

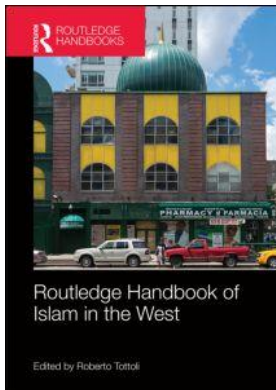
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## **Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West**

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### **Black Muslims**

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# Black Muslims

*Herbert Berg*

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The term “Black Muslim” would seem to encompass all African American Muslims and African Muslims. It is, however, a term that is largely reserved for African Americans in the Nation of Islam (NOI), a movement founded in the early 1930s by the enigmatic Wali Fard Muhammad and led for almost four decades by his Messenger and successor, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Where one begins the story of Black Muslims often reflects one’s views about the orthodoxy of the NOI. If one begins the tale with Estavan, a Moroccan Muslim slave who arrived in Florida with a Spanish fleet in 1527, or with the approximately 15 percent of Africans who were Muslims brought to North America as slaves, then the NOI is a reappropriation of a lost Islamic heritage. It may be heretical and on the margins, but it stands inside the *umma*. If one begins with the history of Fard Muhammad, or, worse, with Wallace D. Ford, then the NOI is a scam and a brazen usurpation of a Muslim façade with a racist agenda that preyed on African American’s ignorance of Islam; its use of the words “Islam” and “Muslim,” or even its inclusion in a volume such as this, is anathema. Where one ends the story of Black Muslims also reflects one’s view about the NOI. To end the story with Louis Farrakhan is usually to highlight the unreformed differences between the NOI and other older or more traditional forms of Islam. If one instead ends with Malcolm X or Warith Deen Muhammad, the son and successor of Elijah Muhammad, then one likely sees the NOI as a necessary, but temporary, stepping-stone towards Sunni orthodoxy.

Since another chapter in this volume discusses African Muslim slaves (Chapter 6), this one will begin with the immediate precursor to the NOI, the Moorish Science Temple (MST) founded by Noble Drew Ali, and end with both Warith Deen Muhammed and Louis Farrakhan. The latter two represent the inherent but conflicting forces in the NOI as initiated by Fard Muhammad and promulgated by Elijah Muhammad. These conflicting forces are also evident in the at times acrimonious interactions of Elijah Muhammad with other Muslims. As Black Muslims and foreign Muslims became increasingly aware of each other, initial acceptance turned to suspicion and then to hostility. Rapprochement became possible only when Black Muslims opted to become Muslims who were black.

## **What’s in a name? The first Black Muslims in America**

African Muslim slaves were not merely Muslims living as a minority in a non-Muslim community. They lived in a society that actively sought to erase their cultures, languages, and

names. Their original diverse cultural identities were reduced to “Negro slave.” With a few notable exceptions, it was not long before their religion, Islam, was eliminated. Some vestiges may have remained, such as an association of Islam with Africa, but the scripture, the prayers, and the rituals were forgotten. When the first Ahmadi missionary came to the United States, what few African Americans he converted had been Christians.

The dominance of Christianity among African Americans in the early twentieth century also helps explain the peculiar formulation of Islam created by Noble Drew Ali. Timothy Drew was a descendent of slaves and born in 1886 in North Carolina. Later legends claim that he passed a test in the Temple of Cheops in Egypt and so became Sharif Abdul Ali, or Noble Drew Ali. In response to a dream instructing him to found a religion “for the uplifting of fallen mankind,” especially the “lost-found nation of American blacks,” he founded the Canaanite Temple in Newark, New Jersey in 1913. After a dispute within the movement, Drew Ali moved to Chicago and restarted the movement, with several name changes, settling on the Moorish Science Temple of America, Inc. in 1928. A year earlier he had published his *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America*, commonly known as the *Circle Seven Koran*.

Drew Ali saw African Americans as the descendants of Canaanites, Moabites, and the later Moors. Although originally “Asiatics,” they populated Africa and, as Moors, were said to have ruled Asia and Europe. Asiatics were said to include all of the original inhabitants of the Americas and India. In other words, it encompassed all but white Europeans and their descendants. For Drew Ali, the original, natural, and only suitable religion for Asiatics was Islam, whereas Christianity was the religion best suited for whites. It is precisely because they had not “honored their mother and father,” that is, by forgetting their true religion, that African Americans suffered slavery. A return to Islam would bring freedom, equality, justice, and love.

Drew Ali called his religion Islam, his followers “Moslems,” and his scripture the Koran. But this is where close parallels with other forms of Islam end. The Circle Seven Koran draws most of its material directly from Levi H. Dowling’s *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1908) and Sri Ramatherio’s 1925 edition of *Unto Thee I Grant*. Apart from selecting the chapters from this book, replacing “God” with “Allah,” and editing out the former’s references to a blond, blue-eyed Jesus, Drew Ali added only four chapters of those materials. Thus half the book is about Jesus, whereas Muhammad is mentioned only twice, once as the “founder of the uniting of Islam” and once as he who “fulfilled the works of Jesus of Nazareth” (Ali 1927: 57).

