuses on the concept of “reversion” rather than “conversion,” as the choice to practice Islam is viewed by many black Muslims as a symbolic “return to roots” and reconnection to pre-slavery ties to Islam. I argue that this concept of reconnection, among other aspects of Sunni Islam, illustrates the religious empowerment that Islam has provided to African-American Muslims over and above other religions.

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## PREFACE

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*African-Americans are acquainted first-hand with terrorism... We probably have suffered the worst kind of terrorism anybody can suffer. We have been seized upon and treated with terrible disrespect. We've been threatened, our children have been killed in churches, people have been hung on trees.*

[Jones 2001]

The sentiments expressed here shortly after 9/11 by one African-American imam represent those of an often-silent minority within this country, both racially and religiously. This imam said that “his organization is against terrorism wherever it occurs,” but pointed out that terrorism has always been present in America, against blacks especially.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the media increasingly drew mainstream America’s attention to the religion of Islam. Despite this increased attention, the voices talking about Islam and terrorism in the media were most often those of government leaders, news reporters, or political pundits—but rarely those of American Muslims. Misrepresentations of Islam in the media brought many American Muslims, who had previously felt invisible to the rest of their country, suddenly into the spotlight with their religious views and their trustworthiness constantly questioned. Suspicions against Arab-Americans were especially high, but what of other Muslims?

For several decades of the twentieth century, African-American Muslims were probably the most visible representation of Islam in America, although when viewed by

the mainstream they were often more associated with black supremacy and separatism than devout spirituality. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with “Radical Islam” in the limelight, many black Muslims have found themselves in a situation of having to justify their religious choices anew. Despite the increased attention, the portrayal of black Muslims in most venues has been largely inaccurate, and there are relatively few true representations of African-American Sunni Islam available. This project seeks to address and remediate that void by exploring the history and religious practices of black Muslims to understand Islam’s distinctive appeal to African Americans over the past several decades.

I originally became interested in the Nation of Islam because I wanted to address the many misconceptions and stereotypes concerning blacks and Islam in mainstream America. Regardless of religion, African Americans face stereotypes and discrimination based on skin color and class prejudice. Furthermore, studies by the Council on American-Islamic Relations have shown that while the average American Muslim performs relatively well financially and professionally, they are largely underrepresented in the media. This accounts in large part for the negative image of Islam and the misunderstandings that pervade American society, since there are few true representations of American Islam available to contradict misrepresentations. My hope is that first-hand perspectives I present will shed light on currently misunderstood practices and beliefs, and challenge predominant notions that black Muslims are anti-American, black separatists, or anti-Semitic.

# I. INTRODUCTION

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Historically and presently, African Americans represent the main converts to Islam in the United States. Although blacks comprise only 30 percent of the overall Muslim population in the United States, they constitute 64 percent of Muslim converts in the U.S. (Bagby 2001). Why are blacks more likely to convert, and what are the links between race and religion in this case? The beginning of an answer to this question lies in the discourse surrounding the word “conversion” itself. Many Muslims prefer the term “reversion” to describe the choice to practice Islam. “Reversion” refers to the idea that all people are born Muslim, but are led to other practices by their parents and other influences from their environment. When one chooses to practice Islam and accept submission to Allah, this involves “reverting” to the natural state.

But the term “reversion” has further significance for some. Many African-American Muslims<sup>1</sup> consider themselves to have pre-slavery Islamic roots in Africa, ties which were severed by the slave trade and by coercion to practice Christianity. Many consider the practice of Islam to be a return, or reversion, to those pre-slavery roots, believing that they would have been practicing Islam in Africa had it not been for slavery. In interviews that I conducted in Philadelphia, several African-American Muslims have pointed to a return to lost roots as an important aspect of their identities. My research and fieldwork have been focused on the extent of this notion’s influence on African-

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<sup>1</sup> A significant number of American Muslims are recently emigrated from Africa (12 percent of American Muslims immigrated from Muslim-Populated Regions in Sub-Saharan Africa; see appendix). However, “African-American Muslims” in this document refers to black Americans whose ancestry dates to the period of chattel slavery in this country.

American “reversion” to Islam, and the relations between racial identity and religious identity in the context of African-American Islam.

The black Muslims who came to traditional Islam by way of the Nation of Islam’s Black Nationalist movement in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century constitute a large portion of today’s practicing African-American Muslims. Muslims of this group often share interestingly complex identities and histories that include disillusionment by centuries of institutionalized oppression, dissatisfaction with what they saw as a submissive ideology underlying integrationism, and frustration with the slow efficacy and false promises of government-enforced integration. Many were tired of contradictions they saw within Christianity, such as its emphasis on “turning the other cheek” despite discrimination and violence against blacks. These disenfranchised blacks sought an alternative to the integrationist approach, and the Nation of Islam provided one with its message of racial empowerment and its notion of reviving the black race. With the help of charismatic leaders like Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, and the popularity of the Black Power message backed by the organization, the Nation of Islam gained strength and numbers throughout the 1950s and 60s.

After the death of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation, his son Warith Deen Muhammad steered the organization away from its controversially racist discourse. He led most of its members to a more traditional and recognized practice of Islam as dictated by the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* (“the way of the Prophet”), and separated from those who would follow Louis Farrakhan under the original tenets of the Nation, anathema to the global community of Muslims. Despite a decline in the reversion of public figures to

Islam since the 1980s, and a decrease of black Muslims in the public eye, Sunni Islam continues to appeal to African Americans.

The Nation of Islam's theology has been questioned by Sunni Muslims, but the organization made great strides in its goal of "spiritually reviving" black Americans, for those who followed it. The Nation made various political and economic gains for Black Muslims, and gave even non-Muslims a voice of non-submission and self-determination through its separatist ideology. Even after many black Muslims made the move away from the Nation of Islam's black supremacist vision, Islam continues to be empowering to those practicing traditional Sunni Islam, because of the Qur'an's vision of racial equality, and the practice of this within the brotherhood and homogeneity of the *umma*, or global community of Muslims.

Currently, many conversions or reversions to Islam occur within the prison system. Education about Islam has empowered many convicts to recognize the often-oppressive racial structure that led them to their circumstances, and the strict guidelines of the religion and its emphasis on respect have brought them agency and discipline to work against those circumstances (Eck 2001). For these reasons, the Nation of Islam, both during its early stages and in contemporary conversion narratives, has been viewed as an empowering force by African-American converts (Tate 2005; Dannin 2002). Clearly, it was more than the political climate of the Civil Rights Era or the call for a simple alternative to Christianity that drew, and continues to draw, blacks to Islam. Something about Islam in particular attracts African Americans.

My goal has been to understand this continuing move toward Islam and particular aspects of the religion that appeal to African-American Muslims. I was especially

interested in contemporary views on race, considering Islam's emphasis on racial equality: decades after a large move toward the practice of "traditional" Sunni Islam, and away from the racist discourse of the Nation of Islam, is there still a racial aspect to Islam as practiced by African Americans? Do black Muslims still see their religion as tied to Black Pride? What attitudes do black Muslims hold toward the U.S. government and the racial situation of the country today? And did racial empowerment of NOI members come more from the group's religious aspects, or its separatist political agenda? In this vein of questioning, I investigate Islam's capacity to empower African Americans, how this might outweigh the marginalizing aspects of leading a strict Muslim lifestyle within mainstream America, and how this "double minority" status is reconciled in Muslim African-American identity.

Common features of many religions include explanations for people's unanswered questions, an ideology of reward for a certain type of conduct, social solidarity, cultural ties to one's ancestry, and comfort in faith that all will be resolved in the hereafter. In addition to these spiritual aspects, religious groups also often provide social services, material aid, or impetus for pragmatic social change. I argue that these aspects of religion are empowering; that is, they give followers the strength, spiritual satisfaction, confidence and support necessary to uplift themselves, and the comfort necessary to help them mentally rise above their earthly troubles when they face circumstances they cannot change.

Islam has not been the sole religion of empowerment for African Americans, who have also historically found solace in Christianity and "traditional" African religions, such as Yoruba and Vodou. However, there are many reasons that Islam in particular saw

large increases in numbers among African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Nation of Islam provided solidarity, agency within the community, a sense of belonging and reconnection to a lost heritage, unambiguous guidelines for daily life and access to heaven, an explanation for a history of suffering, material aid and programs for economic or social change, and a form of resistance to a common oppressor. Although many Black Muslims eventually abandoned the Nation's ideology of black superiority and separatism, a great number of them went on to practice Sunni Islam, and I argue that contemporary interpretations of the Qur'an have empowered African-American Sunni Muslims beyond the agenda of the Nation of Islam or other religions. Where the Nation of Islam fell short because of its controversial, racialized, and perhaps contradictory notions, "true" (Sunni) Islam has brought black Muslims both spiritual satisfaction and social action, and empowers them to move beyond issues of race by putting emphasis on the *umma*. The following chapters will elaborate on these questions and arguments, through examinations of both primary and secondary texts, and recent discussions with black Muslims that took place throughout the duration of the fieldwork for this project.

### **Research Setting**

The Allied Media reports that out of 300 million Americans, an estimated 7 million are Muslim, comprising approximately two percent of the American population (Mujahid). Many argue that the numbers could be higher than documented, since many Muslims worship outside of the mosque, and many more may hesitate to openly display their faith due to Islamophobia (see Werbner 2005) and anti-Arab sentiments in the US and Western World. American Muslims are concentrated in higher populations in certain

cities, and according to an online database of mosques worldwide there are 30 mosques located in Philadelphia (Halalfire Media).

Preliminary research for this project spanned several venues, and was originally directed toward two separate mosques in Albany, NY, as this was intended to be the field site for my project. The setting was not ideal, however, as time constraints and unfamiliarity with the community limited my access to these mosques, which I never visited in person. Still, Albany-based internet materials such as local mosques' and organizations' websites, online Muslim youth discussion forums, and mass e-mails and newsletters from local groups informed a good portion of my preliminary fieldwork research. These should not be omitted from a discussion of my research setting and methodology, since these sources aided me in orienting myself to a topic I initially knew very little about. In these forums, I became familiar with several Arabic words and phrases that I would frequently encounter, and developed a sense of what actions and conduct would be appropriate when performing my fieldwork and interviews.

Three main websites I frequented were: [www.jannah.org/albany](http://www.jannah.org/albany), a site for Muslims local to Albany; [www.themadina.com](http://www.themadina.com), an online message board that also frequently listed local Muslim events; and [www.ymsite.org](http://www.ymsite.org), the site for Young Muslims, a national organization. The online aspect of these interactions provided an interesting perspective to Islam's relationship with "modern," mainstream America, giving perspective into the lives of young Muslims, who are the main frequenters of such forums. Other internet research included hours of footage from [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com). These were primarily speeches from Nation of Islam leaders such as Malcolm X and

Louis Farrakhan, but also documentaries and amateur videos of lesser-known imams and their sermons.

Most direct communication, however, was verbal rather than visual, drawing on phone interviews and e-mail correspondence, as well as in-person interviews. The main fieldwork discussed in this paper involved the Muslim community surrounding a South Philadelphia *masjid* (mosque) of traditional Sunni denomination.<sup>2</sup> Communication consisted of several visits and interviews with members of the community, as well as a great deal of informal communication through e-mail. My time in the *masjid* was spent in the sisters' prayer room on the second floor of the building. This was separate from the men's area of worship, which I never entered. For *jumu'ah*, the Friday congregational prayer, the *khutbah* (speech or sermon) was given by a *khatib* (speaker, or imam for the day) in the brothers' prayer room, and shown on a television screen in the women's section. There were generally about 25-35 sisters present for the *jumu'ah* service, and the congregation was predominantly black.

