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# Black Islamic Evangelization in the American South

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Black Islamic Evangelization in the American South

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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## **Abstract**

Broadly speaking, my research focus is on African American religion, with particular interest in the various manifestations of black Islam in the United States. I am particularly interested in the question “Has religion served as an opiate or stimulant for black political protest?” And my research attempts to answer it by chronicling the experiences of black Muslims in southern prisons. My dissertation builds on Michelle Alexander’s groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). Alexander argues that African Americans were not over-represented in America’s prisons in the 1970s, but with President Reagan’s War on Drugs initiative in the early 1980s, black incarceration exploded. America’s black urban poor became the targets of government laws that meted out harsh penalties for crack possession. As a result, the criminal justice system became a new tool of white social control of black Americans, replacing the old system of Jim Crow segregation. Now, America’s prisons are the institutions depriving large numbers of African and Hispanic Americans of their democratic rights, even after they are released. If our prison system is a breeding ground for perpetuating white dominance, a new Jim Crow, then ultimately I ask if religion plays a vital role in motivating black communities to protest and demand reforms.

My sources—in-depth interviews, prison newsletters, and Muslim publications—contain much testimony from the religious experience of a specific population of oppressed black men at the heart of this new, literally confining system. And, this testimony allows us to take a fresh look at the old question, a constant in the historiography since DuBois: Does black religion in the form of Islam, as it evolved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, help this African American population? Or does it comfort, divert, and entertain them and tend to make them complacent?

Some sources say that it does, generally, in the “free world” as well as in prison. But my research reflects on their testimony in light of past experience.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Historiography

The Nation of Islam and its most famous spokesman, Malcolm X, electrified African Americans with a message of black power, couched in a segregationist theology that was virulently anti-white. During the Civil Rights Movement the Nation of Islam became nationally famous for its black-supremacist ideology, but it was primarily a northern, urban phenomenon. It did not steal the thunder of the Civil Rights Movement in the South. Most African Americans were opposed to the NOI's goal of permanent racial separation, and viewed it as a radical curiosity rather than a viable alternative to the goals of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, few studies have explored the impact of black Muslim movements on political and social reform. Sociologists have either focused on the NOI's organization, ideas, and teachings, or on the role of black religion in general on political protest. My dissertation explores the intersections of race, religion, and mass incarceration, asking the question "Has religion served as an opiate or stimulant for black political protest?" and attempting to answer it by chronicling the experiences of black Muslims in southern prisons. My dissertation builds on Michelle Alexander's groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). Alexander argues that African Americans were not over-represented in America's prisons in the 1970s, but with President Reagan's War on Drugs initiative in the early 1980s, black incarceration exploded. America's black urban poor became the targets of government laws that meted out harsh penalties for crack possession. As a result, the criminal justice system became a new tool of white social control of black Americans, replacing the old system of Jim Crow segregation. Now, America's prisons are the institutions depriving large numbers of African and Hispanic Americans of their democratic rights, even after they are released. If our prison system is a breeding ground for perpetuating white dominance, a new Jim Crow, then

ultimately I ask if religion plays a vital role in motivating black communities to protest and demand reforms. For the black Muslim prisoners and chaplains whom I have interviewed, the picture is mixed.

### **Historiography**

Karl Marx viewed religion as a tool used by dominant classes to subordinate their social inferiors. He believed that religion provided an other-worldly distraction from the miseries of day-to-day life. Many sociologists condemn religion as an agent of black oppression, an obstacle to political achievement in the United States.

W. E. B. DuBois's *The Negro Church* (1903) is a sociological study of religion compiled after a 1903 conference in Atlanta that addressed problems facing African Americans.

DuBois begins with a historiographical essay on the African roots and American development of religion among transplanted blacks through 1890. He argues two points in this section. First, he attacks the notion, popular at the time, that the inherent inferiority of black people was the source of their problems. DuBois points to the damaging effects of slavery instead. Second, DuBois praises the leadership of black preachers during slavery, men who assumed the roles of spiritual leader and comforter. However, he denounces contemporary black ministers for their perceived lack of morality and effectiveness.

Through statistics and scientific data, DuBois's conference sought to identify the causes of the social problems facing African Americans. The conference found that fewer black youths were being raised within the church. The youth were particularly important to DuBois simply because they potentially represented a new generation of ministers. Studies demonstrated that the current crop of black ministers lacked authority because of, among other reasons, promiscuity and alcoholism. There was also concern for the poor financial situation of many

black churches. However, DuBois praises the leadership and government of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, using its success to deny claims of the inherent corrupt nature of black people.

Though DuBois had abandoned religious belief, he defends the need for a strong church to meet the needs of the black community. He criticizes the emphases on emotion and preparation for the afterlife at the expense of intellectual engagement. DuBois thought that a revitalized church could act as an agent of change, but not if it alienated black youth. Despite his own religious skepticism, empirical evidence gathered in the Atlanta study convinced DuBois that the church could be a source of moral inspiration and social activism.

Eugene Gordon published an essay called “A New Religion for the Negro” (1928), in which he faulted Christianity for encouraging African Americans to turn the other cheek when faced with discrimination. He believed that black Americans accepted present subordination because of faith in a future of blissful salvation.

*The Negro's Church* (1933) by Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson is a social survey of black religious institutions based on information gathered from 800 churches. Their damning conclusions echo earlier alarms raised by DuBois: led by uneducated pastors, black churches are rapidly fading into social irrelevancy. Ministers devoted to other-worldly or magical concepts of religion pay too little attention to social ills, and risk losing critical-minded worshipers. There are too many churches, and they are not adequately funded. Rural churches in particular are hit hard because of grinding rural poverty. The failure of American Christianity to address race relations contributes to the problems facing black churches, but only in part. The churches must pull themselves out of their collective stupor.



Mays and Nicholson see some hope for the black church, grounded in its original “genius.” Within the church, black congregants could enjoy pride of ownership, democratic fellowship, and a spirit of freedom. They argue that such a large and enduring institution controlled solely by black people should not slip into opiate escapism, but restore itself as a catalyst for personal and social improvement.

In *Political Life: Why People Get Involved in Politics* (1959), Robert E. Lane says that religion encouraged political apathy among black Americans and immigrants, and Gunnar Myrdal argued that the black church was an ineffective agent for collective action (*An American Dilemma*, 1944).

Franklin Frazier’s essay “The Negro Church in America” (1964) is deeply critical of the Black church as an authoritarian, undemocratic, and anti-intellectual institution that stifles advancement for African Americans. According to Frazier, the cultural heritage of black Americans was created in the United States, mixed with negligible cultural remnants from Africa. Otherwise, American black institutions took their cues from pre-existing white institutions. He argues that the experience of slavery disrupted old forms of social cohesion among black Americans, and they found a new basis for cohesion within the Christian religion. Black people had almost no options for social participation other than that offered by the church, which served as a model for all subsequent black organizations. Whereas Du Bois viewed black ministers as sources of comfort and hope, Frazier describes most of them as petty tyrants who bequeathed a legacy of obedience and ignorance to the black community. Intellectual achievement could only come with defection from the church. Frazier predicted that as integration widened the possibilities for participation in secular areas of American society, a growing black middle-class would be lured away from the church, diminishing its influence.

In *Frustrated Fellowship* (1986), a history of the black Baptist church until 1895, Joseph Washington argues that abolitionists formed the core of regional black Baptist associations led by midwesterners and northeasterners with Virginian roots. Black associations were more active than their white abolitionist counterparts. And though black Christians in antebellum America worshiped in biracial congregations, they organized independent churches whenever possible. This process accelerated during Reconstruction. Black and white Baptist leaders haggled over division of church properties and responsibility for the care of freedmen. However, white racism pushed former black abolitionists to call for total separation of the Baptist church along racial lines. So-called “cooperationists” opposed the separatists, believing in the necessity of white-patronage. Despite these tensions, more and more all-black conventions merged because of limited financial resources, separatist ideology, and racial violence, culminating with the 1895 National Baptist Convention, which created the largest black denomination in the country. The politics of “cooperationists” vs. “separatists” continued, leading to a number of schisms throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the end, Washington’s tale is a lament, hence the title “Frustrated Fellowship.” Internal squabbles, disunity, and power-hungry leaders muted the radicalism at the core of the Black Baptist Church. Concern for middle-class respectability replaced activism, and the church did not live up to its full potential as an agent for social change.

Finally, in the wake of Jesse Jackson’s failed bid for the Presidency in 1984, Adolph Reed challenged the idea that religion inspired black political activism, calling it a myth (*The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics*, 1986). Rather, the institution of the church led African Americans to accommodate themselves to a permanent condition of subordination, or political “quietism.”