Drew Ali’s purpose was not to reintroduce Islam – at least not in any recognizable form – but to capitalize on Islam’s reputation as a non-European religion with a rich history. He benefited from Islam’s association with “the East” and Africa and its apparent longstanding hostility to white Christianity. The name and its symbolism mattered. In that sense, the terms “Koran” and “Moslems” mattered in the same way that the fezzes, turbans, sashes, and names such as Bey and El mattered. Drew Ali was forging a new identity, separate from that of white Christianity, based on an idealized and imagined past.

Drew Ali may have had as many as 10,000 followers, but with this success also came turmoil. When a rival was murdered in 1929, Drew Ali was arrested, released on bond, but died very shortly thereafter under suspicious circumstances. His movement survives in various forms to the present, but it was soon eclipsed by a new movement born in the cities of the North, to which millions of rural Southern blacks had so recently migrated. His significance lies in having reintroduced the terminology of Islam, such as Moslem and Koran, to African Americans and in formulating a racist Islam.

## The Islam of Black Muslims

The Nation of Islam was a movement begun in 1930s Detroit by the mysterious Wali Fard Muhammad. He disappeared in 1934, and his movement of 5,000–8,000 followers fractured. One of his prominent ministers, Elijah Muhammad, fled Detroit and then Chicago not long after the disappearance because of rivals. But he continued to proselytize and founded Temple No. 4 in Washington, DC. There his movement came under Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) scrutiny and he was arrested and convicted of draft dodging in 1942, even though he was then 44 years old. By the time of his release in 1946, his rivals had disappeared and he then led the NOI until his death in 1975.

In many ways the movement was recognizably more Islamic than the MST. The members called themselves Muslims, worshipped Allah, and used the Qur'an – not their own Koran as Drew Ali had. The Prophet Muhammad was revered, the Judgment Day was central, and prayer and fasting were practiced. The consumption of alcohol and pork was also prohibited. But each of these beliefs and practices also highlights differences with other Muslims. They also demonstrate that every aspect of the Black Islam was understood in light of a mythology that seems to go back to Fard Muhammad himself and highlights the experience and interaction of blacks and whites in Western society.

According to this mythology, humanity's origins do not lie with Adam and Eve. Rather, they represent only the most recent and evil development in human history. Fard Muhammad (as narrated by Elijah Muhammad) taught that the earth was some 66 trillion years old, and its current form resulted from Allah seeking to destroy humanity after failing to unite it. The tribe of Shabazz, however, survived the destructive blast that separated the moon from the earth, and settled in Mecca and the Nile valley. Thus all ancient civilization is black and Muslim. The white race, however, was only created 6,600 years ago by the evil Mr. Yakub after he became embittered towards his own people. He began a selective breeding program on the island of Patmos using his black followers and thus created an increasingly lighter people. The net result was a blond, blue-eyed, naked, evil white race. Thus original humanity was black, with white people having lost the original color. That is to say, they are the “colored” people. They are the sinful Adam and Eve created in “our image” (that is, the image of black humanity) and out of “black mud” (Genesis 1:26 and Qur'an 15:28). Six thousand years ago, these newly created people returned to their ancestors' Mecca, but they were soon exiled to Europe by blacks, and there they remained living in caves despite the attempts by Moses to reform them. Jesus, too, failed. Muhammad's success delayed their evil for almost a millennium. But then this race burst out of Europe, conquered the Americas, stole the land, and enslaved Africans. Whites robbed blacks of their religion and their names, forcing them to worship a god who looked like the same white devils who had enslaved them.

But Allah had not forgotten this Lost Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America. He came to Detroit to find them and return them to their original religion: Islam. Spiritual, mental, physical, social, and economic freedom from the white devil was only possible by returning to that religion. Christianity, they were taught, was “one of the most perfect black-slave-making religions on our planet” (Muhammad 1992: 70). It makes blacks worship a false, white god and turn the other cheek in the face of oppression, waiting for the next life for justice. Islam, by contrast, offers freedom, justice, and equality now, under the leadership of the true god, Allah, in the person of Wali Fard Muhammad. Soon, Allah will destroy the evil white race. Only the independent and separated Black Muslims will escape this destruction of the United States and Europe. For that reason, it was “far more important to teach the separation of Blacks and Whites in America than prayer” (Muhammad 1992: 204).

Allah is, therefore, understood quite differently than in most other forms of Islam. Muhammad should not be confused with the notion of incarnation in the Christian or Druze senses. Nor is Allah anything other than human:

They are spooky minded and believe that Allah (God) is some immaterial something ... The ignorant belief of the Orthodox Muslims, that Allah (God) is Some Formless Something and yet He Has An Interest in our affairs, can be condemned in no limit of time. I would not give two cents for that kind of God, in which they believe.

*(Muhammad 1969: 20–1)*

In addition, there had been earlier Allahs, such as the one who split the moon from the earth, but with Fard Muhammad there is monotheism. He is the Allah of the age. Although powerful enough to destroy the earth and knowing humanity's secrets, his purpose was to suffer persecution for three and half years in order to bring Islam to his lost nation. After resurrecting this nation, he continued to guide it via his successor, Elijah Muhammad.