### **Informants**

In this document I reference two different *khatibs* giving three separate *khutbahs* at the *masjid*. One was entitled "Race Matters in Islam," given by Imam Abdul at the Philadelphia mosque in 2006. The other two, untitled, were delivered in February 2007 by a visiting imam to the *masjid*.

I became familiar with this *masjid* through Sister Aliya, whom I met in October 2006 at a presentation she gave during Ramadan in an event open to non-Muslims. Sister

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<sup>2</sup> The name will remain undisclosed to protect the privacy and identities of informants, whose last names have been omitted. For clarification, this mosque will be referred to simply as "the *masjid*," which is how members of the congregation commonly referred to it.

Aliya is a Philadelphia representative for a national legal advocacy group for Muslims. She attends the *jumu'ah* service weekly at this particular masjid, and put me in contact with most of my other informants. We communicated regularly by e-mail and met several times in person, but I did not formally interview her.

Brother Qasim is the director of communications at the masjid. He self-identified as an African American from the South; he was educated, with a master's degree, and was in his fifties. Qasim had never belonged to the Nation of Islam, although he did say he was influenced by its leaders and by the experiences of his uncle, who was in the Nation. Information from Qasim is mostly from phone interviews in December of 2006, and we communicated through e-mail as well.

Sister Lucille, another informant, said she attended *jumu'ah* at the masjid when she could, observing the traditional form of Sunni Islam practiced there. However, she was also in the Nation of Islam, and said she "believe[d] that one does not leave the Nation." She was an older woman, with full custody of her grandchildren.

Communication with her took place during one telephone interview in December 2006.

Sister Rashidah, a regular attendee, religious scholar, and respected member of the community, was not ever in the Nation of Islam. She explained that she came to Islam through different means, exploring a number of faiths before determining that Islam was the best fit for her. We were put into contact by Aliya, and we met at the masjid. The information from Sister Rashidah comes from one interview that took place in February 2007.

Outside of this community, other fieldwork information comes from a variety of sources, including informal interviews with non-Muslim African Americans, and from

classes and lectures. One event I reference often in later chapters was a January 18, 2007 class on Malcolm X taught at the Islamic Learning Foundation in Brooklyn. This class was broadcast live online on the Young Muslims website. The class was taught by Imam Siraj Wahhaj, a well-known Brooklyn imam who used to be a minister in the Nation of Islam, and has been a practicing Muslim since 1969.

## **Overview**

The anthropological research conducted thus far on African-American Islam is quite limited. Acknowledging the time constraints and other limitations of my own project, I have attempted to explore this topic from an ethnographic perspective at a grassroots level, to see how various political and historical events have played out among average worshippers, and to establish whether African American Muslims feel an ethnically or racially based connection to Islam and its empowering capacity. Through an examination of primary and secondary sources on the history of African-American Islam, and through conversations with contemporary black Muslims, I explore the way African-American Muslims perceive themselves, their relation to both their history, and their present role in American society.

The following pages focus on a variety of sources to address these research topics. Chapter II presents an objective sketch of the history of African-American Islam, drawn mostly from secondary texts. Chapter III provides a theoretical framework for the topic of religion in society, examining works of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and other theorists. Chapter IV discusses anthropological and sociological writings on African-

American Muslims, as a further framework for the project and questions about religious empowerment.

In Chapter V, I turn to primary sources to explore the issues historically important to black Muslims during the twentieth century. Chapter VI exposes current interpretations and impressions of that history, based on interviews and other primary sources. Finally, Chapter VII looks at reversion narratives of informants and examines main issues for contemporary practicing African-American Muslims.

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## II. HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ISLAM

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The Nation of Islam was certainly not the first organization to bring Islamic practices to America. The presence of Islam has been documented throughout American history, among African Muslims aboard slave-carrying ships on the Middle Passage and slaves on southern plantations practicing Islam. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigrant Muslims, mainly from the Middle East and Eastern Europe, established communities in the U.S., with the largest being in and around Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Dearborn, Michigan, which still has a large Muslim community today (Tweed 2004).

However, for African-American Muslims, the largest movement to Islam came through the Black Separatist organization of the Nation of Islam. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Science Temple of America, drawing upon Islamic practices and ideology that would influence Wallace Fard Muhammad to begin the Nation of Islam. In the 1930s, word spread that a black American named Elijah Muhammad (born Elijah Poole) was preaching that God “in person” had come to end whites’ oppressive rule; that he, Elijah, was chosen to be the “Messenger” of Wallace Fard Muhammad, who was considered by his followers to be not only the *Mahdi* (Messiah) but also the incarnation of Allah on Earth.

Elijah Muhammad preached a unique version of Islam, based on an interpretation of the Qur’anic story of Yaqub (“Jacob” in the Bible; spelled “Yakub” by the NOI) that traced black heritage to the original population from which all other races descended. According to the interpretation relayed by Elijah Muhammad, Yakub was an evil scientist who manipulated the genetics of some of this original population to breed a new race of

“white devils,” who would rule for 6,000 years until the Messiah appeared. During this time, whites would oppress and enslave blacks, resulting in a loss of their original religion (Islam) and language (Arabic).

According to this creed of the Nation of Islam, all oppression of blacks was prophesied in the Qur’an. The kidnapping, deportation, and enslavement of Africans in the Americas, and subsequent dispossession of their heritage and culture, all pointed to blacks as the down-trodden and rejected masses who constituted God’s chosen ones. The rise of the Nation of Islam marked the beginning of their spiritual and “mental resurrection” with the return of Wallace Fard Muhammad as the Savior, and the Nation’s mission to improve the social, political, and economic conditions of African Americans (Muhammad 1965).

Although viewed as unorthodox and heretical by Muslim leaders worldwide, the Nation gained wide support from the throngs of “down-trodden” blacks in America. The NOI supported Islam as the true religion of blacks based not only on pre-slavery roots, but also the unifying and empowering message of Islam. Elijah Muhammad saw this in contrast to the “Pie in the Sky, Heaven in the Hereafter” message he perceived in Christianity, which he believed to be forced on African-Americans by white slave-owners to appease them while “in the meantime, whites enjoyed Heaven here on Earth” (Malcolm X 1992:231).

The Nation of Islam directly improved conditions in black communities in ways that the government had failed to do up to that point. The Nation expressly forbade drugs, alcohol, adultery, and physical violence toward black women. Many African Americans involved with drugs or crime could now understand their personal histories as the result

of their position in white society, rather than blaming their own failure. The messages of black supremacy and separatism were appealing and compelling enough to change people's lives, and the strict code of conduct within the Nation showed them a way to do it, with specific programs and community support.

Particularly moved by this ideology was a young convict named Malcolm Little, who found the idea of Black Pride compelling after being taught his whole life to be ashamed of his race. In 1952, after release from prison where he had studied a great deal, Malcolm met Elijah Muhammad and quickly became one of his most devoted followers. He changed his name to Malcolm X, as was common in the Nation, to represent the African heritage of which blacks had been deprived, and to reject the last name given by whites. By 1959, he was the leading minister of a Nation of Islam temple in Harlem, and he became the spokesman for Elijah Muhammad and the Nation. With his influence, membership increased from just 500 to 30,000 between 1952 and 1963, including world-famous boxer Cassius Clay, who then took the name Muhammad Ali (Malcolm X 1992).

As the Civil Rights Movement came to the forefront of American politics, there were varying approaches to the pursuit of civil rights. While Martin Luther King, Jr., lauded the merits of civil disobedience and the possibility of integration, many African Americans were less optimistic about the country's ability to change. However, in spite of their differences in approach, historians have shown that while King and Malcolm X have been portrayed as dichotomous and dueling figures, they actually held great respect for each other as well as many similar views, converging especially near the end of their lives (see, e.g., Cone 1992). King's and Malcolm's influence on Elijah Muhammad's son,

Warith Deen (born Wallace D. Muhammad), would result in great changes for Black Muslims in America.

Throughout his father's life, Warith Deen Muhammad conflicted with Elijah over the interpretation of certain aspects of Islam, including Fard's allegedly divine status, stating that this was contradictory to the Qur'an. Warith Deen and Malcolm X increasingly began to see the Nation of Islam as contradictory to the Islam of the Qur'an. Especially troubling was the black supremacist aspect, which goes against the Qur'an's message that all races are equal in the eyes of Allah. In the early 1960s, tensions heightened as talk circulated about greed and corruption of several ministers, Elijah Muhammad's alleged extra-marital affairs, and jealousy over Malcolm's popularity. After a shaky couple of years, Malcolm announced his break with the Nation in March of 1964.

That year, Malcolm began to adhere more closely to the practices of traditional Sunni Islam. Taking the name El-Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz, he made the *hajj* to Mecca, and upon his return, he spoke of the racial equality he saw there. He now viewed Islam as a uniting force with the power to overcome racism, and he abandoned the Nation of Islam's ideology of black supremacy. Malcolm was assassinated in 1965; debate still exists about who was behind his death, but several Nation of Islam members were arrested in connection with the event.

Leadership within the Nation continued to struggle, but with the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, his son became successor despite his off-and-on relations with the Nation of Islam. Warith Deen began to restructure the group, moving the Nation away from its racist discourse and ideology of Black Separatism. He promoted a more orthodox

practice of Sunni Islam, re-naming the group the World Community of Al-Islam in the West, or WCIW (Marsh 1984). In doing so, he did away with many controversial aspects of the group: he discouraged the idea of racial superiority in favor of upholding the Muslim ideal of equality of men; he changed the heretical view that Wallace Fard Muhammad was an incarnation of Allah to one that portrayed him simply as a wise and spiritual man; he did away with anti-Americanism in the group, encouraging black Muslims to vote, and to respect and honor US laws rather than demanding a separate state; and he reiterated the Five Pillars of Islam, gaining the respect and recognition of the international Muslim community.

Furthermore, Warith Deen transformed the way women were viewed and treated, supporting their “right of women to equal education ... under Islamic law,” and changed the mandatory uniformity of dress, calling instead for “uniformity of mind” (Marsh 1984). He also did away with the notion that African Americans were descended from the “Asiatic tribe of Shabazz,” believing instead that they descended from Bilal, an Ethiopian Muslim who lived around 600 AD. This reinforced the bond between Islam and Africa. Lastly, he re-instated respect for Malcolm X, who had been ex-communicated.

This shift marked a move away from the idea of being nationalist “Black Muslims” to simply being Muslim, and Warith Deen had a profound effect on Muslim African Americans. Most Nation of Islam members made this transition with him, although in 1978, Louis Farrakhan reunited a faction that had remained true to Elijah Muhammad’s original teachings, and re-started the Nation of Islam as its leader. Warith Deen has denounced this move as “political” rather than “religious,” based on Farrakhan’s feeling that “the move to Orthodox Islam has caused a decrease in financial

holdings and created a lack of discipline among the members” (Marsh 1984). However, the two still hold respect for each other’s agendas, and Warith Deen’s change was accepted on a large scale by African-American Muslims. He changed the meaning of Islam and religion for many, and reshaped their place in contemporary American society.

The history of this movement remains relevant to the contemporary practice of African-American Islam. As was emphasized in one interview with Qasim, few black Americans were not touched by the Nation of Islam in some way. Reasons for its rise are still important to many black Muslims today, and knowing this history lays a foundation for understanding contemporary practices of and reversion to Sunni Islam among African Americans. Further understanding is provided by scholarship on religion and Islam, which is reviewed in the next two chapters.

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### **III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SOCIAL APPEAL OF RELIGION**

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#### **Religious Theory in Durkheim**

While religious believers often focus on the power of God(s) as the impetus behind religion, believers and non-believers alike have pondered the sheer strength of religion itself as a powerful belief system or social organization. For a comprehensive understanding of religious and spiritual empowerment, I now examine some of the arguments made by scholars about the functions of religion in general. This will provide insights into the particular aspects of Islam, discussed in the next chapter, that make it an appealing alternative to other religions, and some of the reasons African Americans have chosen to practice Islam in higher numbers than other Americans.