There is also a case for black religion as an ideological force for liberation and political activism. In *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), James Cone, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, argues that black Christians saw themselves as being in a covenant with a god that took sides—for the oppressed, and against the oppressor. “Black Power” was a phrase that expressed the urgent need for change through militant, collective action. The God of the oppressed demanded that his people act against a sinful and inauthentically Christian white power structure. In other words, the church acted as a catalyst and mobilizer for black Christians. Below is a survey of scholars who argue for the Black Church as a foundation for education, leadership, and activism.

In *The History of the Negro Church* (1921), Carter G. Woodson traces the development of the black church in America from colonial times through the early years of the twentieth century. For Woodson, no aspect of African American history is left untouched by the church. Beginning with early church movements in the North, Woodson describes the efforts of white Baptist and Methodist missionaries to minister to southern slaves during the Great Awakening. These denominations appealed to slaves because they opened the door to leadership positions, unlike the Anglican or Episcopal Church. In addition, talented ministers held positions of authority conferred by a black community. However, white masters prevented the independent worship of black congregations, especially after the Haitian and Nat Turner revolts.

After the Civil War, the church took on a new, more important role in the black community. Church organizations and benefactors helped establish schools and churches to educate the newly freed black southerners. Woodson argues that the church served as a Chamber of Commerce, educational facility, and a social center. Additionally, the ministry was one of the highest stations to which a black leader could aspire; the visibility and education available to the

clergy was notable in a community that was often denied opportunity. To emphasize this fact, Woodson includes numerous short biographies of church leaders who were instrumental in the development of various denominations or were significant members of the religious community.

Published in a single volume with Frazier's essay is C. Eric Lincoln's "The Black Church Since Frazier," a response to Frazier's condemnation of the Black church. Lincoln argues that the Civil Rights Movement transformed Frazier's dead "Negro church" into the revitalized and relevant "Black church." This is a new, militant church with a racialized liberation theology in which God and Jesus are black. It is grounded in the experience of struggle, and members are mobilized under the bold leadership of people like the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Adam Clayton Powell. While these folks took up the cause of desegregation, mainstream black religion went in the other direction, privileging blackness in ecclesiastical matters.

*The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990) by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya updates Mays and Nicholson's sociological survey of black churches. They combine a historical overview of the Black Church with an analysis of how the church confronts contemporary issues ranging from ordination of female ministers to rap music. They note that the church was a strong institution aiding black urban development. Black churches in urban areas grew rapidly in both the North and the South, but unlike white churches (which grew in membership per church) black churches grew in number of new institutions, the population of each church remaining relatively small in order to provide better service. And they exerted a tremendous amount of influence on black social, cultural, and political life. Particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, the NAACP kept its membership high through the advocacy of ministers. The Civil Rights Movement would not only accept church support, but would use it as a staging ground for their critique of segregated society.

The many varieties of African American religion are informed by a complex history of slavery, segregation, and Civil Rights, creating beliefs and worship practices distinct from those of white Christian Americans. Black Christians sought autonomy for their churches not on theological grounds, but because of the hypocrisy of white Christians who used their religion to justify slavery and oppression. Members of the Black Church saw their religion as more authentic than that of whites.

Many black slaves converted to Christianity during the Second Great Awakening. Other than the family, the Black Church existed at this time as one of the main social institutions for African Americans, and thus assumed significant roles and burdens that distinguished it from other American churches. The rural church not only provided "the womb" for many of the distinctive features of the "black folk" religious experience (styles of preaching, shouting and falling out, spirituals and gospel music, and call-and-response), but also helped slaves survive the plantation system, and by providing assistance after the Civil War. Drawing upon a heritage of communalism, the Black Church served as centers for slave rebellions, civil rights protests, and the mobilization of the black vote. Black churches played a dominant role in establishing the black self-help tradition and eventually assumed the task of helping black people internalize the ethic of economic rationality that would lead to economic mobility. Despite the Black Church's legacy of mutual aid and support, the process of urbanization spurred by the Great Migration of the twentieth century lessened its influence over politics, education, and culture. A black middle-class emerged that assimilated dominant values of individualism, privatism, conspicuous consumption, and upward mobility. While urbanization introduced a greater differentiation of social class and pluralism into the African American community, a collective double-consciousness emerged for a subculture desiring to become a part of the American political

mainstream while at the same time desiring to guard its independence as a historically religious community.

Aldon Morris's *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (1984) covers much the same ground, arguing that the churches and other black institutions of the urban South provided the organizational structure needed for the development of civil rights activism. It is a sociological study that focuses on local organization, citing the importance of the black church in educating and mobilizing African-Americans for the mass movement. Morris argues that the economic and leadership resources of the civil rights movement also came from the black churches.

He also says that the Civil Rights Movement was well organized and planned. Although it was made up of hundreds of autonomous local movements it was not simply the result of black southerners being pushed past their limits. The movement, in all areas, was planned and organized.

The bus boycotts (Baton Rouge, 1953; Montgomery, 1955; Tallahassee, 1956) represented the genesis of a new black movement, indigenous to the South, based on independent local centers, and loosely organized around the black church. These constituted "movement centers", and that by banding these movement centers together in a loose alliance the SCLC (1957) functioned as a decentralized political arm of the black church. The SCLC was able to keep the movement alive when the NAACP was suffering from persecution by the states. Morris adds that the Reverend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was not simply a symbolic leader, but he had a well-organized support system that he controlled.

In *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree* (1993), William Montgomery argues that after the Civil War, Black Christians splintered into a number of new denominations out of a desire to be fully autonomous of white churches. Black defection from traditional Protestant churches did

not create a single, monolithic Black Church. Montgomery identifies diverse trends in belief and worship in black churches that defy lump categorization. Black churches divided along lines of class, theology, and how they responded to whites in general. In attempts to shape Reconstruction politics, some black churches were radical and militant, others more conservative and accommodationalist. Against Frazier, Montgomery argues for the persistence of African cultural ways in worship and community, though congregations often cemented in the face of intense racism. Also, Montgomery praises the moral vision and leadership of black ministers. They and their congregations found strength in the Bible and in churches that were symbols of black independence. These churches also became incubators of black nationalism as post-Reconstruction violence intensified. Some advocated back-to-Africa schemes, and there was some emigration to Haiti and Africa. However, rather than intimidating black people, ruthless white racists provided a model for generations of black nationalists.

With *Righteous Discontent* (1993), Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham adds to the scholarship on the history of the Black Baptist Church by describing the crucial leadership role of women. In the late 1890s Jim Crow laws calcified throughout the South, spelling bad times for the African American community as a whole. However, the National Baptist Convention (1895) gave black women a platform to shape and uplift their communities through publishing and community works. In the postbellum South, Black Baptist churches supported by northern Protestants helped educate an elite “Female Talented Tenth” who then used their skills to promote white middle-class values among other black people, raise funds for black churches, and operate educational and social service programs through the Black Baptist Church. Higginbotham argues that the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. would not have effectively addressed the needs of common people without women leaders. Southern black Baptist women

organized to acquire land for schools and homes for the elderly. Women journalists for the *National Baptist Magazine* condemned race violence and promoted race pride. They attacked the perception that women's proper sphere was the home, and encouraged women to participate in church outreach. Black Baptist women articulated a feminist theology calling for the liberation of women, claiming that women, not men, were better suited to solving dire social problems. Black women utilized the Baptist Church as a support structure to promote women's rights, racial dignity, and black education during the era of Jim Crow.

In the biography *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, Stephen Angell charts the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church through the life of Georgian politician and AME minister Henry McNeal Turner. Turner joined the A.M.E. Church in 1858 and was appointed the first black U.S. Army chaplain during the Civil War. He left the ministry for politics after the war, but his confrontations with racist white Democrats ended his political career in 1868. The bitterness of the experience transformed him into a back-to-Africa nationalist. But Angell's focus is Turner's 60 year career as a preacher. He and other ministers like him completely changed the religious profile of the South and transformed the A.M.E. Church from a small denomination confined to the North into a national denomination with hundreds of thousands of adherents, most of them southern. Turner was a black liberation preacher, who proclaimed that God is black, and was strongly opposed to Booker T. Washington's accommodationism. Turner worked to spread A.M.E.'s brand of Black Protestantism in America as well as Africa, where he worked as a missionary. He believed that black Christians had a duty to spread salvation to both continents.

In *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (1991), Charles Hamilton relates the life of the Harlem Baptist minister-turned-Congressman who successfully fought for Civil Rights before his self-



destruction in the late 1960s. The subtitle says “The Biography of an American Dilemma,” referring to Gunnar Myrdal’s thesis that American society possess a strong belief in liberty, equality, respect for law and democracy but when it comes to black Americans, those same values do not always apply. So the society says one thing and does another as it relates to African Americans and other minorities. Hamilton argues that Powell made that dilemma the main issue of his public life. As a Baptist minister he led crusades for jobs and housing in Harlem, forcing drug stores to hire black pharmacists and the city transit authority to hire 200 black drivers. He used his popularity to formally enter politics and was elected into the U.S. House of Representatives in 1944. He became nationally popular among black Americans as he raged against segregation in the nation’s capital, but he was not without controversy.

