

Homegrown Islam in the USA

By Bruce L. Bauer

Muslims in America are an ethnically diverse group, coming from more than sixty nations and representing very different racial, linguistic, tribal, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Yvonne Haddad groups them into three categories: immigrants, converts, and sojourners (Conser, 218-219). This article will focus on those who have converted to Islam in America, with particular attention to the brand of homegrown Islam that has developed among African Americans.

There is a growing controversy over how many Muslims there are in the USA, with widely different numbers claimed by various groups. The

problem stems from the fact that the US government does not include religious background questions in its census counts, thus leaving the question of the Muslim population in the USA to less than accurate estimates. Many claim that there are between 6 and 7 million Muslims in the United States, while others are just as insistent that there are only about two million (Boehlert 2001, 4). It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with this issue. Regardless of the number, it is a given that the Muslim population in the USA is growing rapidly, that there are more than 1,209 mosques, and that African Americans constitute 25-30 percent of all Muslims in the United States (Sheler and Betzold 2001, 50).

Over the past ninety years converts to Islam in North America have largely come from among African Americans. Initially Blacks joined a racist, separatist movement that could be labeled quasi-Islamic at best, but most of those converts have now moved to a much more orthodox Islamic position that encourages par-



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ticipation in the nation and calls for brotherhood among all races. While small splinter groups still mirror the early stages of the separatist Black Muslims, the large majority has moved into mainstream Islam. In this article I will briefly sketch the development and growth of Islam among African Americans, then I will offer four brief suggestions on how the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church should begin to relate to the growth of Islam in the African American communities of North America.

Qur'an to memory in order to keep their faith alive and pass it on to others (Waugh, 218). However, the combined forces of institutional slavery were too much and, in the end, Protestant Christianity largely became the religion of the African Americans.

The second attempt by Islam to make inroads among African Americans was carried out in 1913 by Nobel Drew, a Black "prophet" from North Carolina who established a "Moorish Science Temple" in Newark, New Jersey. His followers were encouraged to be known no longer

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Islam and African Americans

The relationship between Islam and African Americans goes back to the arrival of African slaves on the North American continent in the late seventeenth century. Slavery, in its dehumanizing forms, separated families, split up slaves from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds and also did everything possible to destroy the Islamic religious heritage held by some of the slaves (Waugh 1983, 218).

Arabic speaking slaves were brought to the United States as early as 1717 (Haney 1992, 8). Accounts persist of Muslim slaves who committed the entire

as "Negroes" or "African" but as "Moorish-Americans." To Drew, Islam was the religion of the Moors, the Black conquerors from Africa who once ruled much of Europe. He taught that Christianity was the religion of the White man and that Islam was the religion for Blacks. Drew's movement spread to Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and to a number of cities in the South. Temples were established and during Drew's lifetime membership grew to around 30,000 (Woodberry 1989, 139).

Drew's movement utilized the Qur'an, Muslim names, fezzes, and repudiated certain fundamental Christian beliefs,

but it was not Islam. Drew's message was a mixture of Black nationalism, Christian revivalism, and Islamic teachings. What it did accomplish in North America was to create a widespread awareness of Islam in the Black community (Waugh, 221).

Nation of Islam

Sometime during the summer of 1930, a peddler, Wali Farrad, appeared in the Black ghetto of Detroit. He gained entrance to homes selling artifacts and silks, which he claimed were like those Black people wore in their homeland across the sea. He claimed to have come from Mecca on a mission of redemption to restore the Black underclass. He taught that Blacks were all of Muslim heritage, that Black debasement was the result of centuries of separation from the knowledge of Allah and that he, Wali Farrad, had been sent to wake up the Black Nation to their full potential in a world temporarily dominated by "blue-eyed devils" (Lincoln 1973, 12-14).

Farrad initially used the Bible as his textbook since it was the only religious book his followers knew, but he stressed that he was the only one able to interpret the language of Scripture. Meanwhile, he slowly began to introduce people to the Qur'an, always emphasizing a message that Christianity was a tool in the hands of White slave masters,

that Whites were devils, and that the only hope for Blacks was total separation from Whites and the development of self-reliance.

Farrad began to call his movement the Nation of Islam. His first temple was built in Detroit to care for the 8,000 followers he was able to recruit in that city between 1930 and 1933 (Marsh 1984, 53). Because of the rapid growth, he gathered a group of men and began to train them as ministers. Among that group was Elijah Poole, the son of a Baptist minister and very knowledgeable in the Bible. Since Farrad used Bible passages to introduce his new religion, Poole's biblical knowledge fitted his strategy. It was not long before Poole became Farrad's protégé and right-hand man. Poole's name was changed to Elijah Muhammad and he became the Chief Minister of the Nation of Islam. After Farrad's disappearance, Elijah Muhammad was elected the head of the Nation of Islam.