Emile Durkheim's theories on religion address the societal structure provided by religious practice and solidarity. Durkheim's take on religion and its origins was social, rather than divine. He explained religion as a structure that served the needs of society and thus the needs of people. According to Durkheim, religion is a reflection of the social order, and religious practices reinforce societal values. Religion and other societal institutions serve as parts of an integrated whole to support each other, thereby strengthening the structure of society. (Durkheim 1995).

Durkheim believed that early religion fulfilled the needs of society through "collective consciousness" and "collective effervescence." The former refers to the common set of beliefs, mores, and social attitudes of the group, binding individuals together with a sense of shared values and solidarity. Collective effervescence describes

the collective energy that results from people gathering together, and the consequent group feelings of euphoria and invigoration of the spirit (Durkheim 1995).

Durkheim applied these theories only to “primitive” religions and societies, contrasting those with advanced, individualized societies that are based on specialization of skills. In the latter society, he said, unity comes not from a collective consciousness but from co-dependence, and individual consciousness often contradicts the collective. Diversity of attitudes and individualized sets of values create the potential for what he called “anomie,” or the collapse of collective social norms and values (Durkheim 1995). This model of cooperation, which he called “organic solidarity,” may be applied to any modern democratic society in which the government regulates behaviors but allows for social freedoms and individualized thought. When people in such a society have the economic and social freedom to develop individualized skills, and are not required to adhere to a particular ideology, they can still find solidarity through co-dependence.

I do not believe that Durkheim’s “organic solidarity” model is the only one that applies to contemporary societies. His thoughts on “primitive religion” can still illuminate the inner workings of social groups throughout the world today. There are sub-societal groups, such as various religious sects, whose common themes serve to regulate social norms of the group. Furthermore, these groups often influence society as a whole, and their values are not restricted to members of the group. In other words, contemporary groups united by religious belief are regulated by the practices and values of their religious codes, and they in turn impact the overarching society, even if the effect is small. In these cases, which are certainly not “primitive,” religion meets the needs of the people by meeting needs of the group.

In Islam in particular, there are strict moral guidelines set by the Qur'an, the *Sunnah*, and the *Haddith*. When practiced by Muslims, these guidelines reinforce the order and values of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, emphasizing modesty, devotion to Allah, charity, community, and Muslim solidarity. Within a particular region or group of Muslims, these shared practices unite the group; they reinforce, and are simultaneously supported by, the group's collective beliefs. The Islamic notion of the *umma*, or global community of Muslims, promotes a sense of solidarity between Muslims worldwide who share common beliefs, values, and a way of life that could be considered to constitute a "collective consciousness." Furthermore, the practice of *salat*, or five daily prayers, brings to many Muslims a sense of shared power and energy. Some may see this as a strong connection to Allah or God, while it is possible that others may view this as a form of collective effervescence, as Durkheim described it.

### **Charismatic Authority**

While many religions have the potential to empower their followers to overcome hardship or adversity, Islam was especially appealing to African Americans at the height of the Nation of Islam, not only for the aforementioned reasons but thanks in large part to the charisma of its leaders as well. Max Weber, a German sociologist, wrote extensively on leadership and religion. In his piece on "Charismatic Authority," he refers to charisma as a quality "not accessible to the ordinary person," which is rewarded with leadership – a status given to prophets, wise men, war heroes, and the like. He emphasizes the importance of the public's response to this as the source of that leader's authority: "What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to

charismatic authority, by his ‘followers’ or ‘disciples’ (Weber 2000:204). Their recognition of this charisma is what makes it powerful, as these followers give “worship or absolute trust [and] devotion,” a relationship “arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope” (Weber 2000:205).

Weber’s ideas about charisma are useful in understanding the phenomenon of Islam’s rising influence among African Americans in the twentieth century. Elijah Muhammad fits Weber’s description of a charismatic leader, made powerful by the followers who had a “duty” to recognize him as such, since he was seen by NOI members as a Messenger of Allah. Additionally, Elijah Muhammad’s leadership gained recognition and devotion in large part because of the “despair and hope” of African Americans during this time period, as this situation made people more open to a leader who met their needs in any way. Poverty and racism, for many African Americans, were influential in increasing the beliefs about white devils, black superiority, and Fard as the Savior.

Weber describes charisma and rational thought as “revolutionary force[s],” but as in conflict with each other, with charisma working as “internal reorientation born out of suffering conflicts, or enthusiasm” (Weber 2000:208). Rationality, conversely, is not subjective or internal, and can create disillusionment with charismatic leaders. Many NOI members and ministers became disillusioned with the Nation of Islam and its leadership, as Malcolm X did upon learning of Elijah Muhammad’s extra-marital affairs.

This rationality displaced the charisma, resulting in a movement away from the Nation of Islam with its contradictions and corruption toward the reasoning of the *Sunnah*, which its followers viewed as less contradictory. After returning from the *hajj* and seeing racial harmony in Mecca, Malcolm X became convinced that Islam was the

best hope for overcoming the race issue in America, and the only religion that could end racism in this country. This is due largely to the homogeneity promoted in the idea of the *umma*, and the idea of a “brotherhood of Islam,” in contrast to the Nation’s ideas about racial superiority. Black Muslims began to study more closely the theology of their religion, rather than the powerful oratory of its leaders, and this played a role in the movement toward orthodoxy.

Ronald M. Glassman, a sociology and anthropology professor at William Paterson College in New Jersey, interprets and elaborates on Weber’s article in “Manufactured Charisma and Legitimacy,” contributing to Weber’s idea of the rational view’s ability to decharismatize. “As a worldview,” he says, “science itself produces a general rationality through which the ‘average’ individual becomes cynical and decharismatized easily, even though media and audience manipulation become ever more sophisticated” (Glassman 2000:213).

Glassman distinguishes between “‘task’ leadership and ‘charismatic’ leadership.” The first, he says, refers to a leader’s mental and physical capabilities to perform the duties of his or her position in the group. In relation to politics, he says that this sort of leadership is always present; that serious candidates are *capable* of performing their tasks. It is charismatic leadership, however, that determines the attitude of the people, and therefore the support that person receives (Glassman 2000:209). Charismatic leadership is especially in today’s age of media frenzy, which was absent in Weber’s time.

Glassman emphasizes the importance of a television persona, like that of JFK, who had “just the right combination of good looks, oratorical restraint, wit, and style” (Glassman 2000:210). In the following years, media stars and analysts have had such an influence

that “office charisma” (task leadership) takes a backseat to television presence, and people only see small bits of the image or actual tasks performed by political candidates or leaders.

It is hard to maintain control of one’s public image in the age of television and the internet, and this may have something to do with the decline in powerful, charismatic leaders like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and JFK. “Television’s opinion-forming agents” today have a great deal of power to “decharismatize” any candidate, and so leaders like Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and Louis Farrakhan are cast to the fringe by the media, whereas regardless of their “office charisma” or ability, they have quite a compelling presence as speakers, outside of the media’s influence.

How then, within this model, do we understand the movement toward Sunni Islam and continued adherence to it, in spite of a lack of charismatic leaders? Although the religious theories of Durkheim and Weber are useful in understanding African-American reversion to Islam, a generic model for religion’s function in society cannot be applied universally, as it does not capture the specificity of this movement. The Nation of Islam and Sunni Islam have functioned differently in the United States, appealing to the same demographic but at different times, and for various reasons. If these models are to be useful in understanding religion, they must be flexible, allowing for an understanding of the historical and political context of the era—in this case, a context including a history of racial oppression and the influence of charismatic leaders. In the next chapter, I turn to literature specific to African-American Islam, to review important themes that have already been identified by anthropologists, sociologists, and other scholars on this topic.

## IV. LITERATURE REVIEW ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN ISLAM

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Scholarly literature on African-American Muslims provides insight into how historical and political events have contributed to, and continue to influence, African-American reversion to Islam. There are varying interpretations of the movement toward Islam during the twentieth century, but most texts are written from the perspective or in the style of sociologists, historians, or religious scholars rather than anthropologists. This is not to say that anthropologists have neglected this area of study; however, most ethnographic work focusing on Islam has been carried out in Islamic countries, specifically in the Middle East or North Africa—a great deal of which is written with the aim of exploring women’s rights and agency within Islamic societies (see, e.g., Mahmood 2005; Abu-Lughod 2002). In this chapter I detail the common themes found in scholars’ interpretations of African-Americans’ reversion to Islam.

Carolyn Rouse and Robert Dannin are two anthropologists who have explored the subject in depth from an ethnographic perspective; Rouse in *Engaged Surrender* (2004) and Robert Dannin in *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (2002). While both texts explore African-American conversion to Islam, the authors approach the subject differently, and their various conclusions can be seen as representing two main arguments among scholars of the subject. Rouse focuses specifically on female converts and their experiences of Islam as a liberating and empowering force, arguing against the widely held vision of the religion as restrictive of women’s rights and freedoms. Dannin’s main interest is Islam’s capacity to empower not necessarily women, but African Americans as a historically oppressed group, and he explores more in-depth the history of African-

American conversion to Islam. Three important themes identified by scholars on African-American Islam are notions of returning to lost roots, ties to the Middle East and the global community of Muslims, and interpretations of gender roles.

### **“Return” to Islam as Empowerment**

Among the written work of scholars on African-American Islam, a common theme is the notion of a return to lost roots and heritage. When W.D. Fard founded the Nation of Islam in 1930, he created an interpretation of Islam that strove to improve social, political, and economic conditions for African Americans through their “mental and spiritual resurrection” (Muhammad 1965). The organization focused on biblical interpretation that “traced African-American roots to peoples of the Jewish and Christian holy lands” (Curtis 2005). The Nation of Islam gained influence through empowerment by rejection of white hegemony, but McAlister (2001) claims that even when leaders like Warith Deen Muhammad and Malcolm X moved the group toward traditional Sunni Islam, this was not the end of the view of Islam as “the religion of black American militancy” (McAlister 2001:91). Beyond the organization of the Nation of Islam, black Muslims have often viewed themselves as having racial and ancestral ties to Islam, the natural religion for black people. The turn to Islam is interpreted as a *return* to heritage.

In his ethnography *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, Robert Dannin documents conversion narratives of traditional Sunni Muslims in communities throughout the country to better understand “the roots of spiritual transformation” and the role of Islam in African-American history and identity. Dannin explores the question of Islam’s capacity to help African-Americans “overcome the legacy of slavery and decades of

racial oppression,” describing African-American conversion to Islam as redemption, therapy for the excluded, oppressed, marginalized, and suffering; a symbolic severing of ties with their “false ancestor—the white slave master” (Dannin 2002:4; 9). He emphasizes the influence of a pre-slavery connection to Islam. Through fieldwork in Medina Kaolack, in West Africa, he explores the pilgrimage of Muslim converts who come to study and “seek to reconnect with a heritage of Afro-Islamic identity that was broken by the Atlantic slave trade” (Dannin 2002:6).

Diana Eck (2001) discusses the importance of the notion of returning to lost roots and heritage in the conversion of African Americans to Islam, mentioning that many slaves came from West Africa, already heavily influenced by Islam when the slave trade forcefully reached America in the 1700-1800s. Aminah McCloud (1995) emphasizes the influence of racial history and pre-slavery Islam on African Americans today, citing slavery and Christianity as reasons for the general lack of knowledge about the Muslim slaves who came to America, since all traces of the religion were wiped out. This view is reinforced by the research of Antonio Bly (1998) on the Atlantic slave trade, which emphasizes the importance of religious and spiritual practices (not necessarily Islamic) in various forms of slave resistance, and the suppression of the resistance resulting in scarce documentation of religion. McCloud describes the past century as having seen “African-American ex-slaves rediscover and reassert Islam as a worldview” (McCloud 1995:165).