After being isolated by President Truman over a perceived insult to his wife, Powell broke ranks with the Democratic Party in 1956 and supported the Republican Dwight Eisenhower. Ostensibly, Powell did so because he thought that Eisenhower would be a better civil rights advocate. In reality, he hoped to end an IRS and FBI investigation into his personal finances. In 1960 he threatened to expose Bayard Rustin, a prominent Civil Rights leader, as a homosexual if he did not call off a protest at the Republican Convention. The blackmail worked. In 1966, Powell opposed a national literacy project sponsored by CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) in order to get the White House’s aid in reducing a libel judgment against him.

Yet, he became the voice of Black America in Congress, especially in the area of desegregation of the military. His Powell Amendment—a proposal to deny federal funds to institutions that practiced discrimination—raised the issue of unequal treatment, but it also resulted in the defeat of legislation that would have been beneficial to Black Americans. It would eventually become law in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. However, after successive legal and

financial troubles, he was kicked out of Congress. His extravagant lifestyle—driving a Jaguar, disappearing to the Bahamas—eroded his religious base in Harlem. He was defeated in a re-election bid in 1970 and died two years later. Hamilton concludes that Powell could have used his Congressional seniority to do so much more for civil rights and his constituents, but he took his popularity for granted, recklessly ending his own career.

Stephen Oates's *Let the Trumpet Sound* (1983) is a biography of Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Oates argues that King changed more lives than any other American reform leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in part because his message had a global reach. Not uncritical of his subject, Oates confirms that King had extra-marital affairs, but does not dwell on them. Obviously, whatever flaws he had as a person were heavily outweighed by the force of his work and message. He involved himself in three great movements—civil rights, anti-poverty, and anti-war. Oates argues that King's intellectual foundation was shaped by Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel and Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent protest. Combined with his Christian faith, charisma and courage, Oates credits King with formulating a protest movement that dismantled Jim Crow, and prevented a race war from breaking out in the South. He accomplished this, in Oates's opinion, by galvanizing not just black marchers, but also northern and southern white liberals. The Reverend King demonstrated a powerful faith in God, which sustained him and others through imprisonment, death threats, and dark times such as the bombing of a black church in Birmingham shortly after his "I Have a Dream" speech. King dealt with Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, and Oates says that King felt personally closest to LBJ. However, he caused a rupture between himself and President Johnson when he came out as a pacifist, and opposed to the Vietnam War. Johnson felt betrayed after pushing

through the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, but it was Johnson who became increasingly unpopular.

While Oates offers little information on King's thoughts on and interactions with people like Malcolm X, he emphasizes King's focus on winning equal opportunities in jobs, housing, and education for the South's middle-class black population. Late in his career he shifted to activism on issues of war and labor unions. It was on behalf of striking sanitation workers in Memphis that he found himself in that city on April 4, 1968, when he was shot on the balcony of his hotel. His legacy cannot be understated, though this biography, intended for a general readership, is too sympathetic towards King, a deeply complex and courageous human being. He borrowed from Reinhold Niebuhr a mistrust in human rationality to promote racial progress, compelling him use the force of filial love and protest to end segregation, and open doors for future racial harmony.

David Chappell's *A Stone of Hope* (2004) argues that Civil Rights is not a story of the triumph of liberal ideals after decades of gradual progress. These white liberals sincerely wanted change, but notions of justice and progress did not have the inspirational power behind it to inspire a critical mass of support. In their place, black leaders called upon the "prophetic tradition" of the Old Testament, where lone seers stand away from the crowd and call for dramatic change or dramatic consequence. They even used the stark imagery of the Old Testament prophets. Meanwhile, though most segregationists claimed Christianity, they were never able to marshal the support of the church in the white Southern denominations—and therefore they lost.

Chappell's book is an argument for protest and political activism as crucial elements of progress for the African-American population. Coercion through mass mobilization had a

powerful influence on the progression of Civil Rights policy, and thus on the situation of the African-Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Randal Jelks's *Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement: a Biography* (2012) is an account of the life of Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College and religious scholar. A devout Christian, Mays's faith led him to agitate against racial injustice and he inspired a generation of Civil Rights leaders to do the same. Mays viewed social activism as an obligation of his faith, against the notion that religion was only a coping mechanism in difficult times. The times demanded leaders with courage and intelligence, and Mays was a model and mentor for other religious leaders like the Reverend, Martin Luther King, Jr. They viewed the world as broken, and Christianity galvanized them to heal it.

The following section deals with the historiography of Black Islam in America, beginning with C. Eric Lincoln's *The Black Muslims in America* (1961, 1973). After the original 1961 publication, Lincoln came to a new conclusion about the function of Black Islam in society. In the 1961 edition Lincoln describes how Black Islam functions for its adherents, and the impact of the movement on society as a whole. He argues that Black Islam is primarily a social, not religious, movement of accommodation. Its main attraction is its emphasis on the solidarity of men who self-consciously recognize themselves as black and work together to achieve group aims. However, rather than acting as just an accommodation to existing power arrangements, Lincoln argues that Black Islam's appeal was its promise to overcome the domination of white men, and perhaps even subordinate them. The emphasis on racial identity and group separatism marks Black Muslims as a social protest group that "moves upon a religious vehicle" (246). Black Islam functions for the group by insisting on high moral standards for the individual and

community, abstinence from alcohol, diet control, steady employment, and self-respect. Lincoln sees the movement as a constructive outlet for black Americans, whose outrage at unrelenting white prejudice might otherwise lead them to drug addiction or senseless violence. With their energies positively channeled, Black Muslims fostered community leadership, educational initiatives, and business enterprises.

However, Lincoln says (in 1961) that the seeds of Black Islam's destruction lie in its dysfunctional relationship with the dominant white society. In demanding that whites take them seriously, Black Muslim's attacks on whites could lead them to retrench out of fear, tighten racial barriers, and ultimately impede racial reconciliation. In attacking the principles of Christianity rather than individuals, black Muslims make creative social interaction more difficult. Lincoln is an integrationist, and believes that segregationist philosophy is unhelpful, whatever the source. Black Islam's attempt to break off all communication between white and black America is dysfunctional. "A functional group is one that reinforces not the status quo, whatever that happened to be, but the organic unity of the society" (252). If Black Islam arose as a response to racism in America, then integration will end it.

Lincoln changes his tune in the 1976 edition. References for a need to integrate are dropped, and Black Islam is viewed more favorably as an American subculture whose members were forced out of the dominant structure. This change reflects a new perspective on the functioning of black religion as a whole: it no longer functions as a force for integration, but as a foundation for resisting racism and oppression. Now the key issue is the conflict over the unequal distribution of power. As a protest organization, Black Islam is the product of social conflict, using its resources to challenge the injustices inflicted by the dominant power group. While emphasizing the distinctive structure of Black Islam, Lincoln says that in its social

separatist doctrine it is similar to Christian Black Power theology: they both reject traditional white Christian notions of their superiority. And since white religious organizations—whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish—never fully integrated black worshipers into the pluralism of American religion, black Christians accepted the “otherness” of their religion as a rejection of the old Christianity of their white masters. Black Muslims and black Christians both assume that God is on the side of the oppressed.

E. U. Essien-Udom’s *Black Nationalism* (1962) agrees with Lincoln’s assessment that Black Islam was a reform movement, but he puts more emphasis on its religious aspects. The bulk of the book deals with the Nation of Islam. The NOI rejected white America and represented a turn inward to the black community as a source of hope, particularly for poor, dispossessed northern urban African Americans. Essien-Udom says that the NOI’s religious component was its binding force. The Holy Koran provided spiritual guidance, Elijah Muhammad provided everyday leadership, and members shared a common ritual life and a firm belief in a redemptive end-time narrative. However, Essien-Udom’s real contribution is based on his interviews with the Messenger Elijah Muhammad, in which Muhammad stresses his ministry of self-reliance, saying that the biggest obstacle is not white racism but the mentality of the “negro masses.” In other words, the NOI was not simply anti-white, but also opposed to the values of lower-class black people, and the complacency and opportunism of the black middle-class. Therefore, if Muhammad’s organization failed, it would do so because of a lack of total black solidarity within the NOI against the dominant white Christian regime.

In *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (1991), Bruce Perry offers a well-researched and nuanced portrait of Malcolm X, the most famous Nation of Islam convert and Civil Rights martyr. First, a word about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as Told to Alex*

*Haley* (1965) needs to be said. As a biography/autobiography, it is excellent, but Malcolm X was careful to control the details about his life, and so it is not as useful as a work of history. The book was self-made myth, though a constructive myth of uplift that could serve as a model for the black urban poor. Malcolm X's assassination in February 1965 turned him into a hero. Perry's biography is a much needed correction to the popular version of Malcolm X's life, but it too is not perfect. He focuses much on Malcolm's youth as a psychoanalytic tool to explain later anxieties and physical problems, many of which could probably be explained as stress-related. In several instances Perry explains Malcolm's actions by implying that he was subconsciously reacting to his deceased father who beat him.