Elijah Muhammad employed the titles Apostle of Allah and Messenger of Allah for himself – after all, he had received personal instruction from Allah himself. Muhammad's role is largely restricted to having constrained the expansion of the white race's evil for almost a millennium. Elijah Muhammad tended to read Qur'anic passages usually thought to be about Muhammad to be prophecies about himself. For example, the prayer of Abraham is about Elijah Muhammad, as is the prophet sent to a people to whom no warner has been sent (Qur'an 32:3 and 2:127–9). Similarly, every reference to Satan in the Qur'an and the Bible was read by Elijah Muhammad as reference to the white race, who had been "grafted" by Mr. Yakub. Elijah Muhammad not only used the Qur'an as scripture, but in so doing made it scripture among his followers who had never read it or perhaps even heard of it before:

The book that the so-called American Negroes (The Tribe of Shabazz) should own and read, the book that the slave masters have but have not represented it to their slaves, is a book that will heal their sin-sick souls that were made sick and sorrowful by the slave masters. This book will open their blinded eyes and open their deaf ears. It will purify them. The name of this book, which makes a distinction between the God of righteous and the God of evil, is: Glorious Holy Quran Sharrieff. It is indeed the Book of Guidance, of Light and Truth, and of Wisdom and Judgment. But the average one should first be taught how to respect such a book, how to understand it, and how to teach it. ... This book, the Holy Quran Sharrieff, is not from a prophet but direct from Allah to Muhammad (may peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him!) not by an angel but from the mouth of Allah (God) ... to get a real Holy Qur'an one should know the Arabic language in which it is written.

*(Muhammad 1957: 50–1)*

But the "how to understand it" was not through the traditional *'ulum al-Qur'an* or the classical collections of *tafsirs*, both of which he was unaware, but in light of his overarching racial mythology. The Bible, on the other hand, was a poisonous book that should be read with caution. "The Bible means good if you can rightly understand it. My interpretation of it is given to me from the Lord of the Worlds" (Muhammad 1992: 88). The truth in the Bible resided in the symbolic history of the races within it, and in the prophecies for the imminent end times. Of particular significance were the Creation stories in Genesis, which for Elijah Muhammad related the birth of the white race, the Gospels, which prophesied Fard

Muhammad, and the Book of Revelation, said to have been written by Mr. Yakub himself and which prophesies the destruction of his white race. These prophecies had remained hidden, like those in the Qur'an, and could only be unlocked by Elijah Muhammad because of Fard Muhammad's guidance. This approach allowed him to employ the scripture with which the majority of his followers were most familiar, the Bible, and the scripture other Muslims would assume they understood better, the Qur'an, in ways that made them entirely dependent on him for their interpretation.

For Elijah Muhammad, the other most important prophecies contained in the Bible and the Qur'an are those of the end times. They, too, form part of the racial mythology and have been completely misinterpreted by both Christians and Muslims. The Last Day does not consist of the end of the world, a bodily resurrection, and one's appearance before Allah to be judged and then assigned to the Garden or the Fire. Humanity is already in the end times, Heaven and Hell describe the contemporary racial situation, and the resurrection describes a mental transformation. The purpose of Fard Muhammad's coming was to resurrect the "mentally dead so-called Negroes," permitting them to free themselves from the devil's rule and influence – that is, Hell – and achieve freedom, justice, and equality – that is, Heaven. The de-spiritualization of the afterlife (which is not in fact an "after" life) parallels that of Allah by Elijah Muhammad.

The racial mythology was also fully integrated into the practices of the NOI. These practices remained recognizably Islamic, and prominently included the traditional pillars of Islam: the *shahada*, *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, and, to a lesser extent, *hajj*. But each was again understood in light of his racial mythology. For example, the *shahada* appears in Arabic in Elijah Muhammad's booklet *the Supreme Wisdom*, but is contextualized thus:

The Muslim begins his prayer by declaring that ALLAH IS THE GREATEST and that he bears witness that there is "No God but ALLAH," and that none deserves to be served (worshipped) but Him. He further declares that Muhammad is his Last Apostle (an Apostle whom Allah would raise from the lost and found people of the seed of Abraham in the Days of Judgment).

*(Muhammad 1957: 45–6)*

That is to say, Allah is Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad is the Apostle. Prayers were in English, not Arabic, and showers were recommended, not the standard ablutions. Communal services were not on Friday at noon, but Sunday afternoon, and modeled on Christian services. Similarly, followers gave money, but this was modeled on Christian tithing more than *zakat*. Elijah Muhammad advocated fasting, not during the month of Ramadan in commemoration of the initial revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad, but in December to focus his followers' on Fard Muhammad instead of on Christmas. In the 1970s, however, he began to encourage his followers to fast during Ramadan. Members of the NOI were also encouraged to fast at least three days each month. Their fasts were twenty-four hours long, starting at five o'clock in the morning. Elijah Muhammad performed the *umra*, but never the *hajj*. Nor did he strongly encourage his followers to do so. In his own writings, Elijah Muhammad did not speak of Mecca as the site of the Ka'ba or as the location of the *hajj*. He described it as "the only holy spot on our planet – the Holy City of Mecca" (Muhammad 1957: 45). Its significance was not as the birthplace of Muhammad, but as that of Allah, Fard Muhammad, and as the ancient capital of the Tribe of Shabazz. All of these differences from other older forms of Islam caused grave concerns, even outrage, among other Muslims (see pp. 132–3).