Revitalization of African-American communities was not only a spiritual movement, but also had important material aspects to it. Dennis Walker (1990) interprets the rise of Islam as a racial movement rather than a religious one, citing as evidence the Black Muslims’ emphasis on revitalizing African Americans and their communities. This

was largely accomplished by establishing education in new Islamic schools, decreasing poverty through economic programs aimed at aiding African-American Muslim communities, and rehabilitating criminals and drug addicts with successful programs. He adds that the racialized aspect only disappeared “As followers prospered and the class configuration of adherence altered, [and] the blatant racism and projection of an eschatological incineration of the white devils became less acceptable” (Walker 1990:349).

These scholars illustrate the importance of Islam in helping the African-American Muslims in their studies to overcome a history of oppression through what they perceive as a symbolic return to roots and reconnection to lost heritage. These sentiments were evident among the informants I interviewed as well, but only on a personal level. In religious services, the emphasis was on the community rather than the individual. Other issues like international relations and gender roles were more prevalent in discussions about the practice of Islam.

### **Ties to the Middle East and Connection to the *Umma***

A large concern of contemporary African-American Muslims, addressed by both Carolyn Rouse and Robert Dannin, is the connection with the rest of the *umma*, or Islamic world. Dannin discusses American Islam’s impact on and interaction with other religions in the West, as they have to adjust for declining numbers and make room for a “Judeo-Christian-Muslim” ethic (Dannin 2002:262). Ties to the Middle East are important to African-American Islamic belief because they influence contemporary political beliefs and identities of American Muslims. This is especially so concerning the

perceived capacity for Islam to "fit in" with "American culture and society," and many Muslim Americans do not share the sometimes-common belief that democracy and Islam are mutually exclusive (see, e.g., Marayati quoted in Eck 2001).

In the past several decades, U.S. military efforts have been increasingly focused around a growing anti-American sentiment, often portrayed in the media and political arena as a "Clash of Civilizations," caused by fundamental differences between Western democracy and non-Western values (see, e.g., Huntington 1993). Although the idea prevails that such differences cannot result in a peaceful coexistence, Mahmood Mamdani (2002) claims that East-West conflict is based more than anything on the consequences of historical events. De-emphasizing the influence of cultural differences in these conflicts, he argues instead for an understanding of them as a result of "political identity" created by a long and complicated history of encounters between Western countries and Islamic ones.

The historical roots of this conflict run deep, extending back to the "mission civilisatrice" and social Darwinism practiced by Western imperialist powers. These policies resulted in centuries of physical domination and oppression of "non-Western" societies through slavery, colonialism, imperialism, exploitation of natural resources, and economic manipulation. The "First World" owes a great deal of its wealth to these exploitative policies, which have frequently stirred up resentment among the exploited. The response to this history of oppression has varied throughout time and geography, but that of the "Arab world" has arguably been the most visible, consistent and successful example of armed rebellion to overthrow its imperialist oppressors (I speak here of Moroccan and Algerian independence paving the way for the rest of Africa, of the "Crisis

in the Suez,” and of the Palestinian response to Hebrew Zionism). Social scientists and authors alike have emphasized the uniting power of Islam as the force behind this opposition, as an alternative to the Christian mission influence of the “First World” (See, e.g. Rouse 2004 who describes Shia Islam as having given Iranians the unity to reject Western hegemony).

Robert Dannin says that in most conversion narratives, “Islam is depicted as a return to the cosmic order... the road back to virtues obscured by the forces of subjugation and injustice” (Dannin 2002:7). This is true not just for individuals, but for societies as well, especially those undergoing decolonization. According to Frantz Fanon, incredible force is necessary to overturn the effects and power structure of colonialism, for such a “narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence” (Fanon 1963:143). Dannin maintains that the “ideology [of the Nation of Islam] owes as much to Frantz Fanon as Freud” as it “confronts the repressed trauma” of Western oppression (Dannin 2002:10). He interprets the Nation of Islam’s revitalization efforts “as moments of acculturation and religious conversion” as well as “mediation between indigenous and colonial systems” (Dannin 2002:8). The movement to Islam, then, was as much a resistance movement for African Americans as it was religious.

These movements drew inspiration from anticolonial opposition in the Middle East. For many African-Americans, the plight of Arab Muslims parallels their own historical struggle for freedom and equality, from the kidnapping and enslavement of their African ancestors to the *de facto* segregation and ghettoization of the United States (Wacquant 2002). This struggle has found various forms of expression: beginning with

Middle Passage uprisings and slave revolts, less violent expressions include (but are certainly not limited to) slave hymns, voodoo practice, abolitionist literature, civil disobedience, and the Black Power movement. For many African-Americans, these responses to oppression mirror events happening around the world.

Originally, leaders identified with the Jewish struggle for autonomy based on personal links of Exodus with the African Diaspora and the Hebrew Zionist movement with Black Nationalist aspirations for a return to Africa. However, for influential figures such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. du Bois, the Israeli occupation of Egypt marked a break from solidarity with Israel, viewing this imperialist act of “collaboration with Britain and France” as “betrayal” by the Jews (McAlister 2001:85). Civil Rights and Black Nationalist leaders striving for freedom and equality of non-whites in America were inspired by anti-colonial movements in North Africa and the Middle East, and many African-Americans, moving away from the colonial imposition of Christianity toward other religious options, identified with the colonized and marginalized Arab world (McAlister 2001). For these disillusioned blacks, opposition to and rejection of colonial authority were inspiring examples, and these sentiments were channeled into rejection of white hegemonic government authority. The Nation of Islam, as an activist organization, was the vehicle for this opposition: “Islam offered an alternative, a basis for a black nationalist consciousness that was separate from the civil rights goals of integration into a white-dominated and oppressive nation” (McAlister 2001:93).

In a different interpretation of the Nation of Islam, however, Dennis Walker (1990) downplays the ties to Arab culture and Middle Eastern Islam in the separatist movement. He describes Elijah Muhammad’s leadership of the Nation of Islam as

seriously deviating from orthodox Islam as it is practiced in the Arab world. He claims that Elijah's prophecies, although they "anticipated the destruction of white America," were "themselves more a homegrown mutation of Protestant apocalypticism than a transplanting of Islamic conceptions out of the Arab world" (Walker 1990:356). Walker says that Elijah's economic model to inspire Black Muslims to economic success "fuelled a grueling process of self- Westernization that would assimilate them into the very patterns lived by those whom Elijah denounced as doomed white devils" (Walker 1990:347). Walker says that "Despite Malcolm X's urgent drive to fuse the sect with global Islam, Black Muslims remained cultural Americans who were only romantically attracted to Arab culture" (Walker 1990:349). In Sonyrea Tate's autobiography about growing up in the Nation of Islam, she expresses anger toward traditional Arab Islam, which she perceives to be another rich imperialist culture that blinded African-Americans in what they felt was a protest against mainstream America, when it actually does nothing more for them than Christianity.

Regardless of whether the Nation of Islam's ties to the Arab World were more imagined than real, the Middle East was a huge inspiration for Black Muslims' rejection of integration. This did create strong bonds to the Middle East, and in my fieldwork, I have observed a strong emphasis on ties to the *umma*, and an emphasis on acceptance of all Muslims, regardless of race or nationality. This will be addressed in later chapters.

### **Gender Roles and Empowerment for Women**

Among the work of scholars on Islam, An important issue concerning Muslims in America relates to the position of women in Islamic societies. This issue was not a central

focus of my research, and I did not explore it in-depth in my fieldwork. However, gender roles did play a part in my access to informants and communities, as well as having an important position in the daily lives of most Muslims. A review of anthropological work on this topic is therefore useful in any discussion on Islam.

In *Engaged Surrender*, Carolyn Rouse takes an ethnographic look at women's agency or empowerment after conversion. Rouse emphasizes the "desire for cultural membership in a community with clear rules of engagement," where women make clearly defined spaces for themselves (Rouse 2004:6). She says that in converting, African-American women have indeed "'surrendered' to Islam," but "in a way that engages their political consciousness and produces not only a spiritual but a social epiphany" (Rouse 2004:20).

In interviews, I have found that many contemporary Muslims are attracted to Islam not in spite of, but rather *because* of what they interpret to be strictly defined gender roles. All actions have a precedent in the Qur'an or the way of the Prophet (the *Sunnah*), providing a logical explanation to life and a clear-cut example of how to live respectably and piously. For many Muslim women, the biggest issue is not defending themselves against an oppressive way of life, but defending their choice to practice a religion that is seen by many as anti-feminist.

Rouse argues against several authors who view Islam as oppressive to women, drawing from her own fieldwork in California communities and the works of other authors. Rouse points out Elijah Muhammad's emphasis on respect for women within the Nation of Islam, saying "His entire religious philosophy was a response to white supremacy" by de-emphasizing sexualization of women and by denying aspirations for

assimilation. Rouse concludes from her fieldwork that the idea behind the patriarchal emphasis was to “instill in men a sense of responsibility” rather than to “make women submissive” (Rouse 2004:16). As far as women’s roles, Diana Eck (2001) says that “The point is not slavish obedience but establishing a rhythm of life in which remembering God has a place” (Eck 2001:273).

Eck quotes women as explaining the separation of genders as rational and logical, rather than based on submission, including one woman who says, “We ourselves don’t want to be bowing to the ground in front of a row of men while we are praying. It would be embarrassing for us and distracting for them” (Eck 2001:274). Rouse adds that “One needs to spend very little time in a *masjid* (mosque) to recognize that most women are not passive recipients of male authority,” and explains wearing of the *hijab* (head covering) as a display of faith that challenges “the legitimacy of American assumptions about race, gender, class, family, and community” (Rouse 2004:16; 9). In choosing to practice Islam, these women enter a culture of Islamic practices and traditions, and the *hijab* puts this on display, challenging generalizations and assumptions otherwise made about their identity.

Rouse herself struggles with the interpretation of Muslim women’s freedoms, describing herself as a believer in “Western feminism and Western freedom,” and trying to reconcile this with the rationality/rationale of Muslim women. However, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing the Western (Euro-centric) assumptions inherent in notions of feminism, as it is defined by those with Western education. McCloud (1995) gives an account of Sunni Islam as empowering to women, writing that “racism has been the commanding force” in their lives, not sexism; “African-American women have, in large numbers, spurned the women’s liberation movement and the

feminist movement” because of the Western homogeneity that provides the basis for much of feminist thought (McCloud 1995:146).

Rouse describes the various interpretations and practices of Islam she observes among her female informants in a creation of an “American version of Islam that speaks to a particular set of liberation ideologies” (Rouse 2004:215). Amina Wadud-Muhsin (1998) argues that the Qur’an can and should be interpreted in a way that takes into account the historical circumstances of its writing, making adjustments for the present “to create a balanced and shared society” for men and women (Wadud-Muhsin 1998:138). She says that the Qur’an does not specify only one role for women, and argues against a universal interpretation of women in Islam irrespective of cultures.

Acknowledging the question of whether empowerment is “merely false consciousness,” Rouse says that Karl Marx, who dismissed religion as an opiate of the masses, “was unable to appreciate the value and meaning of the superstructure of the oppressed,” and that religious belief “confers meaning and value onto things that otherwise have no inherent meaning or value” (Rouse 2004:15; 214). Rouse says that what Marx criticized was a religion steeped in “staid ritual and ideology” that did not answer to the needs of the people who practiced it, and instead “reproduced the material structures of oppression” (Rouse 2004:216). Rouse argues that while religion can and does allow people to remain complicit in their own oppression, there is also resistance in people who question and redefine their faith and the system encompassing it. She says that the “surrender” to Islam is empowering to women because of Islam’s capacity “for challenging racism, sexism, and economic exploitation,” by living a lifestyle that is alternative to the mainstream and based on its own coherent logic. Rouse describes Islam

as “the nexus of their social history, personal reality, and liberation ideology,” giving them the consciousness and discourse for understanding and “challenging those systems of oppression” (Rouse 2004:217).