Elijah Muhammad built the Nation into a strong movement with steady growth. In 1955 there were fifteen temples in the United States. By 1960 there were fifty-five temples in twenty-two states (Woodberry 1989, 140). During Elijah Muhammad's leadership the Nation of Islam remained exclusively a Black organization that appealed to young (80% of new recruits were between 17 and 35), disadvantaged, African American males with a previous Christian background (Lincoln 1973, 22-28).

The Nation of Islam strongly emphasized moral living and ethical conduct for its members who were integrated into a caring brotherhood that provided them with a sense of belonging, support, and sustenance against a hostile world. They were to refrain from eating pork and corn bread (slave diet), and eat only fresh meat of chicken, lamb, beef, and fish from either Muslim or Kosher Jewish shops. Tobacco and alcohol were absolutely forbidden. Members were to observe strict sexual morality. A woman was not to be alone with any man except her hus-

band. Her dress was not to be provocative, nor should she use cosmetics. Marriage outside the faith was discouraged and unconverted spouses were pressured to join the group. Divorce was discouraged but permitted under certain conditions. Members were required to contribute one tenth of their earnings for the support of the group (Woodberry 1989, 140).

for those of his followers who lacked these basic necessities. He was also able to engender pride in his followers as they realized, for the first time in their lives, that they shared ownership in successful business ventures and that they were largely independent.

Elijah Muhammad's teachings were strange and have always created barriers that kept his followers within the Nation of Islam from being accepted by the larger community of orthodox Islam. Elijah Muhammad taught that Allah was a man, specifically, Wali Farrad. He also

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Elijah Muhammad used donations to purchase farms, storefronts, bakeries, apartment buildings, and schools in order to provide an economic base for his growing organization. By owning businesses and land, Muhammad was able to provide both housing and employment

taught that the universe was created and owned by Blacks, and that the White race was created 6,000 years ago through some crude engineering by a mad scientist named Yakub, an exile from Mecca. According to Elijah Muhammad's theory, Yakub created the White race of devils to get revenge on those who had exiled him and his followers to the Island of Patmos. After Yakub's death this newly created White race returned to Arabia, began to get into trouble, was exiled to Europe, and then walled in to keep the Whites from spreading. Part of Muhammad's theory also included the idea that twenty-four scientists rule the universe, and that they write a

prophetic book of history before each 25,000 year period. According to Elijah Muhammad, the prophetic book predicted that Yakub would create his race of White devils, and that they would rule the earth for 6,000 years. Now, according to Muhammad's interpretation, the 6,000 years were finished and the Battle of Armageddon between Blacks and Whites, between Muslims and Christians was about to occur (Muhammad 1965, 110-126).

During his lifetime Elijah Muhammad built an organization with strengths in five major areas:

1. Unlike most Islamic organizations that tend to be egalitarian, the Nation of Islam developed a strong charismatic and centralized leadership that commanded great loyalty at the grassroots level.
2. The Fruit of Islam (FOI), a well-trained militia, was developed from militant former servicemen. The FOI protected the community, mosques, and other institutions. This organization was accused of the assassination of Malcolm X.
3. Successful businesses, banks, and farms were established in order to prove that Black Muslims could control their own destiny and provide for their own needs.
4. Educational institutions were established (named universities of Islam) and run as highly disciplined systems of schooling for students from kindergarten through high school.
5. A national network of temples was organized under centralized leadership with programs filling needs in many areas of life (Haddad 1991, 19).

Malcolm X

In spite of Elijah Muhammad's leadership gifts, the greatest period of growth in the Black Muslim movement was largely the result of the energetic efforts of Malcolm X. In 1948, while serving a prison sentence at the Norfolk State Prison Colony in Virginia, Malcolm Little accepted the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and was converted to the Nation of Islam (Haley 1965, 170-171). After his release from prison, Malcolm Little, a former pimp, drug pusher, armed robber, and numbers man, returned to Detroit and began aggressively recruiting for Detroit Temple #1. In keeping with Elijah Muhammad's teaching that Blacks should change their names to show that they were no longer under the control of White slave masters, Malcolm received a last name "X" as a symbol of his original African name.