Equally problematic were political, economic, and social concerns of Black Muslims that non-NOI Muslims would not normally associate with Islam. Edward Curtis IV has argued

politics and religion were wedded in the NOI (Curtis 2006: 2); and, as I have argued elsewhere, viewing Islam as a religion fundamentally devoid of these concerns does not reflect the history of Muslims, essentializes Islam in distorting ways, and makes the scholar an advocate of a normative Islam (Berg 2009). It also reflects a Protestant understanding of religion that focuses on the interior experience. Nor are such “exterior” concerns foreign to other, older formulations of Islam. Elijah Muhammad demanded separation of the races, not merely segregation, and went so far as to demand several states in the continental USA for blacks. They needed their own nation, not only as reparations for slavery, but because he believed that “We are the original owners of the earth and will take it and rule it again. This is the time” (Muhammad 1992: 233). Barring that, the segregation offered by white Southerners was preferable to the integration demanded by the Civil Rights Movement. He encouraged and exemplified black businesses that were independent of whites. African Americans were to pool their resources to establish their own stores, farms, banks, etc. “Observe the operations of the white man. He is successful. He makes no excuse for his failures. He works hard in a collective manner. You do the same” (Muhammad 1992: 174). And he encouraged the men of the NOI to protect their women: ensuring they dressed modestly, avoided going to bars, and, most importantly, did not intermarry with whites.

Elijah Muhammad’s economic, political, and social agendas were in many ways radical when compared to the Civil Rights Movement. They were clearly at odds with other formulations of Islam. His Islam teaches justice, freedom, and equality, and so these economic, political, and social reforms are just as much part of Islam as prayer. It was an Islam that would free African Americans from the religious, social, economic, and political corruption of whites and prepare them for the coming Fall of America. But in many ways the agendas were also conservative: economically capitalist, politically separatist, and socially patriarchal. The experience and interaction with Western society, with Western society understood to be white society, was to be avoided. But in the end, it was modeled almost exclusively on that society, not other Muslim societies.

### **The lost-found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America**

Elijah Muhammad credited all of these teachings to Fard Muhammad. How one speaks of this founder of the NOI often reflects one’s attitude towards its Islamic legitimacy. If the story begins with the convicted felon Wallace Dodd Ford, the man outsiders, including the FBI, claim was the founder, Fard Muhammad, the implication is that the whole movement was founded by a conman who veiled his racist tenets with an Islamic façade. To begin the story with Fard Muhammad’s appearance in Detroit in 1930 buys into the NOI’s own mythology. A further complication to this story is the sources. In the 1940s the FBI began to take serious notice of this movement, and particularly one of his followers, Elijah Muhammad, who claimed to be Fard Muhammad’s rightful successor. By this time, Elijah Muhammad had already begun to teach that Fard Muhammad was Allah in person. Fard Muhammad seems to have not made that claim. Some of the splits in the movement after Fard Muhammad’s disappearance in 1934 stem from a rejection of this elevation to godhood. Thus, with the exception of one sociological article about the NOI (Beynon 1937–8: 894–907), most of the information about this early period largely comes from hostile FBI sources or hagiographic NOI sources.

Wali Fard Muhammad, also known as Master F.D. Muhammad, began preaching in the streets of Detroit in 1929 or 1930. He claimed to have been born in Mecca to the tribe of the Quraysh in 1877. As Elijah Muhammad would later tell the story, Fard Muhammad’s father had prepared his son to come to America to find the members of the lost tribe of Shabazz who had

been stolen and enslaved by the evil white race centuries earlier and to return them to their original religion of Islam. He began his ministry as a silk peddler and used this as an opportunity to preach to his customers. Soon he needed to rent buildings for his meetings. So popular were they that 700–800 people would turn up in halls that could hold only half that number.

In his three-and-half-year ministry, Fard Muhammad converted thousands of people to his Allah Temple of Islam, later renamed the NOI, including Elijah Poole. The latter had been born in Georgia in 1897. He was the child of poor sharecroppers, and his father was a lay Baptist minister. Extreme poverty and Southern racism drew him north in 1923 in search of a better life for his family. As many African Americans of the Great Migration discovered, racism was not absent in the North. And when the Great Depression struck, they were the first to lose their jobs. Elijah Poole's own despair drove him to alcohol, and some reports suggest that Fard Muhammad's movement saved him from alcoholism. After joining, he soon became one of its ministers. Fard Muhammad personally trained him, gave him new names, first Elijah Karriem and later Elijah Muhammad. As Temple No. 1 in Detroit grew, they together established Temple No. 2 in Chicago.

In May of 1933, the Detroit police arrested Fard Muhammad in connection with a murder by one of his followers. The police report listed his ancestry as "Arabian," his race as "Caucasian," and his profession as "minister." A later FBI report states that the official police report included that "[Wallace] Dodd [Ford] admitted that his teachings were 'strictly a racket' and he was 'getting all the money out of it he could'" (FBI file 100–43165). He was not charged with a crime, but was ordered to leave Detroit, and so he departed for Chicago. There he was arrested again and visited by Elijah Muhammad. In 1934 he disappeared. In the 1963 article that accused Fard Muhammad of being Wallace Ford, Ford's estranged wife, Hazel, claimed that he had returned to Los Angeles in 1934. Ford stayed for two weeks, visited his son, and then left by ship for New Zealand to visit relatives. Elijah Muhammad, on the other hand, stated that he received his last letter from Fard Muhammad in March 1934 from Mexico.