Scholars have described Islam as empowering to African-American Muslims for a number of reasons, including ties to their lost roots, global solidarity, rejection of Western hegemony, and well-defined roles and obligations. In subsequent chapters I turn to the African-American Muslims I have studied with to explore the way these themes have played out in their reversion to and practice of Sunni Islam. My research has largely focused on how African-American Muslims have interpreted Islam to combat racism, not only in the Nation of Islam but in traditional Sunni Islam as well. Next, I discuss the perceived importance (or non-importance) of the historical circumstances of Islam in America, as well as ethnic, national, and gender identities.

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## V. HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN PRIMARY SOURCES

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Primary documents from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century provide a great deal of insight into not only the history of the Nation of Islam, but also the reasons for continued reversion to Islam among African-Americans today. Malcolm X's *Autobiography* has been influential to many black Sunni Muslims, and many reverted to Islam after reading his story. The *Autobiography* provides insight into more than his personal reasons for turning to Islam, describing the racial situation during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that caused many African Americans to seek new forms of political action and religious fulfillment. Knowledge of this context is important for understanding why Islam had such a compelling appeal to so many black Americans at the time.

In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little; May 19, 1925- Feb 21, 1965) described the racial climate he experienced growing up, mainly in the North (Michigan, Massachusetts, and New York). Malcolm's father, Reverend Earl Little, was a Baptist minister who preached the "Back-to-Africa" ideology of Marcus Garvey, as a way to improve the "negro condition." Garvey, who believed in black separatism, thought that blacks would never be able to achieve success under the conditions in the U.S. at the time. This was not only because of legalized segregation and white supremacist violence, but also because of the poor socio-economic conditions of black Americans, and constant discrimination in schools and the workplace. Although Malcolm did not have much respect for religion or believe in Jesus' divinity growing up, it was important to him that his father preached this Marcus Garvey ideology. Even at a young

age, he perceived that blacks were clinging to white society where he lived in Lansing, MI, and he witnessed that everywhere around him, the only successful African Americans were those who achieved wealth by cheating and exploiting others of their race.

Malcolm's family situation was turbulent; he described his father as "belligerent," and his parents as having an abusive relationship. Malcolm, who had lighter skin than his siblings (from a white grandfather), perceived favoritism from his father based on this lightness. Early on, he came to understand the hierarchy of skin color among blacks, and was initially proud of the "white blood" that ran within him. "I didn't have much feeling about being a Negro," he said, "because I was trying so hard, in every way I could, to be white" (Malcolm X 1992:38).

When Malcolm was six years old, white supremacists murdered his father, who also lost several brothers to white supremacist violence. Although Earl Little had been adamant about not falling into debt, which he viewed as a return to slavery, the family fell on hard times financially after his death. The psychological effects of poverty and the Depression were hard on the family, and Malcolm's mother suffered mentally from the indignities of not being able to provide for her family. "Welfare people" eventually came after her, labeling her as "crazy," and Malcolm was sent to live in another household after his mother was put into a mental hospital. Malcolm felt that the state had destroyed his family, failing in its duty to help its citizens, and that the government was largely responsible for the poor social and financial conditions of black Americans at the time.

Despite expulsion from one school, Malcolm did well after being placed in a detention home, and was even elected to be class president. In the eighth grade, however,

when Malcolm expressed his aspirations to become a lawyer, his white teacher told him to be realistic, that he would never be a lawyer. Malcolm felt that even though he was more intelligent than many white students who were encouraged to achieve, his race held him back. This teacher's comment brought a change in him, and he stopped trying to please people. This was part of his early experience that would later bring him to "telling the American black man that he's wasting his time straining to 'integrate.' I know from personal experience," he said. "I tried hard enough" (Malcolm X 1992:38).

Malcolm moved to live with a half-sister in Boston, where there was a strong black community and presence. He said of this move, "All praise is due to Allah that I went to Boston when I did. If I hadn't, I'd probably still be a brainwashed black Christian," referring to the class of African Americans he saw around him who, "Under the pitiful misapprehension that it would make them 'better'... were breaking their backs trying to imitate white people.... It has never ceased to amaze me how so many Negroes, then and now, could stand the indignity of that kind of self-delusion" (Malcolm X 46; 48-49). There in Boston, Malcolm began to see the different levels of embracing or rejecting black heritage among African Americans, and he came to admire those blacks who he felt were not "putting on airs," as he said, about their background (Malcolm X 1992:104). Malcolm began to hang out in the "ghetto" section, and he was drawn to the nightlife in Boston, especially the Lindy-hop dances and the music. When he began dancing, what he perceived to be his "long-suppressed African instincts broke loose," and he came to feel a certain pride in a heritage of which he had been conditioned to be ashamed (Malcolm X 1992:67).

On the other hand, Malcolm imitated the popular style of the time by “conking” his hair to make it straighter, so that it would “look white.” He explained, “This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair; I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in American who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are “inferior”—and white people “superior”—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look ‘pretty’ by white standards (Malcolm X 1992:64). These circumstances were shared by many black Americans at the time, and were all extremely influential in contributing to the growing backlash against integrationism.

For Malcolm in particular, these circumstances were illuminated as he came to see more of the country with a new job on a train. One trip to Washington, D.C., gave him a view of black destitution he had never seen before, and this reinforced for him a sense of the poor living conditions of African-Americans throughout the country. The train job also brought Malcolm to Harlem, where the growing African-American community was vibrant with jazz culture, and people didn’t “put on airs.” After some time spent hustling on the streets of Harlem, selling drugs and stealing, Malcolm was sentenced to ten years in prison for robbery. He felt that this crime was more stringently prosecuted because his white girlfriend and her sister were involved in the crimes, and this prison sentence would mark the beginning of his move toward black separatist ideology.

In 1948, while he was in prison, Malcolm’s siblings in Detroit wrote about converting to a new religion, the Nation of Islam. His brother told him in the letters that

God, Allah, had come to America in the form of a man, and had revealed himself to a black man named Elijah Muhammad. The letters were influential on Malcolm. In his preaching, Elijah Muhammad highlighted whites' culpability and complicity throughout history in the oppression of non-white peoples, and these ideas struck a chord with Malcolm, who began to change the way he viewed his history and race in the United States.

Elijah Muhammad's theory, identifying whites as the devil, explained the oppression and exploitation Malcolm saw and felt around him, as well as the "brainwashing" of blacks, referring to their feelings of inferiority. In turning to this new religion, the Nation of Islam, Malcolm came to have faith that the "white man's world was on the way down... The devil's 'time was up'" (Malcolm X 1992:184). Malcolm communicated personally with Elijah Muhammad, and after leaving prison, their relationship deepened. Malcolm began to do his own preaching in the Nation of Islam temples.

Malcolm came to see white Christians as hypocritical and not "Christ-like" at all, but rather untrue to Christ's teachings, and his sermons highlighted this theme:

*[The] white slavemaster's Christian religion has taught us black people... we will sprout wings when we die and fly up into the sky where God will have for us... heaven. This is white man's Christian religion used to brainwash us black people! ...this blue-eyed devil has twisted his Christianity, to keep his foot on our backs... to keep our eyes fixed on the pie in the sky and heaven in the hereafter... while he enjoys his heaven right here... on this earth... in this life. [Malcolm X 1992:231]*

Malcolm saw Christianity as belonging to the slavemaster, who “injected” it into black slaves, and “taught [them] to worship an alien God having the same blond hair, pale skin, and blue eyes as the slavemaster” (Malcolm X 1992:188). He also believed that these white Christians used their religion as a “weapon for enslaving,” pointing out that in whatever lands were conquered by whites, missionaries preceded the guns (Malcolm X 1992:278). By teaching blacks “to always turn the other cheek... and be humble... and to take whatever was dished out by the devilish white man,” Malcolm believed that Christianity was also a means to pacify slaves who would otherwise fight back, and to appease blacks by telling them to “look for heaven in the hereafter” (Malcolm X 1992:188).

By contrast, Malcolm said, Islam does not “teach you to turn the other cheek” after being attacked (Malcolm X 1992:246). For Malcolm, Islam was the clear alternative to Christianity. Elijah Muhammad said that Islam was the “natural religion for the black man,” through a connection to the original Muslims—a religion that they had been made to forget by missionaries, slavemasters and white policies designed to suppress opposition (Malcolm X 1992:181). Through self-education in prison, Malcolm learned a great deal about black history, as well as the history of European domination and oppression. This, in addition to Elijah Muhammad’s ideas, increased Malcolm’s anger and indignation that blacks had been brainwashed to believe that they had no history. He wrote:

*This is one reason why Mr. Muhammad’s teachings spread so swiftly all over the United States, among all Negroes, whether or not they became true followers of Mr. Muhammad. The teachings ring true—to every Negro. You can hardly show me a*

*black adult in America—or a white one, for that matter—who knows from the history books anything like the truth about the black man’s role.* [Malcolm X 1992:201]

Much of Elijah Muhammad’s influence stemmed from his connection to W.D. Fard, whom the Nation of Islam viewed as the incarnation of Allah on Earth, or the *Mahdi* (savior). Elijah had studied with Fard from their meeting in 1931 to Fard’s “mysterious disappearance” in 1934. Elijah Muhammad, who had only stayed in school through the fourth grade, seemed a very wise and knowledgeable man despite his lack of formal education, and Malcolm could only explain this by his belief that Elijah had received his education from Allah, and that Elijah “had been divinely sent... by Allah himself” (Malcolm X 1992:246). Malcolm believed everything Elijah Muhammad preached, including what he later described as the mythology, referring to Muhammad’s story of the origin of races and the return of W.D. Fard as God in person, who would “restore” blacks to their rightful position in society.

Malcolm would later say that this story about Fard was easy to swallow because Eastern Muslims had not done enough to spread knowledge about “real Islam” to the West. Later, Malcolm decided that a more orthodox Islam, rather than that preached by Elijah Muhammad, was the real path to racial harmony in the United States. At the time of his initial Islamic education, however, Malcolm expressed his awe and appreciation for the unity of Muslim prayer, as well as the pride, honor, and respect that was practiced between African Americans in the Nation of Islam (Malcolm X 1992:223). He also described an “electric atmosphere” whenever Elijah Muhammad spoke to hundreds of Muslims. Elijah Muhammad “told us, and showed us, how the teachings of the true

knowledge of ourselves would lift up the black man from the bottom of the white man's society" (Malcolm X 1992:227).

As the Nation received more publicity, it was accused of spreading an ideology of hate in preaching black supremacy, but Malcolm claimed that the Nation was only trying to uplift black Americans, who had been kept non-violent and subdued for too long, in his eyes, by Christianity. The Nation of Islam argued for separation, rather than integration, so that blacks could be in control of their own destinies. Elijah Muhammad said, in his *Message to the Blackman in America*:

*We believe that the offer of integration is hypocritical and is made by those who are trying to deceive the black peoples into believing that their 400-year-old open enemies of freedom, justice and equality are, all of a sudden, their "friends." Furthermore, we believe that such deception is intended to prevent black people from realizing that the time in history has arrived for the separation from the whites of this nation. [Muhammad 1965:163-4]*

Malcolm agreed that integration was nothing more than "crumbs from the white man's table" (Malcolm X 1992:211). He felt that the Nation of Islam was the only "not integrated... all-black group," the only one blacks were in control of, unlike other civil rights groups that were financed or supported by whites, who therefore had control. Malcolm also saw the quest for "civil rights" in the U.S. as ridiculous, since he felt that blacks were treated as sub-human everywhere, and that black activists first had to seek "human rights" worldwide (Malcolm X 1992:207).