That said, most of Perry's conclusions are more directly evidence-based. He disputes a litany of events related by Malcolm in his *Autobiography*. During his street-hustling days, when he was known as "Detroit Red," Malcolm was more than just a numbers runner—he probably engaged in homosexual acts for cash. Malcolm's house was firebombed a few days before his death. Malcolm blamed the NOI, but he was about to get evicted, and probably destroyed it himself. But the most revealing detail concerns Malcolm's 1964 *hajj* to Mecca. He said that it was a time in which he realized that true Islam is no respecter of race, and that white men were not really the devil. Rather, they were shaped by the same forces of racism and hatred which he had internalized. Apparently, Malcolm had not believed that for years, if at all. He maintained his "white devil" rhetoric to remain in good graces with Elijah Muhammad. The famous "break" occurred because Malcolm X wanted the NOI to get politically involved. He was embarrassed that southern black Christians were putting their lives on the line in places like Birmingham, and he was standing on the sidelines despite his militant speeches.

Yet, Perry confirms much of the *Autobiography*, as well. Malcolm feigned insanity to avoid the draft, was under constant surveillance by the FBI and CIA, and met with the Klan in 1961 to talk about securing a separate black homeland. Perry's biography offers a more ambivalent, and more believable, Malcolm.

Karl Evanzz's *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (1999) condemns the co-founder of the Nation of Islam as a violent demagogue, while giving limited praise to his organization. His syncretic religion pieced together Garveyite separatism, Booker T. Washington's self-reliance, and Islamic scripture, and he attracted followers through fiery anti-white rhetoric. However, whatever violent acts he may have inspired, it seems that most of them were leveled at other Muslims. His followers were loyal because many of them felt as though they had been rescued from lives of despair, drug and alcohol addiction, and moral depravity. Evanzz argues that Muhammad was successful because he roped in marginalized people and gave them a sense of belonging and pride. He was both prophet and psychologist, diagnosing the obstacles to black progress as "mental dysfunction." And when details of his sexual promiscuity became public, many of his followers simply refused to believe the stories. Evanzz blames Elijah Muhammad's split from Malcolm X as the work of FBI intelligence operations, but it was Muhammad who produced the climate that led to Malcolm's assassination. Afterwards, the NOI fell into a state of disarray and suspicion, leading to reforms after Elijah's death. His son, Warith Deen Muhammad, would rename the Nation of Islam the American Muslim Mission, step away from black nationalism, and embrace Sunni Islam. However, Elijah Muhammad's legacy is evidenced by the seven million or so black Muslims living in America today.

Manning Marable's late biography of Malcolm X, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2010) grounds the minister's appeal in his ability to emulate two archetypes in African



American culture: the trickster/huckster figure, a scofflaw who outwits his enemies, and the preacher, who lives by faith, and calls others to it. Marable details Malcolm's constant struggles with faith, which led him to both embrace and reject Elijah Muhammad and his organization. Malcolm eventually accepted a more universal form of Islam, but the journey compromised all of his relationships, even the one with his wife. His growing disconnect with Elijah Muhammad surrounded the issue of political activism. Muhammad prohibited it, but Malcolm X came to believe that faith and words, without actions, were empty. According to Marable, Malcolm X's most important legacy was the linking of black liberation in the United States with the liberation of non-whites globally. Sadly, however, it is his violently militant rhetoric for which he is most remembered. Rhetoric which, even today, reinforces perceptions of Islam as an inherently violent religion.

Arthur Magida addresses the current status of the Nation of Islam, as resurrected by Minister Louis Farrakhan in 1978, in *Prophet of Rage: A Life of Louis Farrakhan and His Nation* (1997). Magida finds that Farrakhan's black nationalist beliefs are genuine, but his outrageous anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic statements are more in keeping with someone trying to appear relevant. Elijah Muhammad rarely made provocative statements, and often chastened Malcolm X for angering the public. Farrakhan's endorsement of Jesse Jackson for the Democratic nomination for President in 1984 damaged Jackson's credibility, and provided ammunition to conservatives who accused the Democratic Party of being hijacked by radicals. While the Million Man March brought attention to Farrakhan as a leader, he is still considered a marginal voice for black aspirations in America. Nonetheless, black Muslims in the United States, even those not affiliated with today's NOI, look to Farrakhan as a source of inspiration, guidance, and devotion.

On the topic of radicalism and American politics, Devin Fergus explores the relationship between liberalism and black nationalism in *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (2009). First, he argues that liberals in the late 1960s-70s wielded a moderating influence on Black Power radicals, absorbing many into the political mainstream. They abandoned separatist rhetoric in exchange for legitimacy. Second, Fergus also says that moderate Republicans reached out to black nationalists, as exemplified by the Blacks for Nixon movement. However, as the New Right formed in opposition to the New Deal and Great Society, it also reacted against conservative attempts at compromise with radicals. Even though black radicalism had sharply declined by 1980, Republicans painted Democrats who engaged with radicals as out-of-step with mainstream society and anti-American.

Malcolm X was popular among black Americans all over, but had limited success in attracting southerners to join the Nation of Islam. He has gone down in history as a powerful voice for poor black Americans locked in northern ghettos. In *Malcolm and Martin and America: a Dream or Nightmare?* (1991), James Cone explains Malcolm X's success in the north, and why the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message of non-violent protest was less effective in cities like Chicago and Detroit. Malcolm X's black nationalism appealed to northern African Americans facing systematic discrimination not calculated in Jim Crow laws. Northern white liberals who supported King's efforts to integrate the South ignored problems faced by black Americans in northern cities. As a solution, many black northerners embraced permanent racial segregation.

Another important problem surrounds the question of whether or not the Nation of Islam was a legitimate religion. In a report published in June, 1955, the Federal Bureau of Investigations concluded that it was not. The FBI found that services conducted by members of

the “Muslim Cult of Islam” were “bereft of any semblance of religious exercises.” C. Eric Lincoln views the religious aspects of the NOI as secondary to its function as an expression of black nationalism, and therefore lends support to the FBI summary. However, Edward E. Curtis, a professor of religion at Trinity University, disagrees with the FBI’s assessment. In two books devoted to black Islam in America (*Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought*, State University of New York Press, 2002; and, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), Curtis maps the tensions within Islam as both a universal religion and a faith-based vehicle for black nationalism in the United States. He faults Lincoln for drawing too rigid a line between definitions of political and religious organizations, citing definitions of Islam that include personal beliefs as well as a range of social and political institutions and states. Islam is also dynamic, rather than static, altered over time by the participation of converts from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Curtis states that the form of Islam practiced by the NOI was discontinuous with traditional (Sunni) Islam, but rejects its characterization as a deformity of Sunni. Members of the NOI identified themselves as Muslims, even if they were not “mainstream.” However, as immigration of Sunni Muslims into the United States increased after the 1960s, the teachings of Elijah Muhammad increasingly incorporated orthodox elements as a response to his critics who denied any connection between Islam and his organization. The “Islamization” of the Nation of Islam, or the process of identifying it with universal Islam, was completed under Elijah’s son, Wallace D. Muhammad. He dissolved the movement, and many of its financial assets, to signal his embrace of Sunni’ism. That might have been the end of the story were it not for Louis Farrakhan, a charismatic NOI minister who remained loyal to Elijah Muhammad’s vision.

According to Clifton E. Marsh, when Wallace Dean Muhammad terminated the NOI, he also gutted Islam's ability to effectively speak to the plight of economically marginalized and politically oppressed African Americans. He eliminated that particular expression of Islam for one that would gain international approval, but in so doing would ask American black Muslims to accept a "new" religion devoid of meaning for them (*From Black Muslims to Muslims: The Resurrection, Transformation, and Change of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America, 1930-1995*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995). Marsh condemns W. D. Muhammad for discarding the black nationalist theology of the NOI, and praises Minister Louis Farrakhan as Elijah Muhammad's "spiritual" son. In 1977, Farrakhan resurrected the Nation of Islam, promising a return to black nationalist dogma. Marsh gauges Farrakhan's effectiveness by his ability to grab headlines, especially when he registered to vote and endorsed Jesse Jackson's candidacy in the 1984 Presidential race. Marsh claims that Farrakhan was involved in the day-to-day struggles of African Americans, while W. D. Muhammad was largely invisible and his American Muslim Mission faced dwindling membership. Under Farrakhan, the NOI promoted expansion of black-owned businesses and implemented programs to fight drug addiction in inner-city Washington, D.C. Farrakhan also promised to recruit future "Malcolm Xs" from American prisons, acknowledging the alarming numbers of black prisoners. However, as in the 1950s, NOI prison ministries focused on rehabilitation of the prisoner, not the social conditions that contributed to his imprisonment.