The FBI reported that the fingerprints of Fard Muhammad taken by the Detroit police were the same of those of Wallace D. Ford, a criminal arrested in 1918, 1926, and 1927 in Los Angeles, and who had been imprisoned after the latter arrest in San Quentin for bootlegging and possession of narcotics. The later investigations have suggested a Polynesian, Jamaican, Arab, Indian, or Turkish origin, though he claimed to have been born in 1891 to Hawaiian parents then living in Portland, Oregon. The FBI favored reports claiming a birth in New Zealand to a British father and Polynesian mother. Scholars suggest that after his release from prison in 1929 he made his way to Chicago, where he might have had contact with Ahmadi Muslims, Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, and/or Drew Ali's MST. From there he made his way to Detroit.

Was Wali Fard Muhammad really Wallace Dodd Ford? Yes, unless another plausible candidate is found and evidence of an FBI conspiracy is produced. A more important question is the origin of his knowledge of Islam. Given the limited time he could have spent within the MST and the nature of its teachings, it could hardly be the sole source. Another equally interesting question is why Islam was so adaptable to the racial situation of some African Americans. Sherman Jackson suggests that Islam was particularly suitable for black religious protest against white supremacy and anti-black racism. Islam was, of course, associated with Africa. It also had a reputation for opposition to these Europeans, a claim to an independent non-white civilization, a simple theology (at least compared with trinitarianism), a conservative social ethic, a retributive justice from the Qur'an, a lack of an ecclesiastical hierarchy (in Sunni Islam), and, perhaps most importantly, white Americans hated and feared Islam (Jackson 2005: 44). In the cultural rhetoric of white America, Islam had since the seventeenth century been idealized as the



antithesis of an America imagined to be democratic, Christian, and virtuous (Marr 2006). Equally important was the general ignorance of Islam among African Americans. This allowed first Drew Ali to extract authoritative terminology from Islam, and later Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad to reformulate the common elements in Islam so as to blend with their racial mythology.

The powerful pull of this formulation of Islam can be seen in the story of Elijah Poole, who experienced the worst of white racism in the South and even witnessed lynchings. His early experiences in the North did not dispose him to think any differently of whites. There he had witnessed white policemen shooting a black man in the street with no consequences. His experiences made him particularly susceptible to the powerful message of Fard Muhammad. Once introduced to the movement, he soon became an ardent follower of Fard Muhammad, even believing him to be the one named Jesus whom the Bible said would return at the end times (Sahib 1951: 91). Soon Elijah Poole was given permission to preach and received personal instruction from Fard Muhammad. Fard Muhammad used the title Master, but the renamed Elijah Muhammad was the first to refer to him as a prophet and later as Allah. After Fard Muhammad's mysterious disappearance, the latter became a point of contention. One rival sought to displace Fard Muhammad and therefore belittled him, but Elijah Muhammad emphasized the godhood of Fard Muhammad. In any case, he was forced to leave Detroit after being arrested for keeping children out of the public school system in favor of the NOI's University of Islam. He left for Chicago, but the minister he left in charge of Detroit formed his own group and in Chicago his own brother helped lead Temple No. 2 against him. He fled and began traveling to the cities on the northeast coast, settling in Washington, where, in addition to establishing another temple, he is said to have gone to the Library of Congress to read a list of 104 books Fard Muhammad is said to have given him. It was his preaching against black participation in a "white war" which brought him to the attention of the FBI in 1941.

After his arrest, conviction, and imprisonment for draft dodging in 1942, Elijah Muhammad emerged in 1946 with his rivals gone and his remaining few followers deeply committed to him. In prison, he experienced firsthand how no political, social, or religious organizations were seeking to help or reform African American prisoners. He decided to give this group his attention. Many of them had suffered the most under white racism and were the most in need of his transformative message, as evidenced by the conversion a few years later of Malcolm X. From Malcolm X's release in 1952 to his departure from the NOI 1963, by which time he had risen to the rank of National Minister, the NOI went from having approximately 10 temples to having over 50. He also established the NOI's own newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*. His rapid rise within the organization and his media prominence fostered jealousy among the older leadership of the NOI, including Elijah Muhammad. This jealousy led to the rupture between the two men as much as Malcolm X's awareness of Elijah Muhammad's infidelities and his act of disobedience by commenting on President Kennedy's assassination. Malcolm X soon moved to a more Sunni understanding of Islam, as had two of Elijah Muhammad's sons, Wallace and Akbar (see pp. 131–2). Elijah Muhammad weathered all this turmoil of the mid-1960s well. His movement survived, particularly with the help of his new protégé, Louis X (later Louis Farrakhan). However, Elijah Muhammad had had health problems since the early 1960s, initially just bronchial asthma and later also diabetes, leading to power struggles within the NOI by the early 1970s.

The NOI was a wealthy and powerful organization. It had seventy-six temples throughout the cities of the United States and many of them ran Universities of Islam. Membership rolls were kept secret, but there were as many as 100,000 members. Supermarkets, bakeries, restaurants, a fish-importing business, and 15,000 acres of farmland added up to an empire worth \$45

million. On January 29, 1975, Elijah Muhammad was checked into the hospital. While there, he suffered congestive heart failure and died on February 25, 1975. The next day, at the annual Saviour Day's rally, it was his son Wallace D. Muhammad who prevailed and was proclaimed the new Supreme Minister. Almost immediately he began the process of transforming his father's NOI into a far more Sunni-like Muslim movement.