These notions were inspirational to blacks who were disillusioned with offers of integration, and the Nation of Islam received more support from this group as time went

on. Malcolm became Elijah Muhammad's most trusted minister, leading Temple Number Seven in Harlem. He started *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation of Islam's own newspaper, in 1957, and opened up temples all over the country. Malcolm wrote that he was devoted completely to Elijah Muhammad and the cause of growing the Nation of Islam, to improve the condition of blacks in America. He and the other brothers in the Nation of Islam would seek new converts on the streets where they had previously hustled and used drugs; their tactics for curing dope addiction were effective because they could get their friends to quit by speaking familiarly to them, showing a successful example, and giving a compelling argument. The Nation and its separatist ideology gave African-American Muslims a sense of Black Pride, and the self-confidence that Malcolm said was necessary in their decisions to quit.

Unlike in Christianity, which Malcolm saw as allowing people to think they were saved while continuing to live immoral lifestyles, Muslims had to maintain a "physical and moral" code—a sort of test to see who was really devoted. The focus within the Nation was on a strict lifestyle that included no drugs, alcohol, or "fraternization," emphasizing respect for women and for each other. Without drugs, these converted Muslims were no longer wasting money to "make the white man richer" (Malcolm X 1992:300). Smoking tobacco was also forbidden, because cigarettes were viewed as a tax on the poor going to a government that did not care about them.

These practices truly were changing peoples' lives, uplifting and empowering Black Muslims. The numerous successful examples of lives turned around were appealing to many downtrodden and poor blacks at the time. Quitting drugs also helped people get out of prostitution and crime, as these professions were common ways of

supporting drug addictions, and Malcolm X emphasized that by starting Muslim-owned businesses, they helped keep money in the black communities (Malcolm X 1992:303).

There were also schools started for children to learn Arabic and black history.

However, many of the Nation of Islam's practices, Malcolm later discovered, were not true to "Islam of the East," and he would later describe himself as blinded by his devotion to Elijah Muhammad. In 1963, Malcolm explained, he began to preach less moral and religious material, focusing more on the social and political aspects of the Nation's ideology. This was because of rumors circulating related to alleged extra-marital affairs Elijah Muhammad had had with secretaries within the Nation. Excusing these indiscretions as materialization of earlier prophesy that Muhammad would falter, Malcolm wanted to draw attention away from the self-contradictory morals Muhammad preached. However, tensions became more and more strained between the two, and after Malcolm made a controversial comment about John F. Kennedy's assassination, he was "silenced" (suspended) for 90 days from the Nation (Malcolm X 1992:347). Malcolm believed that the comment he made was no more controversial than many of his others. He attributed this silencing to "jealousy" from other ministers, because, as the spokesman of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad's failing health had brought Malcolm more publicity than usual.

These tensions illuminated for Malcolm much hypocrisy, corruption, and inaccuracies within the Nation of Islam, and he started to question the beliefs to which he had so closely adhered over the years in his devotion to Elijah Muhammad. His ideology began to change, including the concept of the "white devil," which he began to view no longer as referring to any inherent evil of individual white men, but rather the "collective

white man’s cruelties...responsible for [the] presence [and] condition of [the] black man in America” (Malcolm X 1992:306). When Malcolm X finally learned of death plots against him, arranged by Elijah Muhammad, he realized that the ties between them were truly severed, and he left the Nation.

Many followers of Malcolm X witnessed these changes, and began to question their own involvement with the Nation of Islam. Some left to support Malcolm with his changing agenda. He remained dedicated to the cause of helping the black man in America, and felt that integration was nothing more than a “smokescreen” (Malcolm X 1992:313). He still believed that Christianity exploited blacks; he advocated armed defense against white supremacist attacks—but not senseless violence—and Christianity did not permit armed defense of any sort. He also felt that the black man still needed healing—spiritually, economically, and politically—so he began working on a “constructive approach to America’s race problems” (Malcolm X 1992:364). He came up with Muslim Mosque, Inc. and decided to make the *hajj* to Mecca.

In Mecca, Malcolm “experienced [being] looked upon as a Muslim, and not a Negro”; In Mecca, for the first time, he saw “brotherhood” between all races (Malcolm X 1992:369). Malcolm realized through his new religious insights that Elijah Muhammad was not divine, and began to see the potential within the theology of Islam itself to bring racial harmony to the still heavily segregated United States. He said:

*I am in agreement one hundred percent with those racists who say that no government laws ever can force brotherhood. The only true world solution today is governments guided by true religion—of the spirit. Here in race-torn America, I am convinced that the Islam religion is desperately needed, particularly by the American*

*black man.... America needs to understand Islam because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem... I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color. [Malcolm X 1992:424; 391]*

Wallace Muhammad, Elijah's son, agreed that the Nation could only be saved by understanding Orthodox Islam. Long after the death of Malcolm X, there remains a divide between those who followed Wallace (now Warith) Muhammad into orthodoxy, and those who stayed with the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan. In an interview, Warith Deen spoke of Farrakhan and their split:

*I felt that he was going out to teach moral reform... that was a very important message in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, when the majority of the blacks of the big cities were without opportunity and education etc. to build... cultural life of themselves. So I thought if Farrakhan could reach people that we had lost because of our open community, I felt it was worth it. I didn't, however, feel too comfortable with him... I felt he was giving me an excuse to get a base... the Farrakhan I see now... seems to be taking on the makeup of a politician rather than a minister in the Nation of Islam. [Muhammad 2007]*

The split between these two leaders illustrated the larger split between the two groups. The Black Muslims under Farrakhan remained focused on the political agenda of furthering the racial cause. Those who followed Warith Deen to Sunni Islam, however, studied the Qur'an more closely and stretched to reach a broader demographic, integrating into the worldwide *umma*. I turn now to some of these Muslims to consider their interpretations of this history.

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## **VI. HISTORICAL NARRATIVES FROM AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSLIMS**

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This chapter incorporates historical narratives drawn from interviews or lectures of three African-American Muslim informants. In these narratives, they interpret the history of African-American Islam, from the Civil Rights Era through the shift toward traditional Sunni Islam. In focusing on these narratives, I hope to draw out common themes in this history that remain important to African-American Muslims today. This will provide insight into their personal connections to Islam, including perceived racial, cultural and historical ties.

Among the informants for this project, even those who did not come to Islam through the Nation, or whose reasons for practicing Islam today are unrelated to matters of race, tended to identify with some of the Nation of Islam's original core tenets. One such goal of the NOI was to "spiritually revive" blacks in America, a notion which is often emphasized, in some form, in Islamic religious services today—usually as a reference to spiritual revival or uplift. Informants also commonly referenced pre-slavery ties to Islam and ideas about Islam as the "natural religion for blacks," both in talking about the history of African-American Islam, and in their own conversion/"reversion" narratives.

The idea of Islam as a "return to roots" or as the natural religion for blacks was promoted by the Nation of Islam, but is still shared by many other Muslims as well. For Sister Lucille, black Americans have ties to Islam that go back to the era of the slave trade. In an interview, she mentioned an article called "Return to Roots" (Ali 2005) that

was personally important to her, detailing an African-American “return to Islam through many paths.” She said she looked at the article “from time to time,” as a reminder of the deep connection she felt to Islam as an African American. Lucille pointed out a timeline of African-American Muslims in the article, showing her that “Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, [and] Warith Deen came out of [the Nation of Islam], but Islam was practiced openly prior to that” among people of African descent.

Sister Lucille explained what “reversion” meant to her, preferring this term to “conversion:” “We believe that everyone is born Muslim by nature, [and] our parents or others teach us differently... for me, Muslim is ‘born to submit to do the will of God.’” According to this idea, when one chooses to “submit” and practice Islam, this is not “converting,” but “reverting” to the natural state of acceptance. But Lucille pointed out that in addition, “a number of our people [ancestors of African heritage] brought into captivity” practiced Islam, and so, for African-American Muslims, “reversion” is also a return to pre-slavery roots.

Brother Qasim confirmed that in his experience, the Nation’s vision of Islam as the best path for African Americans was important and influential to even non-Muslims. It was especially inspiring to black Americans who had tired of the integrationist approach to civil rights. Some felt that “desegregation was a hoax,” he said, pointing out that African Americans moved north to escape southern Jim Crow rule only to discover that they were still living in ghettos. He explained that this was not only a sentiment of Malcolm X and his followers, but that Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced the same disappointment with policies of integration as they were put into practice.

Several times during our conversation, Qasim mentioned the book *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, by James Cone (1992). In this book, Cone says that the rationales behind separatism and integrationism were dependant on the degree of faith that African Americans and other civil rights activists held in the capacity of the U.S. Constitution to overcome the dilemmas of racial stratification. Qasim said that at the time, he was influenced by approaches to civil rights activism on all sides. Citing this book, Qasim disputed the stark contrast often applied to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. He pointed out they both had similar goals, and were deeply influential to large numbers of people; their approaches differed mainly because of their personal histories.

In a formal lecture to students on the life of Malcolm X, Imam Siraj Wahhaj of Brooklyn highlighted the importance of understanding why Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. had such different approaches (Wahhaj 2007). Imam Siraj contrasted the adversity Malcolm had overcome in comparison to the relative respect that King received throughout most of his youth. Imam Siraj emphasized the comparatively greater struggles (economic and otherwise) that Malcolm had faced early on, including his father's murder by the KKK, his mother's institutionalization for mental illness, an altogether unstable family situation, and discouragement and discrimination from teachers and all around. These early circumstances in the life of Malcolm X, an eighth-grade drop-out jailed for robbing houses, contrasted starkly with those of King, who "skipped ninth and twelfth grade, graduated with honors, and received a PhD from Boston University" (Wahhaj 2006). They also spoke to different aspects of people's personalities and personal experiences with their race, and so the two leaders were influential in different ways.

To understand the role of race in the history of African-American Islam, one must understand the social conditions of blacks in the U.S. at the time of the Nation of Islam's establishment. Imam Siraj emphasized the importance of the racial context of the day to the political action that arose during the time. The institutionalized racism of the Jim Crowe era, with its government-enforced segregation and the absence of legislation to protect blacks from lynching, contributed heavily to the political and social atmosphere. Like Qasim, Imam Siraj pointed out that those who moved north to escape the *de jure* segregation faced "discrimination in housing and confinement to ghettos, because their houses would be burned if they moved into white neighborhoods." It was under these desperate but common conditions, the Imam said, that people like himself and Malcolm X found a voice in the Nation of Islam.

Qasim was personally influenced by both King and Malcolm X, who, despite their differing ideologies, experiences, and approaches, both had a common goal of improving conditions for black Americans. He explained that for Malcolm, "Desegregation was not the way... and Malcolm thought that [the integrationists] missed it on that, that they were out of touch... so he didn't participate in the [integrationist] movement." Although Qasim was not involved with the Nation of Islam, he said that the Black Muslim movement influenced him at the time. In fact most African Americans, he said, "cannot say that they did not have contact with the Nation of Islam; [it] was so pervasive, and a large number of African-American Muslims came into" Islam through the Nation.

