

African-American Islam Reformed: “Black Muslims” and the Universal Ummah

Summary: The history of the Nation of Islam continued in the mid-1960s under the leadership of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. Mohammed focused on reforming the organization with an emphasis on orthodox Islam and interracial and interreligious collaborations. Other important African-American Islam organizations emerged, such as the Dar-ul Islam movement and the Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA).

African Americans make up some 20% of the total Muslim population of the United States today. The term “Black Muslims,” coined by Dr. C. Eric Lincoln in 1956 to refer specifically to the Nation of Islam, is a label that today blurs the complex picture of Muslim groups in this community. Most African American Muslims now identify themselves with the worldwide Muslim *ummah*, adopting the beliefs and practices of “mainstream” Islam, whether as Sunni Muslims, Shi’i Muslims, or, if they reject such distinctions altogether, as “Muslim Americans.” The indigenous history of Islam is a fascinating, complex, and uniquely American story.

In the mid-1960s, Malcolm X broke ties with the Nation of Islam when he became dissatisfied with its leadership and non-Islamic teachings. Then in 1975, Warith Deen Mohammed succeeded his deceased father, Elijah Muhammad, as leader of the Nation. Warith Deen Mohammed began a rapid transformation toward more orthodox Islam, beginning with the assertion of *tauhid*. He explained the “strange teachings” of his father as necessary for building the dignity and identity of African Americans, preparing the way for them to embrace true Islam. He renamed the group the World Community of Al-Islam in the West and then the American Muslim Mission. Imam Mohammed courted the world Muslim community, urging other African American Muslim leaders to gain greater Islamic education and to work toward interracial and interreligious cooperation.

Many Muslims formerly affiliated with the Nation of Islam describe the first years after the death of Elijah Muhammad as the “transition” to Islam: “temples” became mosques; racial barriers were destroyed; and the practices of the global Muslim community were introduced. Today, a few

decades after the transition, the Ministry of Imam W. Deen Mohammed publishes the weekly Muslim Journal, broadcasts weekly radio and television shows, runs over 20 full-time Clara Muhammad Schools, and has affiliated mosques in over 100 cities. The vast majority of the Nation's membership followed this transition, and today, over 2,000,000 African Americans are now part of the worldwide Muslim *ummah*.

Certain African American sectarian groups continue to draw supporters, although some of the views advocated by these groups are regarded by most Muslims as heretical, or at the very least non-Islamic; other Muslims see these as stepping stones to the path of "true" Islam. In 1977, Minister Louis Farrakhan revived the old Nation of Islam, restoring its organization and the University of Islam in Chicago. He claims that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad commanded him to continue leading the chosen Black race to liberation from slavery. The Nation of Islam, with over 60 affiliated mosques and perhaps as many as 20,000 members, has successfully organized a security company, continues to support black business enterprise and drug-free neighborhoods, and publishes the *Final Call* newspaper. Although maintaining the Nation of Islam's doctrine and ideology, in recent years some members have begun to pray traditional Muslim prayers and to fast during the month of Ramadan, in addition to the Nation's December fast.

Other splinter groups of the Nation include the Five Percenters, or the Nation of Gods and Earths, established by Clarence 13X in 1964 after he broke away from the Nation of Islam. The Five Percenters involve young African Americans in an unstructured community based on a variant of Elijah Muhammad's lessons. Five Percenters, whose strongest presence is in New York City but whose influence can be heard in the rap lyrics of such popular groups as Public Enemy, hold that "Blackman" is God, that each Black man becomes a god when he learns his lessons. The Five Percenters seek to deliver the 85% of humanity from the 10% who oppress them.

The Dar ul-Islam movement was launched in 1967 by a group of African Americans who left the Islamic Mission of America in New York. They adhered to a strict interpretation of Qur'an and *Sunnah* and emphasized purity, knowledge, and independence from unjust, immoral American society. Guided

by Imam Yahya Abdul-Karim, this group formed a federation of mosques around the country in the 1970s, each organized into ministries of education, defense, information, and culture. Dar ul-Islam was the largest indigenous Muslim group until Warith Deen Mohammed transformed the Nation into a more inclusive Sunni Islam. In 1980, Imam Yahya relinquished leadership to an Indian Sufi *shaykh* who renamed the movement Jama'at al-Fuqrah. Several member communities did not follow the *shaykh*, eventually affiliating themselves with Atlanta's Imam Jamil Al-Amin, formerly known as H. Rap Brown.

The unity of these movements depended primarily on the strength and charisma of their leaders, including the men mentioned above; after their deaths, many of these communities disbanded, including the Dar ul-Islam movement, Warith Deen Mohammed's American Society of Muslims, and adherents of Imam Jamil Al-Amin. The Nation of Islam, re-established under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, continued to grow in strength, but today, the influence of Arab, South Asian, and Southeast Asian Muslim immigrants has made a significant impact on the state of African American Islam, as American Muslims from all backgrounds have been united by efforts to challenge religious persecution and mainstream distrust in the wake of 9/11.

Through the early years of the 21st century, African American Islam continued to have its own face, through the work of such organizations as the Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA) and Project Downtown. MANA aims to unite Muslim organizations in North America, particularly those of "indigenous Muslims," i.e. African American Muslims, in order to address issues and concerns—social, economic, and religious—that are specific to that community, as well as those that affect American society in general. Project Downtown, which was started by Muslim university students in Miami, Florida, aims to provide food and conversation to the homeless, welcoming people of all faiths to participate as volunteers. The organization emphasizes that it acts in the charitable spirit of Islam, providing help to those who need it, regardless of their faith, and doing so without preaching or otherwise extending an explicit invitation to Islam. These organizations are changing and strengthening the African American Muslim community, providing an example of what might continue to evolve out of this faith tradition in the American context.