### The Nation of Islam and other Muslims

Even if non-NOI Muslims did not consider Elijah Muhammad and his followers to be Muslim, there is no doubt that NOI Muslims did. The relationship and interaction between the NOI and other Muslims is quite complex, and Elijah Muhammad's reaction to them depends very much on the origin of these other Muslims. If they were former members of the NOI, Elijah Muhammad saw them as hypocrites. Other American Muslims, whether immigrants or African American converts, were seen as rivals to be insulted. The most interesting relationship was with foreign Muslim critics, for that relationship evolved significantly between 1959 and 1975. For over forty years he steadfastly believed that Allah himself had appointed him to be his Messenger. The only other authority he seemed to recognize, the Bible and the Qur'an, simply confirmed for him everything he had been taught by Allah about Islam, including the racial mythology. However, it is precisely his primary claim of authority – the commission from Allah as Fard Muhammad – that all of these non-NOI Muslims found so objectionable.

Muslims within the NOI were expected to give absolute obedience to Elijah Muhammad as the Messenger of Allah and to his appointed representatives. Those who challenged his authority on doctrinal issues were expelled and, if they did not recant, labeled as "hypocrites." His use of this term highlights two interesting aspects of the NOI: the growing influence of Qur'anic terminology and Elijah Muhammad's tendency to identify the passages in the Qur'an as being uniquely applicable to contemporary situations. When he first used the word in print, he used it to describe white Christians' treatment of their black co-religionists. But with the turmoil of the mid-1960s, he began to employ it for those who broke with his authority. He retroactively applied it to his brother, who had challenged him after the disappearance of Fard Muhammad. It was then applied most forcefully against Malcolm X, who was described as the "chief hypocrite" and "the number one hypocrite of all time." Elijah Muhammad cited passages from the Qur'an repeatedly for years afterward about the dangers of hypocrites and the need for absolute obedience. Even errant sons did not escape this charge. Wallace Muhammad had had doubts about his father's teachings for many years, especially when he began reading the Qur'an for himself. He gradually moved towards a more Sunni understanding of Islam – what he described as the "Islam of the Qur'an." Since it was he who had confirmed to Malcolm X that the rumors about his father's infidelities were true and since he had objected to the corruption of some NOI officials, it is not clear whether his excommunication was due simply to his heretical beliefs. Akbar Muhammad, another son, was a hypocrite for purely doctrinal reasons, however. He had been sent to study at al-Azhar in Cairo and thus had the most firsthand experience of Sunni Islam within the NOI. When he returned in 1964, it provoked this condemnation in *Muhammad Speaks*:

On Sunday, November 26, 1964, at Muhammad's Temple No. 7 in New York City, a speech was made by Akbar Muhammad containing statements and views which were not in keeping with the teachings and principles of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah. It has therefore been decreed by the Messenger that Akbar Muhammad is no longer to be regarded as a follower of his father in what Allah has revealed to his

father in the person of Master W. F. Muhammad. Akbar is now classified as a hypocrite by his father and by all those who follow him.

(“Decree Akbar Muhammad” 1965: 9)

Hypocrites had but one option: to submit themselves humbly to Elijah Muhammad’s authority or be expelled. Malcolm X and Akbar Muhammad left the NOI; Wallace Muhammad recanted, but it was he who was able to transform the NOI (see pp. 134–5). Passages in the Qur’an were often interpreted as prophecies about the rebellions that Elijah Muhammad faced. Even sympathizing with hypocrites was a form of rebellion. He warned: “God is very hard on those who disobey His Messenger. He warns in his Holy Qur’an not to quarrel and dispute or raise our voices above the Messenger’s voice. Strict respect and honor is demanded for His Messengers” (Muhammad 1992: 260).

Elijah Muhammad could not expel those not part of the NOI, such as leaders of rival Muslim movements, whether African American or immigrant. Elijah Muhammad almost never addressed their critiques, opting to respond only with *ad hominem*. Talib Ahmad Dawud, for example, was the African American leader of an organization called the Muslim Brotherhood USA. In the late 1950s he condemned the assertion that Allah appeared in the person of Fard Muhammad, the depiction of race as central to the teachings of Islam, the denial of a bodily resurrection, and the use of improper prayers. Dawud also employed *ad hominem*, claiming that Fard Muhammad was a Turkish white man who was once a Nazi agent, and that Elijah Muhammad was not a Muslim, but an ex-convict and teacher of racial hatred. Elijah Muhammad retorted:

Talib Ahmad Dawud and his TV blues-singing Miss Dakota Staton (who the paper says is Mrs. Alijah Rabia Dawud in private life) and whom the world can hear her filthy blues and love songs and see her immodestly dressed, were successful last week in getting a chance to breathe their venomous poison against me and my followers in this paper and in the local Chicago paper, *The Crusader*. Mr. Dawud is from the West Indies (Antigua) and was born a British subject. He was known by the name Rannie (sounds like a devil’s name). He is jealous of the progress with which Allah (to whom praises are due) is blessing me and my followers, and this jealousy is about to run Mr. Dawud insane. (*The Crusader* erroneously called him an Imam.) Mr. Dawud and Miss Staton should have been ashamed to try to make fun of me and my followers while publicly serving the devil in the theatrical world. I do not allow my followers to visit such, nor do I allow my wife and the believing women who follow me to go before the public partly dressed. If they would, never would I claim them to be mine any more.