Reflecting on his earliest awareness of the Nation of Islam, Qasim could not recall whether the numbers of blacks in the Nation were greater than those practicing traditional Sunni Islam at the time, but "by far, the [group that] had the greater impact upon society

was the Nation of Islam.” He said that “Sunni Muslims were viewed as strangers, an oddity within the African-American community. They wore traditional Islamic garb [and] turbans... so they were looked upon as something almost foreign and alien, and didn’t ascribe to [the] nationalist, racist agenda” that the Nation of Islam members did— “whereas the Nation of Islam had a specific agenda to [separate], and that excited people.” The separation he spoke of was not only from the mainstream (a form of separation which was also accomplished by Sunni Muslims, as well as African-Americans practicing other non-Christian religions), but a separation from what many viewed as the submissive ideology behind integrationism.

It was this refusal to integrate that “excited people,” as Qasim said. He believed that a great deal of the Nation of Islam’s power came from its black supremacist ideology, which empowered formerly oppressed blacks to oppose white dominance by giving them a sense of Black Pride. Other religions and practices, while appealing in their own ways, lacked this aspect of racial superiority. The Nation of Islam gave blacks an ideology to combat racism by going beyond the civil disobedience advocated by King at the time, and promoting the superiority of blacks as the chosen people of Allah. Although all of the Nation’s tenets did not adhere to the traditional teachings of Islam, Imam Siraj pointed out, the Nation did provide a gateway to the true teachings of the Qur’an. So while, as Qasim explained, these initial converts to Islam did not “have any scholars locally to teach them differently,” they used Islam “to stand up to racism in America.”

For Qasim, Islam was also particularly influential to so many African Americans at the time specifically because it does not mandate or advocate the “turning of the cheek” stance of Christianity. He explained that this sentiment, often mistaken for

advocacy of violence, is based in scripture; that the Prophet Muhammad established a protocol, a set of boundaries, for every action of human life, including war. Qasim explained, “There are rules and regulations for war: women, children, and non-combatants are not to be harmed. Not even a tree is to be stricken down in the cause of your jihad, unless they are combatants.” However, he continued: “We are people who believe in self-determination and self-defense, so you won’t find Muslims taking a pacifist perspective.”<sup>3</sup> Before the Nation of Islam, blacks (most of whom were Christians) were encouraged to be non-violent, and to “turn the other cheek” when provoked or attacked. Part of Islam’s appeal, according to Qasim, is that unlike Martin Luther King’s Christian pacifism, it offered a more active response to violence against blacks. This sentiment, expressed so often by Malcolm X, clearly remains influential today, decades after his death and the large-scale decline of the Nation of Islam.

Qasim acknowledges that he was influenced by the ideas the Nation of Islam put forth, and pointed out its legitimate ideas and accomplishments. For instance, the Nation “took people from the penitentiary system, reformed them and cleaned them up... [this group had the] power to give them morals, manners, which many did not have coming from the ghetto.” He went on to point out that the Nation established itself in many areas, having its own printing press, newspaper, economic programs, and school system—the Clara Muhammad schools, Islamic schools (named for Elijah Muhammad’s wife) which were popular even among non-Muslims, for the “morals and discipline” they provided.

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<sup>3</sup> In saying this, Qasim strongly condemned acts of terrorism such as those practiced against the U.S. on September 11, 2001, saying that they are contradictory to Islam, and pointing out that many Muslim Americans were killed in the attacks as well. Clearly, in explaining his religion, Qasim, like many Muslim Americans, feels compelled to contradict misconceptions that have been spread through the media and absorbed by the American public in the past several decades.

These institutions were sites of Black Power, controlled and operated independently by African-Americans rather than relying on the government for social change.

Although Qasim pointed out the legitimacy of the Nation of Islam, its influence on him was more political than religious, and he emphasized that *both* Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., as black activists, had an influence on him politically. He reconciled their originally conflicting principles by pointing out that, late in their lives, the two men were each experiencing changes in their ideologies to become more similar to the other's. King, "disillusioned and bitter with his own movement," began to realize that no one (in the government) "ever meant for de-segregation to be complete." Malcolm, on the other hand, after his *haji*, had a change of attitude toward whites, seeing the racial harmony that Islam had brought to the people in Mecca. Qasim greatly emphasized the importance of Malcolm X's shift toward orthodoxy in his admiration for him. It was not until after Warith Deen's transition to Sunni Islam that Qasim became a practicing Muslim.

According to Qasim, when Elijah Muhammad's son, Warith Deen, said that his father "was not a prophet of God, but just an ordinary man, and fallible like all human beings," Malcolm X was greatly influenced by this, and it was Warith Deen "who pointed him toward the direction of Mecca." Qasim also emphasized the controversy this created within the Nation of Islam, as "that kind of speech was believed to be blasphemous, and dangerous." Still, the move "pulled a lot of people into the orthodox community... [who] respected Malcolm X because of his travels." Qasim included himself among those who were influenced by the "rhetoric" of Islam becoming more public after Malcolm's transition: "Words like Allah, Islam, and Muhammad were made household words. This

sparked an interest in a lot of people who would not ordinarily come across those words,” he said.

Qasim’s uncle, who was in the Nation, “did have a great deal of influence” over him: “Reflecting on his experience in the NOI,” he said, “I just early on couldn’t recognize the tenets of the nation as acceptable religious doctrine.” He compared the inconsistencies he saw within the Nation’s ideology to contradictions he perceived in Christianity, and said “that was a doctrine I was trying to get away from... So when I followed Warith Deen... when he embraced orthodox Islam, I then could see myself more or less agreeing... So I came in supporting that doctrine, more than the nationalist [doctrine], what some might call racist.” Like Malcolm X, when Qasim discovered the “true teachings of the Qur’an,” he embraced Islam spiritually, over and above his initial interest in the Nation of Islam as a political inspiration.

After learning the true teachings of the Qur’an, Imam Siraj explained, Black Muslims suffering injustice and discrimination found an even more compelling message than black superiority: a doctrine of racial equality. Under Islam, he said, “everyone is the child of Adam. There is no racial superiority. Allah made male and female, nations and tribes, so you might know each other, [but] there is no superiority. Islam gave criteria to determine authentic superiority.” The notion he expresses here was often cited by other Muslim informants, that the “criteria to determine” worthiness is based on spirituality and piety.

For many black Muslims, their collective racial history plays a part in their spirituality. Conceptions of pre-slavery roots in Islam have been important to their identities as Muslims. Furthermore, struggle against oppression is present in the minds of

many as part of their cultural legacy, and the Nation of Islam's mission to overcome oppression "by any means necessary" had an influence on most African Americans. Those I spoke with shared many of the sentiments expressed by Malcolm X during the height of his leadership, as they emphasized the role that black supremacy and rejection of pacifism played in leading to racial empowerment by way of rejecting white dominance. However, these aspects were significant only to the racial identity of informants or their initial familiarity with Islam. Among other aspects of Sunni Islam, it was the Qur'anic message of racial equality, put forth after the transition to orthodoxy, that had the longer-lasting influence and importance. The return to lost roots has been an important feature of people's reversion narratives, as stressed by much of the scholarship on black Muslims. In practice, however, there is more of an emphasis on the preservation and homogeneity of the *umma*. In the next chapter, I move from a discussion of the past to current representations of African-American Sunni Islam, and explore some of the important issues in contemporary practice.

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## VII. CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF SUNNI ISLAM AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

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### Community Concerns

Inside the South Philadelphia masjid I visited, *khutbahs* of the Friday *jumu'ah* services focus on different themes each week, touching upon a variety of issues that are important to the Sunni Muslims who worship here. For this African-American Muslim community, the focus over the past several decades has shifted away from the racialized goals and discourse of the Nation of Islam to concentrate on issues that are important to the global community of Muslims, the *umma*. The following discussion explores some of these issues and beliefs to understand contemporary practice of Sunni Islam, its continuing appeal to African Americans, and its potential for spiritual empowerment.

Since the transition away from the Nation of Islam and its racialized discourse, a great deal has changed within the mosques of African-American Muslim communities. At the Philadelphia masjid, some aspects are visibly evident, such as the *mihrab* (niche in the wall of the mosque) showing the direction toward Mecca, and the shape of the windows that evokes Islamic architecture. Other aspects of change are less visible, but still present: at most services, imams do not speak of race in terms of black and white, if at all.

At first sight, some might consider this relative silence on race to be the elephant in the room, since at most times within the masjid, the thirty or so sisters in the women's prayer room were all African-American, as was the imam and anyone visible on the television screen showing the brothers' prayer room. There is clearly still separation in

practice by ethnicity or nationality in the demographics of most mosques, in spite of the emphasis on equality and solidarity among Muslims. This is probably not deliberate, however; when Warith Deen Muhammad shifted away from the black supremacist vision of the Nation, whole communities turned their mosques from Nation of Islam temples to Sunni masjids, and the racial makeup of these congregations remains nearly the same.

In fact, a number of imams have addressed this separation during *jumu'ah* services. During a *khutbah* at the Philadelphia masjid entitled “Race Matters in Islam,” Imam Abdul spoke, telling congregants that certainly, there are many different divisions within Islam—races, classes, genders—and so it is sometimes natural to band together with others who share a nationality or other aspects of identity in common. This is not racism, he said, “but it becomes a racist matter when you exclude others.” In this speech, Imam Abdul emphasized that when people think they are superior because of race, nationality, or other such identity, they become an oppressors. He drew a parallel between this and *Sheitan* (the devil) saying he is better than man. Supremacy, according to the imam, is the mindset of the devil.

Imam Abdul said that racism is still a pertinent issue in the country and in the world today. Among Muslims is no exception: “We have a race problem; we have a gender problem; we have a nationalist problem, in the Muslim community.” He urged congregants to remember, “You are a Muslim first; you are a Pakistani, or an Arab, or an African American second.” In acknowledging that “race matters,” Imam Abdul was speaking of the current circumstances, not of how things ideally should be.

Muslim solidarity is important above allegiance to class, race, or any other distinction. During another *Khutbah* at the masjid, the visiting Imam put emphasis on

equal treatment of Muslims, saying that there is “no color, no particular group” that Muslims belong to, but rather that they have a tie to “all nations,” for “the true nation of Islam has blessings.” The “true nation” refers to the *umma*. The imam continued, “Wherever you are in this *umma*, you must practice Islam... not just in Mecca.” There should be no distinction between Muslims based on geographical location; everyone is part of an Islamic nation, dedicated to worship of Allah. What is important is to preserve the *umma*. He stated that “You should be happy” to see other Muslims, no matter who, from where, or what they look like. Muslims should not judge each other. “Do not let non-believers of Islam split us up [into distinct groups], separate us... that’s not Islam. We must keep the *umma* together,” he said.

Imam Abdul elaborated on this, saying:

*Race for a Muslim is not an issue... for a true Muslim that is... for a sincere Muslim... we know that in Islam, no one is superior because of their color. The Qur’an tells us, ‘O people, we have created you from a single male and female and divided you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.’ But each and every one of us has our biases... if we are honest with ourselves.”*

He went on to talk about discrimination against Muslims, but said, “I don’t just want justice for Muslims... we have a divine responsibility to struggle for the liberation of all oppressed people... if whites... blacks... Arabs are being oppressed we must stand up with them and for them.”

Ending the English portion of one *khutbah*, the visiting imam at the masjid told congregants, “Ask for protection against enemies of Islam—protect brothers and sisters around the world. Keep them safe from enemies of Islam.” The issue of preserving the

*umma* is not only important to contemporary African-American Muslims, but is among those that matter to many Muslims worldwide, as imams within different communities struggle to remain connected in such a divided world.

“You have five duties that a Muslim owes to another,” said the visiting Imam at the Philadelphia masjid, referring to the Five Pillars of Islam: declaration of faith, prayer five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, charity, and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). He said that Mohammed gave a pure example of how to live—the *Sunnah*—and gave wisdom and understanding through this. Islam is not just a religion, but “a way of life,” an all-important set of beliefs and practices that influence every aspect of life, incorporated into work, education, and any other institution. “Follow the Sunnah to reflect Islam,” he said, “To uplift us.” This is similar to the message preached by Elijah Muhammad, that “the teachings of the true knowledge of ourselves would lift up the black man from the bottom of the white man’s society” (Malcolm X 1992:227).