Malcolm X was unyielding in his devotion to Elijah Muhammad and extremely aggressive in recruiting new members to the Nation. In recognition of the growing impact Malcolm X was having on the movement, Elijah

Muhammad appointed him as National Spokesman in the United States.

From Detroit, Malcolm went to Boston and organized Temple #11. In March of 1954 he moved to Philadelphia and in three months Temple #12 was in operation. Next, he went to New York and became the minister in Temple #7 (Marsh 1984, 72). Malcolm X was instrumental in establishing most of the temples in North America and he believed that his efforts were largely responsible for the increase in membership from 400 to 40,000 during his few years as a member in the Nation of Islam.

Qur'an for some prophetic explanation of what was happening. Malcolm X conducted his own private investigation of the adultery charge, and went so far as to question Elijah Muhammad in person. In answer to the questions Elijah Muhammad replied,

I'm David. When you read in the Bible how David took another man's wife, I'm that David. . . . You read about Lot who went and laid up with his own daughter, I have fulfilled all these things (Marsh 1984, 79).

Wallace was given the task of influencing Malcolm X's theological thinking and keeping him up to date on the thinking of the

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The late 50s and early 60s were stormy years for the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X and Wallace Deen Muhammad (Elijah's fifth son) found themselves under increasing pressure and embroiled in controversy. Many within the Nation of Islam were jealous of Malcolm X's successes. There was added tension when two of Elijah Muhammad's former secretaries accused him of committing adultery. Malcolm X and Wallace Deen Muhammad searched the Bible and the

Honorable Elijah Muhammad. However, even Wallace, Elijah's own son, saw the lie between the teaching and the lifestyle (Marsh 1984, 112).

As a consequence both Malcolm X and Wallace began to lean more and more toward orthodox Islam. Wallace began to question seriously how Wali Farrad could be God himself when in some of Farrad's writings he clearly referred to himself as the "messenger of Allah." Soon both

Wallace and Malcolm X were convinced that Farrad could not have been Allah in person.

In 1964 Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam and formed his own organization: Muslim Mosque, Inc. He made Hajj to Mecca, where his ideas and beliefs concerning Islamic teachings were further altered (Woodberry 1989, 140). While in Mecca he observed Muslims from differing cultures and races practicing true brotherhood. In his travels he met various leaders from African countries who also helped modify his worldview.

to an audience of about 500 people in New York City. While Elijah Muhammad denied any involvement in Malcolm X's death, three former members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of his murder (Marsh 1984, 85).

Wallace Deen Muhammad

Wallace Deen Muhammad, the other reformer and advocate of a shift toward orthodox Islam in the African American community, continued to have a very contentious relationship with the Nation of Islam and his father.

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Through these and other events, Malcolm X became a follower of orthodox Islam. As a result of his ideological shift, he took a new Islamic name, Malik el Shabbazz, and broadened his emphasis from Black nationalism to human rights for all peoples (Young 1979, 80). He began to invite White Americans to turn also toward the spiritual path of truth and to embrace the brotherhood of Islam.

Malik el Shabbazz had no time to promote orthodox Islam in the Afro-American community for he was assassinated on February 21, 1965, while speaking

After a series of suspensions, Wallace was restored to the Nation of Islam in 1970. In 1974 he was restored to ministry within the Nation of Islam and allowed to preach what he pleased. The day after Muhammad's death on February 25, 1975, Wallace Deen Muhammad was chosen to lead the Nation of Islam.

Under Wallace Muhammad's leadership, dramatic changes took place in the Nation of Islam. In 1976 Wallace declared that his father was not a prophet and began the process of moving the theology of the Nation of Islam towards orthodox Islam. Un-Is-

lamic elements such as racism were eliminated; Malcolm X was restored to a position of honor and had a mosque named after him; followers were encouraged to honor the American Constitution and to participate in the political process. Wali Farrad was demoted and became a "wise man." The five pillars of orthodox Islam became central teaching points. Temples became mosques, ministers became imams, and Islamic rituals began to be observed (Haddad 1991, 19-20).

Wallace also "changed the name of the organization to 'American Bilalian Community' in deference to Bilal, the first Muazzin of Prophet Muhammad, a slave of Abyssinian origin who was converted by the teachings of the prophet Muhammad" (Woodberry 1989, 141).

In 1975 the name was changed again to "World Community of Islam in the West." Further changes occurred in 1978 when Wallace Muhammad resigned as the spiritual leader or "Chief Imam" in order to become an ambassador-at-large. Decentralization occurred as a seventeen-member council with six regional Imams assumed day-to-day authority. Another new name was adopted, "The American Muslim Mission" (AMM), which continues to be used.