Sherman A. Jackson's *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford University Press, 2005) is an antidote to Marsh's argument for the NOI's preeminence among black Muslims. After limitations on immigration were lifted with repeal of the National Origins Act in 1965, black American Muslims were confronted by ever-increasing

numbers of Muslims from Asia and the Middle East. The encounter between American black Islam and “Immigrant Islam” forced black Muslims to accommodate themselves to a form of Islam considered universal and “normative,” opposed to an indigenous variety informed by a tradition of black religion that developed in response to anti-black racism. In explaining what he means by “Third Resurrection,” Jackson points to the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975 as the beginning of a second “dispensation” for American Islam, with branches led by W. D. Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan. Particularly with Farrakhan and the NOI, doctrine was based on the teachings of a single, charismatic leader. But, Jackson sees the charismatic tradition in its twilight, and believes that the ground of American black Islam will be the Sunni tradition. The term *Third Resurrection* refers to the reconciliation of the indigenous American Islam with the historically dominant form imported from countries with large Muslim populations. The two are linked, as Jackson does not believe that black Muslims would embrace Sunni’ism were it not for the appeal and momentum of earlier American forms of Islam. The distinctive character of black Islam in America will not disappear, but its authenticity as a tradition relevant to black Americans will be grounded in their participation in a universal religion.

The Nation of Islam and its place in African American religion has been scrutinized by sociologists, historians, and theologians. By combining previous literature and new research, including ethnographic studies through interviews and written narratives, I hope to render a verdict on the impact that African American forms of Islam has had on social and political reform in penal institutions and carceral systems.

## Chapter 2: A Brief History of the Nation of Islam

The outbreak of World War One in 1914 cut off European immigration to the United States and created a need for a new pool of cheap industrial labor. Black southerners filled the labor gap by moving en masse into northern cities, looking for relief from sharecropping and Jim Crow segregation. This was the beginning of a major demographic shift in America's black population known as the Great Migration, which produced *de facto* segregated urban neighborhoods in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and many other cities. Despite subpar living conditions marked by inadequate housing, low wages, and economic insecurity, black Americans fled Dixie and its disfranchisement laws, creating the conditions for mass organization and political activism. Though the power of the black vote would not be felt immediately, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant to the United States, stirred the hearts of millions of African Americans. Originally invited to the U.S. by Booker T. Washington to raise funds for a college in Jamaica, Garvey's mission changed after his arrival in Harlem. He launched a black nationalist organization called the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), appealing primarily to the poor and working-class. He hoped to unite efforts of black peoples in the U.S., Caribbean, and Africa against white racism. Central to Garvey's gospel of black uplift was racial pride and economic independence. He accepted and promoted racial segregation, not as a means of black subordination, but as he saw it, the only path to progress. Garvey's vision was radical—a pan-African movement with the goal of creating a black American civilization in Africa. His detractors, however, dismissed the UNIA as an unrealistic “back to Africa” movement, despite attracting an estimated one million members—including the parents of Malcolm X. Garvey was jailed and then deported in 1927, but UNIA members were

active into the Depression years. The Garveyite movement then faded, but Garvey's nationalism paved the way for a new generation of black radicals.

The Great Migration together with the Great Depression provided context for the rise of the Nation of Islam. Had the promise of stable jobs and improved standards of living for black migrants to the North been realized by most, the NOI may have held little appeal for a rising black middle class. While the energy of the Harlem Renaissance birthed a legacy of black artistic achievement, it also created a false sense of progress and security for those caught up in the Jazz Age lifestyle, which the Depression exposed—black unemployment reached fifty percent by 1933, double the national rate. And just as European and Asian immigrants faced nativist hatred, black northerners experienced racist attitudes from whites, some of whom had also abandoned the rural south for better jobs. Anti-black racism was part of their baggage—race riots erupted in Washington, Chicago, and Omaha during the Red Summer of 1919, Harlem in 1935 and 1943, along with Detroit and Los Angeles during the War years. When the Great Depression crippled the American economy, white-owned businesses in inner cities outright refused to hire any black employees where there was competition with whites for available jobs. Whereas black workers had routinely taken jobs as janitors, porters, and domestics, those positions went to out-of-work whites. Substandard and overcrowded tenements, inadequate schools, and unemployment turned black neighborhoods into ghettos—urban cages where despair and hopelessness fueled criminality, alcoholism, and drug addiction. The dehumanizing circumstances of the ghetto are described by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*:

...The boys, it was clear, would rise no higher than their fathers. School began, therefore, to reveal itself as a child's game that one could not win, and boys dropped out of school and went to work...My friends were now 'downtown,' busy as they put it, 'fighting the man.' They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did;

presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing fighting, sometimes weeping; lost and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was ‘the man’—the white man. And there seemed to be no way whatever to remove this cloud that stood between them and the sun, between them and love and life and power, between them and whatever it was that they wanted. One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one’s situation; one did not have to be abnormally sensitive to be worn down to a cutting edge by the incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day long.<sup>1</sup>

Black northerners organized themselves out of humiliation and despair, using boycott and protest tactics to win concessions by employers, and to elect local black politicians. However, gripped by nostalgia for the emotional power of Garveyism and its message of black political and economic determination, many African Americans drifted into fringe movements, of which the Lost-Found Nation of Islam was one. Founded by a Middle Eastern or Indian immigrant named Wallace Fard (or “Farad,” as it was usually pronounced) in Detroit in 1930, the NOI began with Fard’s door-to-door message that Islam was the original religion of black African peoples (indeed, all so-called “Asiatic” peoples), and that white people were “devils.” Fard combined black nationalism with an apocalyptic theology that predicted white people would one day be destroyed. Though his teachings were a mixture of Islamic motifs, numerology, and fictive history, Fard’s working class audience responded to his powerful message of personal dignity and material wellbeing. He delivered sermons in the emotional style of a Christian evangelical preacher, attracting enough followers to open a store front temple in Detroit, and by 1934, a second one in Chicago. He vanished that year, possibly deported, and leadership of the fledgling organization passed to a migrant from Georgia named Elijah Poole.

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Vintage Books, New York, 1963, 1993, pp. 32-33.



Poole was the spiritually-minded son of a Baptist minister who found in Fard's gospel a potent combination of Garveyite nationalism and religious conviction, touting Islam as the liberating alternative to white Christianity. He recognized Fard as a divine being, Allah incarnate, a claim he repeated throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> As became custom for members of the NOI, Elijah replaced his surname with the Arabic "Muhammad," erasing any identification with white slave masters. Elijah Muhammad further developed the doctrines of the NOI, and guided a growing community of black Muslims. However, like Fard, Muhammad extolled a highly unorthodox variety of Islam—one that embraced racial superiority, polygenesis (belief that different races were created apart), and a physically incarnate God. And, while Elijah Muhammad acknowledged the authority of the Qur'an, his selective incorporation of its scripture belied its centrality in traditional Islamic belief. The debate surrounding the status of the NOI as an authentic expression of Islam will be dealt with below. What is true is that members of the Nation of Islam thought of themselves as Muslims, and still do.

A quiet, smallish man, Muhammad did not possess Fard's charismatic speaking abilities, and struggled in the aftermath of his disappearance. Membership dropped, and then, in 1942, the FBI arrested Muhammad for draft-dodging, and encouraging others to do the same. He was convicted and sent to federal prison. Released in August, 1946, Muhammad's six-year prison stint may have finished the Lost-Found Nation were it not for his dauntless wife, Clara Muhammad. Her administration skills kept the organization afloat, an irony given the NOI's strict adherence to traditional Islamic gender roles demanding the subordination of women.

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<sup>2</sup> Elijah Muhammad, *The Fall of America*, p. 72, "Let us rejoice on this day in the coming of Allah (God), who came in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad to Whom praises are due forever and give thanks to Him." National Newport News and Commentator, publisher, 1973.

Between 1946-1952, Elijah Muhammad fully developed the Nation of Islam into a black nationalist organization committed to racial separation and ethnic pride. Borrowing from Islam, Muhammad saw the world as divided into a community of believers (the *ummah*—all Asiatic persons, including black peoples) and infidels, all white Westerners, who were “devils” (the *dar al-Harb*, or “realm of war”). The two could not mix or integrate as a matter of divine intention. Those left thirsty from the memory of the UNIA’s heyday found a recognizable message in Muhammad’s teachings, couched in religious language. He shared Garvey’s belief in the creation of a separate black American nation. If African Americans could not physically move to Africa, the alternative was to partition the United States along racial lines. In contrast to dominant civil rights forces, Muhammad preached that black people should withdraw from active political participation or agitation for the sake of equality. Asiatic and black peoples everywhere constituted an “original,” and therefore superior, race, lost in an oppressive white-controlled wilderness. This was an utter rejection of American society. He asked black Americans to adopt a doctrine of political and economic self-sufficiency as a better alternative to demands for civil rights, which he and other NOI leaders characterized as “begging.”<sup>3</sup> Like Garvey’s legions, Muhammad inspired a disciplined corps of bow-tied men, who took to the streets hawking bean pies, salvation, and copies of *Muhammad Speaks*, a weekly newspaper promoting NOI doctrines. However, by 1950, Muhammad’s movement wallowed in obscurity—his Chicago congregation numbered barely 300. He remained on the FBI’s radar, but was not

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<sup>3</sup> Elijah Muhammad’s early writings reflect a desire for black Americans to “return” to Africa, but if the federal government refused to pay transportation costs for such an endeavor, it should set aside parts of the South. In fact, the NOI never bought steamships, as did Marcus Garvey, or develop concrete plans for a mass black emigration to Africa. Muhammad admitted as much to Louis E. Lomax, see his *When the Word Is Given*, (Wesport, CT: Greenwood, 1963), 79.

lighting Chicago or Detroit's black populations on fire. If not for the conversion of a Boston convict named Malcolm Little, things may have stayed that way.