However, the message has changed to emphasize equality of all Muslims. The visiting imam reiterated this point: “It is not better to be Arab, African-American... Slavery, all that crap doesn’t matter... You’ve been cleaned up, uplifted” by Islam. The theme of “uplifting” was repeated often during the *khutbah*: “The Qur’an will uplift us... make us higher... purify... and you will be successful... will benefit from Islam.” There is a strong emphasis on uplifting oneself through moral character and actions. The Nation of Islam also emphasized self-improvement and “moral character” of individuals in order to improve African-American communities, but while these messages are similar, the interpretation of theology has changed. The emphasis now is on self-reflection and obedience; the best Muslim has good character. In a message similar to that left by

Malcolm X after his return from the *hajj*, the visiting Imam said, “This is the best nation for all mankind,” referring to the equality and solidarity of Islam. “*This*,” he said, “is what makes us [Muslims] better.”

### **Personal Interpretations**

Sister Rashidah, a regular attendee of the Philadelphia masjid, is a knowledgeable and studied religious scholar. She preferred a more theologically based message to the racial aspects in the visiting imam’s exhortation, which were more political and social in theme. “I don’t like it when [imams] yell like that,” Rashidah said, referring to the content and intensity of the fiery *khutbah*. His impassioned speeches sometimes reach loud volumes with a fervent discourse, and Rashidah expressed more enthusiasm for the regular imam, who had been conducting the jumu’ah services in connection with a theme of the month, such as family life development.

Despite the emphasis on theological issues, and on connecting with the worldwide community of Muslims, there are some aspects of Islam that seem to specifically, or especially, speak to African Americans; if it is not acknowledged as a shared sentiment of the community, it is still true at least on a personal basis. Rashidah was never associated with the Nation of Islam, and emphasized the strong presence of Islam in America unrelated to the Nation. Still, she acknowledged that race probably does play a role for African Americans in their comparative readiness to accept Islam.

Rashidah suggested that the homogeneity of the *umma* is appealing especially to many African Americans like herself who do not feel a loss of any culture in choosing to practice Islam, because they do not know what their African culture consisted of. She

explained that while some blacks have embraced the back-to-African-roots practices, there is still great disconnectedness with what their real culture and heritage are. This would suggest that Islam's culture is more appealing to African Americans because there is not really sadness or hesitancy to leave anything behind in choosing to practice Islam. As for Rashidah, she took the *shahadah* (vows) at twenty-seven, after exploring many faiths including Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism. She took the *hijab* (head covering) the day of her *shahadah*, twenty-five years ago, and has worn it without hesitancy ever since. She felt that it was probably easier for her, as an African American, to submit to Islam, feeling that she had "no culture" to give up.

More than anything, however, many Muslims like Rashidah have been attracted to Islam for what they perceive as its clearly defined guidelines and theology. A main concern for Rashidah has been learning what the rights of women are within Islam, and she has worked to study Arabic so she can translate for herself what the Qur'an says. She related one anecdote in which, after taking out and handling the family Qur'an in one Nation of Islam household, her female friend was appalled: "In the Nation of Islam, women were not allowed to study for themselves or touch the text." Rashidah informed her that this is stated nowhere in the theology of Islam, and she has made a point to know what the theological truth is, rather than accepting unquestioningly things that she has been told.

"Most people don't know the theology of their own religion," she said. They know what they've been told, or learned from their pastor, and they identify with that—"and most people like this; many are comfortable not asking questions," she said. Rashidah, however, was always asking questions, of all the various religions she had

explored; before Islam, she had not found satisfactory answers. She could not accept that she was expected to blindly swallow the contradictions that she saw. She asked of several spiritual advisors, “If the Earth is so orderly, why isn’t faith orderly?” At one point she laughed hesitantly, remembering that she had asked such probing questions of her priest that he went on sabbatical after talking with her, and has not been seen since at the church. Rashidah said that only Islam has brought satisfying answers to her questions.

Brother Qasim experienced similar frustrations in his long quest for spiritual fulfillment, including the contradictions he found within Christianity, and was unable to reconcile the belief that there is one God with the idea of the Trinity. He recalled his early encounters with Islam: “My first text reading of Islam was in the Encyclopedia Britannica for a research project, in either junior high or high school, [which] described the Five Pillars.” He also read *Muhammad Speaks*, the newspaper of the Nation of Islam. Qasim said that while “the monotheistic tenet—only one god, nothing to be associated with his form— resonated,” he was troubled by the contradiction present in the idea of W.D. Fard as God-in-person. “It just didn’t add up.”

When he came to understand more about “true” Islam, Qasim found a doctrine that did not contradict itself. “That’s what I was looking for, and that’s what I found [in Islam].” When Malcolm X’s *Autobiography* came out, “a lot of people followed and supported [him] for their own reasons: because he was a great speaker, because he was a revolutionary, [and] for many because he was a Black Nationalist.” But for Qasim, it was Malcolm X’s shift toward traditional Islam that appealed to him, and said that his uncle made the transition to traditional Islam as well.

Rashidah explained the appeal of Islam’s theology, saying that in her personal experience, at least, “There are truths whether I accept them or not,” referring to the Islamic tenet that everything is determined by the will of Allah. “We learn something else” in childhood, she said, being “taught [that] we can control [life], but the truth is, we can’t.” As an example, she said that people are taught that if they stop breathing, they will die, and that they can do this—take away their own lives—voluntarily. However, she pointed out, “If you try to hold your breath [until death], you will pass out. And then what? Then you begin to breathe again... We do not have control over this; only Allah does.” She said that when people realize this, that is when they revert to the initial knowledge, that which “even a baby knows: you do not stop breathing. You live, because Allah wills it so.” This is one way Rashidah explained her faith.

In explanation of “reversion,” Rashidah said, “You don’t have a choice until you become conscious,” which she did. Rashidah considers herself to have “reverted,” but as she was always seeking spiritual satisfaction and answers, she emphasized that she has not just reverted but “grown,” on a journey to find understanding. There is a difference, she said, between having unquestioning faith and understanding. There are many interpretations of the texts in other religions, but Islam has the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the hadiths which state explicitly how to conduct oneself, without, in her opinion, any contradictions. For Rashidah, although there were aspects of her race that drew her to Islam, she felt that Islam is empowering in its own rite, to anyone regardless of race.

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## VIII. CONCLUSION

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From its conception, the Nation of Islam was focused on large-scale racial empowerment, to uplift not only small communities but an entire subset of the population. To an extent, it realized many goals it set out to accomplish. As an organization designed for spiritual revival of black Americans, the Nation served as a vehicle for racial empowerment at a time when it was critically needed by many downtrodden and oppressed African Americans. It provided a sense of solidarity, self-respect, and agency for its members through specific revival programs, a non-submissive separatist agenda, and a vision of black supremacy. The organization made great strides in economic success and material change for many members and communities. It also was successful in its goals of racial empowerment, even for many non-Muslims, with its emphasis on Black Pride.

Through the exploration of primary texts from the era of the Nation of Islam's foundation, and fieldwork within the African-American Muslim community surrounding the Philadelphia masjid, I have demonstrated that certain aspects of the Nation of Islam's history remain important to individual Muslims on a personal level, as they were affected by those efforts during a time of great political and racial conflict. However, over the past several decades, for those who chose to practice traditional Sunni Islam, empowerment is more spiritual than racial. Strong morals are still emphasized, and righteousness comes from "being a good Muslim," but worship practices are different, and more focused on the theology of the Qur'an and the individual's duties to the *umma*.

In the Qur'an's message of racial equality and emphasis on brotherhood, African-American Muslims have found empowerment beyond what the Nation of Islam could provide for them. Sunni Islam features many empowering aspects of religion identified in the Introduction, such as answers to spiritual questions, a code of righteous conduct, religious solidarity, and social services. But certain aspects of Sunni Islam are specifically appealing to African Americans in ways that other religions are not: these include such clearly defined codes of conduct that people do not perceive ambiguities in how to live piously; cultural ties that are perceived to be deeply rooted in ancestry; and solidarity that goes beyond the smaller community, reaching the rest of the world throughout the *umma*.

Despite the division of Muslim communities and mosques by racial makeup, imams still strongly urge congregants to treat fellow Muslims as brothers and sisters. There is an emphasis on uplifting the communities and the individual, but by means of racial equality and compassion. Self-worth is approached not through a sense of superiority, but a sense of common struggle for improvement in serving Allah. I have demonstrated that these combined aspects of Sunni Islam empower African Americans by providing them with strength, spiritual satisfaction, support, and agency.

In spite of the emphases on equality, however, there will always be discrepancies between people's ideals and their practices. Aspects of racial division exist, and as Imam Abdul said, "Race matters in Islam," as it historically has in this country, because cultural, social, and economic differences still exist based on race. My fieldwork was limited in part by this fact: gaining access to an all-African-American mosque as a white Jew seemed intimidating at first, and I felt that I would have to make up for these

differences by being very informed and not challenging or questioning anything, for fear of betraying my limited “Western” perspective. For future study of this topic, ethnography might be more approachable for someone with more racial, religious, or any sort of personal ties to the community, especially since I sensed a degree of hesitancy to interact with non-Muslims, based on social and moral differences. The limited fieldwork I performed was also restrictive to this project, and a great deal more participant-observation would be necessary for a proper study of this sort.

Other suggestions I would make for further research would be a more in-depth study of representations of Islam in the Western media. It would be interesting to see exactly how the numbers of African Americans (or any Americans, for that matter) reverting to Islam have been affected by the decrease in imagery of the Nation of Islam. I would also like to have spent more time getting a sense of how 9/11 and its consequences have affected black Muslims. My research was largely based on history, leaving little time for discussion of the present. At the very least, though, I hope this project will contribute in some way to a more representative description of African-American Islam, or of Islam in general, and that readers of this paper will gain at least some of the understanding about race and religion that came to me throughout the duration of its writing.

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## IX. APPENDIX

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“American Muslims: Population Statistics” (all figures reproduced directly from CAIR):

### Ethnic Breakdown of (Sunni) Mosques Attendees in the United States:

Ethnicity	%
South Asian	33
African American	30
Arab	25
Sub-Saharan African	3.4
European (Balkan)	2.1
White American	1.6
Southeast Asian	1.3
Caribbean	1.2
Turkish	1.1
Iranian	0.7
Hispanic/Latino	0.6

Source: Ihsan Bagby et. al, *The American Mosque: A National Portrait*. CAIR 2001.

### Muslim Population in North America\*

Ethnic Ancestry	As % of Estimated Muslim Population
South Asian	25
Arab	23
African American	14
Sub-Saharan African	10
Iranian	10
Turk	6
Other Asian	5
Balkan	2
Other**	5

Source: Mohamed Nimer. *The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.

\*United States and Canada.

\*\*This category is comprised from many ancestries, including Anglo Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Canadian Aborigines.

### U.S. Immigrants from Muslim Populated Regions

Region/Country	As % of American Muslims	What % is U.S. citizen	What % has Bachelor degree or higher	Average household income \$
Arab World	29	80	33	47,000
South Asia	27	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Iran	13	44	49	50,000
Sub-Saharan Africa	12	65	33	31,000
Turkey	7	70	40	52,000
Other Asian countries	5	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Balkan	3	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Albanian	n.d.	85	22	45,000
Gayana	2	53	15	40,000
Trinidad and Tobago	1	42	15	36,000
Other*	5	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.

Sources: The North American Muslim Resource Guide and the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

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