Additional changes were instituted. These included a relaxation of strict Islamic discipline, the disbanding of the

FOI, and the cessation of preaching a message of racial hatred that identified Whites as blue-eyed devils (Haddad 1991, 20).

Not everyone was happy about these changes in the Black Muslim movement in North America. In December of 1977, the National Spokesman for the World Community of Islam in the West, Louis Adul Farrakhan, defected, accusing Wallace Muhammad of denying the teachings of his father, Elijah Muhammad. Farrakhan referred to himself as the national spokesman for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and continued to promote the radical Black separatist ideas of the past. His organization took over the name "Nation of Islam" and continued to print a monthly newspaper *The Final Call*, in which he reprinted the late Elijah Muhammad's speeches and writings.

Mainline Muslims considered Farrakhan and his followers to be non-Muslim heretics, but Farrakhan continued to draw a large and sympathetic response among inner city, lower class Blacks (Woodberry 1989, 141). However, after undergoing cancer surgery in 1999, Farrakhan began to moderate his racist views and started the process of moving the Nation of Islam closer to orthodox Islam by observing the traditional Friday prayers and keeping the daylight fast during the month of Ramadan.

The Nation is also teaching that the prophet Muhammad received the final teachings for Islam rather than Elijah Muhammad (Wood 2002, 298).

American Muslim Mission and Nation of Islam: Two Approaches

As one looks at the impact of Islam in the African American communities of North America in 2005, one is struck by the fact that the America Muslim Mission and the Nation of Islam attract two distinct groups of people. Lawrence H. Mamiya, in his chapter, "Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Final Call: Schism in the Muslim Move-

phasized developing an independent Black economy, from farms to retail outlets, and a rigorous Muslim code of morality. The ascetic lifestyle encouraged thrift and savings, not buying on credit, not spending money on foolish pleasures such as dancing or sporting events, and not wasting it on frivolous things like cars, clothes, and records.

The AMM sees in its membership the results of forty years of preaching such a message. As Sister Evelyn Akbar reports:

Everyone who has been in the movement for ten years or more has moved upward. You can't help it because the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's message was strongly

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ment," clearly delineates several socio-economic factors that will probably continue to drive a wedge between these two major African American Muslim groups (Waugh 1983, 234-255).

Presently the AMM is made up of largely middle class members, while Farrakhan's resurrected Nation of Islam continues to find its base of support in its lower-class origins.

The program of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad strongly em-

phatic. If Elijah Muhammad was about anything, he was about uplifting people's education and economics (Waugh 1983, 248).

As a result, the membership of the AMM contains many professionals: bankers, doctors, lawyers, educators, and graduates with university degrees. These middle class African American Muslims, who have been victims of racism in their climb up the economic ladder, are reluctant to be called racists. Therefore they

have reacted positively to the downplaying of ideas of separatism and themes identifying Whites as devils.

On June 18, 1975, only a few months after his father's death, Wallace Muhammad declared, "there will be no such category as a White Muslim or a Black Muslim. All will be Muslims. All Children of God" (Waugh 1983, 249). This new policy was a radical shift from the early days of the movement. Most members were ready to change and to move beyond racism. As Imam Ali Rasheed of the Malcolm Shabbazz Mosque in Harlem said:

Those who were indoctrinated by racism were disappointed because the race game had ended. But the majority of the people were open to social change and social revolution. We lost people who lacked the understanding, who couldn't make the transition, but we have gained others as a result of the change (249).

In the early days of Elijah Muhammad, followers were placed under severe discipline. This helped create a highly disciplined, upwardly mobile middle class. As the discipline became habitual and part of a new lifestyle, members were happy to embrace the relaxation of those disciplines by Wallace Muhammad after he assumed leadership. When the twin barriers of racial attacks on Whites and strict discipline in many areas of life were removed, the way was opened for the AMM to recruit actively among

America's Black middle class. The Mission moved into the mainstream of American life. Members are now encouraged to vote, to participate in politics, and to honor the constitution and flag of the United States. The result is that out of the approximate two million African American Muslims all but 20,000 to 30,000 belong to this moderate, orthodox stream of Islam (Gilbreath 2000, 53).