Minister Malcolm X (following Mr. Muhammad's example, he replaced his surname) entered the ranks of the NOI in 1952 following a six year stint in prison for burglary. Muhammad targeted prisoners as a particularly vulnerable group, and as the son of Garveyite organizers, Malcolm's upbringing prepared him for the nationalist theology of the NOI. In it, he found an escape from the physical confinement of prison and the intellectual confinement of internalized oppression. Abandoning his shiftless past, Malcolm dedicated himself to an extraordinary regimen of self-discipline and self-education. He developed a charismatic oratory style, employing sharp wit to entertain, admonish, and ultimately hook his audiences. By his own telling, Malcolm's ministry expanded membership in the NOI from 400 to 40,000, and the number of temples in the U.S. increased from four to over one hundred.<sup>4</sup> While Malcolm could not have developed the organization alone, without him Mr. Muhammad may have never expanded beyond a storefront religious operation. Minister Malcolm endlessly extolled his leader's virtues to the public, witnessing to his character and teachings to thousands who would otherwise have never heard of Elijah Muhammad.

Malcolm X mesmerized audiences, especially young urban black males, who flocked to hear his sermons on black pride and the evils of white America. In some respects, his voice was an extension of Mr. Muhammad's—preaching the superiority of Islam over Christianity, of black over white, and the necessity of race separation. But in other ways, Malcolm's message was uniquely his—more so as time passed—and revolutionary. He mocked Martin Luther King Jr. and other mainstream civil rights leaders as Uncle Tom Negroes chasing the false hope of

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<sup>4</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Ballantine Books, reissue edition, 1992, p. 290.

integration. Depicting whites as “blue-eyed devils,” Malcolm urged listeners to reject feelings of inferiority, and to fight against internalized racism, a legacy of white colonialism. Malcolm brought visibility and mainstream media attention to the NOI, but in the process earned the envy of other black Muslims, including Muhammad, who tried to muzzle Malcolm after he made incendiary political statements. Because of his interest in global affairs, Malcolm departed the NOI in order to pursue a political goal that linked a concern for international human rights with pan-African unity, stating, “We need to expand the civil-rights struggle to a higher level—to the level of human rights. Whenever you are in a civil-rights struggle, whether you know it or not, you are confining yourself to the jurisdiction of Uncle Sam. No one from the outside world can speak out in your behalf as long as long as your struggle is a civil-rights struggle.”<sup>5</sup>

Even after Malcolm’s defection in 1964, the NOI continued to grow. Its mosques multiplied, and new members came in to replace those who, like Malcolm, left in disappointment. The organizational infrastructure of the NOI also grew during the 1960s and 1970s. In many of the NOI’s temples, members participated in chapters of an all-male organization, the Fruit of Islam, and an all-female organization, Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class. By this time, believers also oversaw the operation of several primary and secondary schools called Universities of Islam. Wherever Muslims lived, they established small businesses associated with the local temple, including barbershops, bakeries, clothing stores, and restaurants. Many non-Muslims patronized these establishments. Still more businesses were owned personally by Elijah Muhammad, who presided over a multimillion-

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm X speech, *The Ballot or the Bullet*, delivered in Cleveland, OH, April 3, 1964. Cited here from [http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm\\_x\\_ballot.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html).

dollar business empire which consisted of a printing press, farms, restaurants, a meat packing plant, and a small bank.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to calculate exactly how many persons called themselves followers of the NOI during the 1960s and 1970s. Estimates have ranged from below 10,000 to over 100,000, with no reliable census to confirm these numbers.<sup>7</sup> Some members stayed in the NOI throughout this period, but many converts also left the movement. No matter what its exact size, it is safe to conclude that the NOI was a relatively small group when compared to other African American religious communities and organizations. However, it played a significant role in the history of American religion.

In the late 1950s, media attention garnered by Malcolm X lifted the Nation of Islam out of relative obscurity. Hosted by journalist Mike Wallace, New York's WNTA-TV aired a five-part documentary on the movement called "The Hate that Hate Produced."<sup>8</sup> It began a trend in national coverage by broadcast and print media outlets that cast the NOI in very negative terms, characterizing it as an anti-American and black supremacist organization. African American civil rights leaders, including Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), denounced the NOI as a hate group.<sup>9</sup> Wilkins, like noted sociologist of religion C. Eric Lincoln, argued that the failure of the United States to provide equal

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<sup>6</sup> *Muhammad Speaks*, "Clarifies Muslim Accomplishments," 29 March 1974, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Claude A. Clegg, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 114-115. He recorded estimates of membership numbers in the 1960s, noting that the movement itself said that it had over 100,000 members—journalists Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax repeated these claims. Clegg's educated guess, however, is that there were 20,000 members at the height of the movement's popularity, while many more people sympathized with the movement. In 1965, the FBI estimated that there were only 5,000 full-fledged members. See "Nation of Islam: Cult of the Black Muslims," May 1965, pt. 2, p. iv, of an internal report declassified under the FOIA available through the FBI's Electronic Reading Room: [http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation\\_of\\_islam.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation_of_islam.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Louis E. Lomax, "The Hate that Hate Produced," on "Newsbeat," WNTA-TV, July 23, 1959, transcript available in a FBI report at: <http://wonderwheel.net/work/foia/1959/071659hthp-transcript.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America*; University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962, p. 73-74.

opportunity for African Americans had fueled movements like the NOI. Influenced by a desire for progress on civil rights, mainstream black leaders pointed to the emergence of black fringe movements to argue for a stronger civil rights bill. Inside the FBI, investigators ignored the social contexts in which the NOI found success, instead citing it as an example of black racism: “The Muslim Cult of Islam is a fanatic Negro organization purporting to be motivated by the religious principles of Islam, but actually dedicated to the propagation of hatred against the white race. The services conducted throughout the temples are bereft of any semblance to religious exercises.”<sup>10</sup>

Though harsh, the FBI’s appraisal of the NOI was echoed by C. Eric Lincoln in his groundbreaking study *The Black Muslims in America*.<sup>11</sup> He concluded that the NOI seemed far more like a political organization than a religious one. Viewing the Nation of Islam from a functionalist perspective, Lincoln argued that religious aspects of the movement, particularly its pseudo-Islamic elements, were incidental to its success. In his view, “religious values” had a “secondary importance.” In fact, Lincoln said, “they are not part of the movement’s basic appeal, except to the extent that they foster and strengthen the sense of group solidarity.” He emphasized the oppressive social conditions that attracted disenfranchised blacks to the Nation of Islam, and argued that its success stemmed primarily from the NOI’s ability to create an exclusionary sense of community among its members. For Lincoln, the Nation captured the essence of black nationalism by providing cohesion, control and solidarity for its members.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Excerpted from “Summary and Conclusions,” p. iii, of a report produced by the national headquarters of the FBI, available through the Electronic Reading Room of the FBI Website: [http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation\\_of\\_islam.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation_of_islam.htm).

<sup>11</sup> First published in 1961, with subsequent editions in 1974 and 1994.

<sup>12</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) p. 26, 43, 63, 210.

Though he downplayed the legitimately religious aspects of the movement's nationalistic activity, his work reveals that the line between religion and politics was and is often blurry.

Elijah Muhammad's writings as found in *The Fall of America* and elsewhere contradict Lincoln's assertion that the Nation of Islam was primarily a social protest organization. Though the NOI had very explicit political overtones, especially in its opposition to the civil rights movement, its members identified themselves as Muslims. The organization was apolitical in that, in spite of its militant rhetoric, it waited for Allah to bring about social change. Elijah Muhammad prophesied that Allah would destroy the United States. Therefore he could argue:

Allah is sufficient for all our needs. This is why I do not have to beg from our oppressors or march on their Capitol with my hat in my hand. For how can I on one hand preach the doom of the oppressive system and then with the other hand ask alms of the oppressor.<sup>13</sup>

Justice, he argued, would come to black Americans "only through Divine and not through civil government." Although the Nation engaged in a range of nonreligious activities, religion was crucial to the organization.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the meteoric rise of Malcolm X within the ranks of the NOI, along with its swelling membership, emboldened Mr. Muhammad to claim leadership of all Muslims in North America.<sup>15</sup> His appearance in 1959 at the African-Asian Conference in Cairo, where he delivered a brief message, implies a tacit acceptance of the NOI by the international Muslim community. However unorthodox, it was perceived as an Islamic beachhead in the United States.