(Muhammad 1959: 14)

Elijah Muhammad responded in the same manner to Jamil Daib, a Palestinian Arab who was once the principal of Elijah Muhammad’s University of Islam in Chicago and who criticized the use of different books, prayers, and fasts. These attacks continued from various groups periodically throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, and Elijah Muhammad’s responses were consistent. When an Ahmadi Muslim criticized him, *Muhammad Speaks* claimed that the Ahmadi movement originated in British India and was financed by Christians to help pacify Muslims who were revolting against British rule. The charge that the movement had tailored a translation of the Qur’an “to meet the needs and objectives of the foreign occupier” (Baghdadi 1972: 2) is ironic given his own use of an Ahmadi translation of the Qur’an. In any case, he may have relied so heavily on personal attacks because these Muslim critics had centuries of

traditional Islamic doctrine on their side. In many cases they knew the Qur'an better than he. His usual trump card, his unique access to Allah, held no value with these opponents.

Initially, foreign Muslims, whom Elijah Muhammad himself referred to as "Orthodox Muslims" or "Eastern Muslims," were more problematic. He saw the NOI a part of the larger Muslim world. This larger Muslim world was united, at peace, rich, and black (in the sense of all colors except white). Members of the NOI would be "welcomed with sincere and open arms and recognized by his light-skinned or copper-colored Arab brother" (Muhammad 1957: 37). Elijah Muhammad's personal experience during his *'umra* likely disabused him of his rather naive assumptions of unity and wealth of other Muslims. But the obvious religious differences were dismissed as merely due to different circumstances:

My brothers in the East were never subjected to conditions of slavery and systematic brainwashing by the slavemasters for as long a period of time as my people here were subjected. I cannot, therefore, blame them if they differ with me in certain interpretations of the Message of Islam. In fact, I do not even *expect* them to understand some of the things I say unto my people here.

*(Muhammad 1957: 4)*

If his travels made him disillusioned with these copper-colored brothers, it also reinforced the beliefs for which these other Muslims viewed him with suspicion (Clegg 1997: 144). For his part, Elijah Muhammad at first continued to minimize the differences, believing that the Eastern Muslims would come around to his point of view. Moreover, since he so clearly saw that the Qur'an confirmed his beliefs, he was certain that the learned Muslims were well aware that he was correct. Their greater facility with Arabic and the centuries of scholarship on the Qur'an were irrelevant: "I am sent from Allah and not from the Secretary General of the Muslim League. There is no Muslim in Arabia that has authority to stop me from delivering this message that I have been assigned to by Allah. ... I am not taking orders from them, I am taking orders from Allah (God) himself" (Muhammad 1963: 3–4).

By the mid-1960s Elijah Muhammad had become far more cognizant of the danger that "Orthodox Islam" posed because of his sons Akbar and Wallace, and because of his former protégé Malcolm X. Orthodox Muslims were not, in fact, coming around to his point of view. Rather, they were becoming increasingly hostile as they became more familiar with the NOI. He began to accuse them of not understanding the Qur'an (Muhammad 1992: 187) and being "spooky minded" in their conception of Allah. By the 1970s, he became more hostile and began criticizing "old world" Muslims for following an "old Islam led by Whites" and claiming that they were no better than white Christians. And from there, it was an easy step to calling them "white": "We have a New Islam coming up. The Old Islam was led by white people, white Muslims, but this one will not be. This Islam will be established and led by Black Muslims only" ("Allah's Last Messenger ... " 1972: 3–4). Their Islam differed little from Christianity: "The Christians and most old world Muslims are alike: not having a true knowledge of the Supreme One, referred to as Allah, and God makes most people believe that God is something other than a man" (Muhammad 1974: 61). "Copper-colored" Orthodox Muslims of the East had become *white* Muslims, with all the evil that comes with that pejorative adjective. When Elijah Muhammad was forced to choose between his Islam and Muslim unity, he chose the former.

### **The race myth vs. the *umma***

Elijah Muhammad's tense relationship with other Muslims seems to suggest that he and his Black Muslims were gradually moving away from them. But the examples of Wallace

Muhammad, Akbar Muhammad, Malcolm X, and many others demonstrate that there was always a tension within the NOI: one force that pulled people to the powerful racial message within Islam as formulated by Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad, and one that pushed people towards conceptions of Islam that were much closer to that of Muslims outside the NOI. While Elijah Muhammad lived, those competing forces were kept in check, unless one left the NOI.