In contrast, the resurrected Nation of Islam under Farrakhan's leadership continues a policy of separatism and alienation from American society. Farrakhan continues to make racism a central theme of his speeches, although in the early 2000s he has moderated the rhetoric to some degree. The Nation of Islam continues to recruit among the receptive people of the Black lower class, stresses strict discipline and emphasizes economic self-help programs. Eddie X, a recent convert to the Nation of Islam from Greenville, Mississippi explained it this way:

What attracted me to Farrakhan was his deep concern for the despised and rejected of American society. I don't see Wallace's group as being concerned with the outcasts. They seem to me to be Arabicized intellectuals, spouting Arabic phrases to you (Waugh 1983, 250).

A Suggested Christian Response

How should the American Christian church and especially the African American Church,

respond to the challenge of the Black Muslim Movement? I would like to suggest five areas that should be addressed.

1. The church must develop a deeper understanding of the role of Africa and Islam in history. Most Christians in North America are totally ignorant of the arguments Noble, Stockwell, and Van Sertima (1978) present in *The African Presence in Ancient America: They Came Before Columbus*. According to the theory there are three possible periods, circa 1200 B.C., circa 800 B.C., and a Mandingo period in 1310/

swer some of the most serious charges Black Muslims level against Whites and Christianity. We must acknowledge and repent for the way Christians in Europe and America used Christianity as a tool for enslaving Blacks. But we must also know enough to point out the extent of slavery in Africa among the followers of Islam themselves (Haney 1992, 20).

2. The church must strive to understand Islam from the perspective of Islam, knowing the historical background, how it developed, and then learning all

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1311 A.D. when Africans could have reached the Americas (Van Sertima 2004, 1). I am not arguing either for or against the theory, but it should be pointed out that Black Muslims utilize this historical perspective in their evangelistic strategy. Christians in America also tend to dismiss the universal appeal of Islam as something that cannot and will not happen in America. Meanwhile thousands of African Americans continue to convert to a religion few Americans understand.

By deepening our understanding of history we can an-

swer that is possible about why Islam has become entrenched in the Black community in North America (Ellis, 56). Most American Christians in 2004 still know very little about the beliefs and practices of Muslims. If the church is to be effective in reaching out to African American Muslims, the church must first of all understand them and their faith.

3. The church must begin to look at the world from an Afro-centric perspective. At a time when African Americans are in the process of searching for their roots and reclaiming their Afri-

can identity, as indicated in their desire to be known as African Americans rather than Blacks, surely it is not too much to ask the church to redouble its efforts to see the many contributions Africans have made and continue to make to the building up of God's Kingdom.

An Afro-centric perspective understands that God created African American women and men in His image, and that they, like all humankind, are fallen but also redeemed in Jesus Christ. This perspective believes that God is working through African American culture, not against it, to bring African Americans into a relationship with Him.

The Church must acknowledge and educate its members concerning the contributions that people of African descent made within the Bible as well as in church history.

Too often, African American school children have heard of the ancient powerful Islamic kingdoms of western Africa (Ghana, Mali, Songhay), of the great king Mansa-Musa who reigned from 1312-1337, and of Timbuktu, one of the greatest learning centers in the world, but few have heard or know of the contributions of the African Christian world, such as in the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt (Haney 1992, 21).

We must not only acknowledge the contributions of Africans in the history of Christianity but we must also note the rapid expansion of Christianity

in central and southern Africa and the resulting shift of the center of Christianity to the southern hemisphere.

4. The church must develop a stronger incarnational ministry. It is ironic that Islam, the major religion that tolerates no culture or language other than Arabic, has been much more effective in affirming the roots and culture of African Americans (Ellis 1983, 54). The biblical models and the example of Christ challenge the church in North America to develop compassionate, healing, prophetic, and saving congregations in the African American communities.

An incarnational ministry must take seriously the injustice, the poverty, the oppression, and the suffering that many in the Black community still face. Throughout history, when the Christian church has stood in solidarity with suffering people, speaking in their defense and identifying with their needs, the church has been viewed not only as the repository of truth, but also as being relevant. By not taking seriously the needs of the African American community, the church is too often perceived as containing no truth (Haney 1992, 21).

5. The church must develop a ministry that models the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Merely understanding the role of Africa and Islam in history, developing an Afro-centric perspective, and having an incarnational ministry will still be inadequate

unless Christians model the transforming power of Jesus Christ. When White Christians, Black Christians, Hispanic Christians, and Korean Christians live and work in the same community, belong to the same denomination yet do not know each other, and never mingle, such Christian communities only reflect the separatist attitudes of American culture. The church in America must do more than is being done by the secularists in society, for in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, African or any other kind of American, for we are all one in Christ.

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