Emigrant Muslims in the United States extended little of that goodwill to Elijah Muhammad and his racialized brand of Islam. Before the 1960s, Muhammad had the luxury of asserting his doctrine of Islam as the true religion of all black and Asiatic peoples without

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<sup>13</sup> Muhammad, *The Fall of America*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad, 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier* (January 17, 1959): p. 8.

significant competition from Muslims unaffiliated with the NOI. For many Americans, regardless of race, their introduction to Islam was Elijah Muhammad's movement, as filtered through the media. However, the mid-1960s saw a relaxing of immigration restrictions under President Lyndon Johnson, initiating a surge of immigration from the Islamic Middle East. With the new arrivals came Sunni'ism, the dominant branch of Islam. Sunni Muslims challenged the NOI's former monopoly on Islamic belief in the United States, roundly criticizing it as an inauthentic expression of that religion.

A chorus of emigrant Muslim voices condemned Elijah Muhammad and his teachings. As the NOI came increasingly under fire from the mainstream media, traditional Muslims wanted to distinguish themselves and their religion from what they perceived as Elijah Muhammad's false doctrines. They did not want a hatred of white people to become associated with the religion of Islam, a universal religion that was no respecter of race (something Malcolm X discovered on his historic pilgrimage to Mecca). The Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., for example, denied any claim of Islamic legitimacy for the group, and disassociated itself from Elijah Muhammad.<sup>16</sup> Letters appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, where Muhammad had published articles since 1956, pleading readers not to "confuse the sect of Muhammad with that of true Islam. Islam does not preach hate, it does not preach racism, it only calls for love, peace, and understanding." Another letter asserted that Elijah Muhammad "twists the Koran around to fit his hate teachings." Others condemned Elijah Muhammad as a heretic for his belief in the divinity of W. D. Fard—from its origins, Islam has rejected notions of an incarnate god and

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<sup>16</sup> Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, p. 317-319.



prohibits any physical representation of Allah.<sup>17</sup> Fair or not, critics attacked the NOI for being neither legitimately religious nor authentically Islamic.

These attacks continued into the early 1970s, when other troubles beset the Nation of Islam. Financial mismanagement, Muhammad's failing health, and internecine violence all contributed to the organization's decline, despite ongoing recruitment efforts. In 1972, Muhammad approved a \$2 million project to construct upscale homes for NOI officers, a small clique of Chicago-based individuals known as the "royal family," symbolizing a widening economic gap between leaders and followers. In addition, the NOI was under investigation for tax evasion and paying employees sub-minimum wage salaries, allegations denied by leaders in *Muhammad Speaks*.<sup>18</sup> However, the perception of corruption and alienated leadership led a number of younger black Muslims to make an assassination attempt on the leader of the Fruit of Islam. A number of the plotters were murdered, inaugurating a series of violent episodes, including an open gun battle in the streets of Baton Rouge, Louisiana in early 1972, which left two police officers and the same number of Muslims dead.<sup>19</sup>

Gripped by scandal and violence, the Nation of Islam was further rocked by the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, paving the way for a rapid transformation under its new leader, Wallace Deen Muhammad, the seventh child of Clara and Elijah. Wallace ("Warith" after 1976, replacing the name of the false-god, Wallace Fard) Deen shunned his father's teachings, initiating a process of Islamization that reoriented the NOI towards orthodox Islam. He dismantled the Nation at a dizzying pace. In most instances, mosques replaced NOI temples, and

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<sup>17</sup> Louis A. DeCaro Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> From an interview with Minister Louis Farrakhan, originally published in *Muhammad Speaks* in December, 1973, and reprinted in *7 Speeches by Minister Louis Farrakhan* (Newport News, VA; Ramza Associates and United Brothers Communications Systems, 1974), p. 43-64.

<sup>19</sup> *New York Times* (January 21, 1972) p. 2 and 21.

inside them black nationalism was abandoned in favor of orthodox Sunni'ism and the universality of mankind, black or white or any other race. Whites were to be no longer demonized, and eventually the Nation of Islam itself was discarded. Muhammad adopted a new name, the American Muslim Mission, signifying a wide range of religious reforms that led conventional Muslim leaders, both in the United States and abroad, to embrace Warith Muhammad and his followers as true Muslims.<sup>20</sup> Former NOI leaders would now be called imams, and would be subject to democratic elections by the particular congregations they represented.

Imam Warith D. Muhammad's Islamic reformation not only abandoned hatred of white people, but also his organization's steadfast opposition to the United States. Indeed, W.D. Muhammad became a model of conservative Republican patriotism. In 1977, Imam Muhammad explicitly repudiated his father's legacy, which had called for African Americans to exist in a separate, politically autonomous nation. In an interview with *Bilalian News*, the newly-minted *Muhammad Speaks*, he sported an American flag and said that he did not think that his father "ever truly envisioned seeing a physical nation with a different flag than this."<sup>21</sup> This was a debatable assertion, but fits with the Imam's pattern of interpreting, rather than discrediting, his father in a way that supported a reform agenda. He did not wish to alienate black Muslims still loyal to the Messenger. In the same year that he expressed fealty to the American flag, Imam Muhammad implored African American Muslims to celebrate American independence on the Fourth of July. He addressed the stunning reversal of attitude by saying that everyone should "come together in the spirit of genuine patriotism, not having any old emotional hang-ups with

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<sup>20</sup> Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1996), p. 108-9.

<sup>21</sup> David Smothers, "Changes Reflect Real Beliefs of Nation of Islam Founder," *Bilalian News*, May 27, 1977.

the American flag or the American government,” concluding that the United States was “the greatest land on the face of the earth.”<sup>22</sup>

While Elijah Muhammad had preached political abstinence, his son adopted a quietly conservative political posture and encouraged his listeners to vote. When Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson made a run in the Democratic Presidential primaries in 1984, W. D. Muhammad voiced support for the Republican incumbent, President Ronald Reagan, saying that “on the whole, the Reagan administration has been good for the country.”<sup>23</sup> Imam Muhammad did not mince words with the black nationalist followers of Elijah Muhammad when he said that their support for the United States and its institutions was in accordance with the will of God, going so far as to encourage military service. Again, this was a cold splash of water, especially for those Muslims who admired Muhammad Ali—the most famous NOI convert besides Malcolm X. Ali refused to serve in the army during the Vietnam War, despite severe consequences to his boxing career. At the same time that W.D. Muhammad tried to convince black Muslims to abandon long held anti-American prejudices, he tried to shift the attitudes of American authorities away from viewing black Muslims as threatening or subversive. He made the case that Muslims were loyal citizens of the United States, not enemies to it.<sup>24</sup> His efforts bore fruit: in 1977, President Jimmy Carter invited him to the White House; and in 1992, Imam Muhammad became the first Muslim to offer morning prayers in the U. S. Senate.<sup>25</sup>

W.D. Muhammad made one more gesture towards unifying American Muslims with the global Islamic community—he dissolved the American Muslim Mission (1987). Retiring to the

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<sup>22</sup> W.D. Muhammad, “New World Patriotism Day Address,” *Bilalian News*, July 22, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Ayesha K. Mustafa, ed. 1988, *Focus on Al-Islam: A Series of Interviews with Imam W. Deen Mohammad*. Chicago: Zakat Publications, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> W.D. Muhammad, *An African American Genesis*; Chicago: Progressions Publishing Co., 1986, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Barboza, *American Jihad: Islam After Malcolm X* (Image Books, Doubleday publishing: New York, 1994), p. 98.

life of a scholar, Imam Muhammad justified his decision by saying, “It’s just the final step in the process of bringing our membership into the international Muslim community and to conform to where there’s a normal Islamic life—just normal, practical Islamic life. The hangover from yesterday of ‘Black Nationalist’ influence is something that we have to get rid of, because it was in conflict with the open society and democratic order of an Islamic community.”<sup>26</sup>