Wallace Muhammad remained within his father's movement, even though he had been repeatedly expelled for his heretical beliefs. On Saviour's Day, February 26, 1975, just one day after his father's death, Wallace Muhammad became the new Supreme Minister of the NOI. More than a decade earlier, he had told Malcolm X that "the only possible solution for the Nation of Islam would be its accepting and projecting a better understanding of Orthodox Islam" (X with Haley 1973 [1964]: 339) or what he often called the Islam of the Qur'an. As the new leader, he rapidly pushed for Black Muslims to become just Muslims. The nationality of his followers was changed from the tribe of Shabazz to Bilalians, since Bilal was an African slave in Mecca who converted to Islam in the time of Muhammad. Of course, this identification with a Companion of Muhammad was also unusual, and was later dropped. The NOI became the Community of al-Islam in the West, then the American Muslim Mission, and later the Mosque Cares, whose leadership consisted of a council or *shura*. He preferred the title "Imam" and even changed his own name to Warith Deen Mohammed. His father was spoken of as "Master," not Apostle or Messenger, and whites were no longer devils – though many had a devilish, racist mindset. Fard Muhammad was not Allah, but merely a "wise man." Warith Deen Mohammed, rather implausibly, suggested that Fard Muhammad had secretly planned to bring African Americans to Orthodox Islam. But when he found them in 1930, they were unfamiliar with the Qur'an and did not recognize its authority. The NOI was his "strategy, a temporary strategy, a temporary language environment, to hold uneducated Blacks ... long enough to come into an independent mind ... and then later study the Qur'an" (Mohammed 2002). Once their minds were freed from the bondage created by slavery and racism, they would come to see that the racial mythology he had created contained the seeds of its own destruction. And then, they would be ready for the Islam of the Qur'an. Warith Deen Muhammad even believed that his father died a Sunni Muslim, having privately rejected his own teaching that Fard Muhammad was Allah.

The other force within the NOI was conservative, believing that the essence of Islamic teachings and practices was those about race. It pushed members to cling to the unique racial teachings that were part of Fard Muhammad's and Elijah Muhammad's formulation of Islam. Without them, all Black Muslims would end up doing is trading a white Christian model for an Arab Muslim one. In other words, it is the "Black" in Black Islam that is essential. Louis Farrakhan, originally Louis Eugene Wolcott and then Louis X, led this conservative movement. Although he was Elijah Muhammad's right hand man, filling the vacuum left by Malcolm X, he lost the power struggle to succeed Elijah Muhammad. He only pledged to support his rival Warith Deen Mohammed reluctantly and in a restricted manner. In 1977, dismayed by the massive reforms, he re-established the NOI with its original teachings. Louis Farrakhan was a far more charismatic speaker than Warith Deen Mohammed, far more controversial, and far more ambitious, and so he has received far more media attention. His NOI's dispute with the Jewish community over Jewish involvement in the slave trade and his Million Man March in 1996 made him a household name in the United States. But this does not indicate that he was more influential than Warith Deen Mohammed among African Americans. In the last decade and a half, even Louis Farrakhan has made tentative steps to bring his NOI closer to Sunni Islam.

In stark contrast to Louis Farrakhan and his NOI, by the time of Warith Deen Mohammed's death in 2008, he and the Muslims in his organization were accepted by Muslims worldwide. They became part of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), on whose Majlis ashShura he served. He was also appointed to the World Supreme Council of Mosques, a body within the Muslim World League. The ISNA obituary stated:

Warith's father, Hon. Elijah Muhammad, was the leader of the Nation of Islam from 1934 to 1975, an organization that preaches a form of Black nationalism. Elijah Muhammad died on February 26, 1975. After his father's death in 1975, Warith Deen Mohammed was accepted by followers of the Nation of Islam as their leader. With his new understanding, based on his lifelong study of the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad, he brought about many reforms, which brought the followers of the Nation of Islam closer to mainstream Islam and away from Black nationalism.

(*Imam Warith Deen Mohammed ...* 2009)

As this obituary highlights, there remains a consistent effort to separate the father's movement from the son's. But it would be wrong to assume that the transformation of the NOI would have gone so smoothly had it not harnessed forces that were already present among Black Muslims *because* of Elijah Muhammad. Elijah Muhammad's use of the Qur'an to justify his own teachings "elevated the status of traditional Sunni Islamic discourse, especially its sacred texts, within African-American Islamic thought" (Curtis 2006: 18–19). Employing the Qur'an in this fashion for so many decades created an authority for the Qur'an, which had already begun to hand the advantage to his non-NOI Muslim opponents, whose facility with the Qur'an so outweighed his own. And it was the Qur'an and his opponents' interpretation of it that drove a wedge between him and his own sons, Akbar Muhammad and Warith Deen Mohammed.

The story of Black Muslims in the United States beginning with Drew Ali is one of the most unique in the history of Islam. Islam was redeployed in such a way as to create a new identity for African Americans, but that identity was one which other Muslims could not recognize as similar (enough) to their own. Despite what the detractors of Black Muslims may have thought, Islam and the Qur'an were essential to that new identity. Elijah Muhammad had invested all authority in himself as the Messenger of Allah who taught a new Islam and who interpreted the Qur'an in light of it. In so doing, he almost single-handedly did something no other person calling him- or herself a Muslim had been able to do: More effectively than the millions of Muslim immigrants to the United States, he brought millions of Americans to Islam and made Islam part of the American religious landscape. But once he died, the authority of Islam and the Qur'an that he had worked forty years to create in African Americans was no longer subservient to his own charismatic authority. Warith Deen Mohammed did not have the desire for the absolute authority that his father had wielded. He deferred to the authority of the Qur'an, and in so doing handed over doctrinal matters to an orthodox Sunni formulation of Islam – "the Islam of the Qur'an."

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