For Minister Louis Farrakahn (formerly Walcott), the Nation of Islam was not so much transformed as it was neutered, and he became the leader of a counter-reformation. If black nationalism was a “hangover” for some American Muslims, Farrakhan’s cure was hair-of-the-dog. Gathering those disaffected with W.D. Muhammad’s reforms, he promised to stay true to the “old teachings” of Elijah. Many felt left in the cold by the new direction and its implications. Businesses were closed, properties sold, corruption rooted out, and theology purged of its black nationalism—too much for some to accept. Farrakahn continued to speak to their frustration and feelings of alienation in the wilderness of North America. In 1977, Farrakhan announced his intention to relaunch the Nation of Islam, but organizational progress was piecemeal until 1980, when he held a national teleconference with his followers. The next year, around 5,000 people attended a Savior’s Day Convention (honoring Elijah Muhammad’s birthday). But Farrakhan and his reestablished Nation gained little attention before he endorsed Jesse Jackson in the Democratic Presidential primaries in 1984.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to W. D. Muhammad’s reserved and press-shy demeanor, Minister Farrakhan’s bombastic style made him a media lightning rod and a crowd pleaser. Despite the spotlight (most of it from negative media portrayals), Farrakhan’s reconstituted NOI was never

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., in Mustafa, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> *Washington Post*, 1983, "Black Muslim Leader Endorses Jackson," by Michael Marriott, p. A5, in an address to the NAACP.

accorded the legitimacy enjoyed by the American Muslim Mission for a number of reasons. First, the black nationalist message lost its appeal after passage of the 1964 and 1965 Civil and Voting Rights acts restored democracy to the American south. Black Americans could become a part of the political mainstream and were less likely to adopt radical ideologies. Second, immigration into the United States from predominantly Muslim countries introduced mainstream Islam in an unprecedented way. And third, the majority of black Muslims accepted Warith Deen Muhammad as his father's heir, embraced him as their leader, and rejected Farrakhan's call-to-arms. Also, there are the numbers. According to the Pew Research Center, there are an estimated four million Muslims living in the United States today.<sup>28</sup> Black Muslims comprise 40% of that number, and at most, NOI membership is estimated to be 50,000.<sup>29</sup> In short, Minister Farrakhan has never spoken for more than a marginal number of black Muslims in the United States.

A casual scan of news headlines tells a different story--more often than not, it is Farrakhan grabbing media attention, conferring a prominence that does not accurately reflect his standing in the black American Muslim community. He joined the Rainbow Coalition of Jesse Jackson supporters in 1984, but quickly drew fire for anti-Semitic remarks, and though taken out of context, he referred to Hitler as a "great man." As the media seized on the comments, Jackson's campaign flailed as it tried to distance itself from Minister Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, popularly perceived as an anti-white, and particularly anti-Jewish, hate group.<sup>30</sup> A decade later, Farrakhan's public career peaked with the successful Million Man March on Washington,

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>.

<sup>29</sup> According to Lawrence A. Mamiya, professor of religion and African studies at Vassar College, in an article from *The New York Times*, "Nation of Islam At a Crossroad As Leader Exits," Neil MacFarquhar, February 26, 2007, Sec A, Column 1.

<sup>30</sup> *NYT*, "Jackson Says He Disagrees With Muslim's View Of Hitler," David Rosenbaum, April 13, 1984, Sec. B, p. 6.

which he organized. In a two hour speech, Farrakhan characterized the gathering as a "day of atonement" for black men, calling on them to face their shortcomings and take responsibility for their lives and families, while calling on white America to atone for its willingness to keep millions of black Americans in a perpetual state of poverty.<sup>31</sup> Many attendees saw it as a day of unity for black Americans of diverse backgrounds, but it did not spawn a political movement. Some view the March as a lost opportunity for a sustained attack on social injustices; critics condemn it as a platform for Farrakhan's chauvinist and homophobic beliefs with little redeeming value.<sup>32</sup>

Minister Farrakhan is still at the center of a fault line in American Islam. The Southern Poverty Law Center labels the NOI as a "hate group," and most black converts to Islam join the Sunni branch.<sup>33</sup> However, true to its origins and historic mission, the NOI continues to succeed in prisons, where Elijah Muhammad targeted the most dispossessed and vulnerable pool of America's black population, a theme of particular concern for this dissertation. Besides offering religious rehabilitation for prisoners, NOI chapters in urban areas have also worked to alleviate gang violence by brokering peace agreements between rival gangs. Their efforts earned the organization and Farrakhan positive recognition in the defiant lyrics of 1990s-era hip-hop and rap music, demonstrating the NOI's tremendous influence on black American youth culture.<sup>34</sup>

My interviews with black Islamic chaplains and prisoners in the Arkansas and Louisiana correctional departments, as well as sermons published in prison newsletters, add new levels of understanding of the continuing appeal of the Nation of Islam to black prisoners. According to

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<sup>31</sup> Allen, Ernest, "The Farrakhan Speech: Toward a 'More Perfect Union': A Commingling of Constitutional Ideals and Christian Precepts", *The Black Scholar*, volume 25, no. 4, September 1996, p. 27-8.

<sup>32</sup> *NYT*, "The Million Man March, 20 Years On," Charles M. Blow; Oct. 12, 2015, Sec. A, p. 19.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/nation-islam>.

<sup>34</sup> Gardell, p. 292-3.

Imam Abdullah Ameen, a Muslim chaplain with the Arkansas Department of Corrections, about 60% of incarcerated Muslims follow the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, and Imam Ameen blames Minister Farrakhan for spreading the notion that Islam is a racist religion based on his black nationalist views. “What we are fighting for,” said Ameen, “is the realization that you can be a Sunni Muslim who is also committed to the African American community.”<sup>35</sup>

After years of experience working in prisons, Imam Ameen sees the fight against the NOI as an uphill battle. He understands the attraction to it, because he originally converted under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad. Prior to 1972, Ameen’s name was Larry Holmes, and he was the choir director of a Baptist church in Memphis, Tennessee. At the invitation of a friend, Holmes began visiting Nation of Islam Temple #55, and at first was drawn to the message of militant black pride. When he approached the minister of his Baptist church with ideas gleaned from NOI services, he was accused of trying to subvert his authority. He left the church, converted, and adopted the new name Abdullah Ameen. Three years later, he struggled over the question of whether or not to follow W. D. Mohammed and his program of reform. Ultimately, he broke with the NOI after reading Chapter 49, Verse 13 in the *Quran*, “All mankind, god created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you different races and different religions that you may know each other, not that you may despise each other. God has full knowledge and is well acquainted with all things.”<sup>36</sup> An eye-opener for Ameen, he came to believe that all Creation was an act of God, and therefore good. He still sees Elijah Muhammad as important and necessary, saying that, “He was a good man, wanting racial uplift. His intentions were good, but he was limited by no more than a third grade education.”<sup>37</sup> For Ameen,

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<sup>35</sup> From a personal interview with Imam Ameen, May 13, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> *Quran*: English Translation, by Talal Itani, published by ClearQuran, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, May 13.

this explains why Elijah Muhammad accepted Wallace Fard's claim of divinity, because he simply lacked the education to know better. However, Fard taught him how to channel the anger and resentment of the black urban poor. White racism was an obstacle to feelings of self-worth among black people. Ameen interprets Fard's and Muhammad's teachings as an antidote—if a white Jesus was a tool for the separation and subordination of black people, Islam was the tool for liberation. Unfortunately, this also meant substituting Satan, the true Quranic adversary, with the “white devil.”

Ameen identifies the historically angry character of black Islam—particularly as propagated by Malcolm X—as the key to its continued popularity among prisoners, especially the young. Anger drives them into the ranks of the NOI, because they feel victimized by the system, and Minister Farrakhan speaks to them in the language of defiance. Yes, he preaches self-responsibility and black pride, but along with that is a crippling distrust of all whites. As a Sunni Muslim, Ameen approaches prisoners from a different perspective, but understands black anger as a palpable force.

Malcolm X predicted the consequences of black anger in 1964 with his famous “Ballot or the Bullet” speech. As a Muslim, he defined his position as against the use of violence, but urged lawmakers to grant the vote to disfranchised black Americans or they would turn to “the bullet.”<sup>38</sup> Malcolm X turned out to be both right and wrong. In the long term, expansion of voting rights to black southerners ended civil rights radicalism. In the short term, however, black frustration in urban ghettos exploded in riots all over the United States in 1965. The riots, which caused damage primarily in black neighborhoods and shops, defied liberal comprehension, coming as they did on the heels of the Voting Rights Act. The Justice

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<sup>38</sup> [http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm\\_x\\_ballot.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html)



Department concluded that the harsh conditions of urban poverty—not disfranchisement—sparked the looting and violence.

Chaplain Ameen understands how economic conditions shape black attitudes, and then how prison can exacerbate feelings of despair and anger. After leading the masjid in Memphis for nearly a decade, Imam Ameen was asked to enter into prison ministry exactly because he was a follower of W. D. Mohammed, and not a radical. He even resents the term “black Muslim,” an invention, he says, of Alex Haley (co-author of Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*). He and many other Muslim chaplains try to develop religious strategies that offer positive models for change and rehabilitation. Black pride is still an important theme, according to Ameen—not in terms of race, per se, but in terms of what God has created. “I can’t have anything but pride in myself because GOD MADE ME.” Black pride may be a start, but then there must be movement towards a universal ideal, no one is born a sinner. The Quran does not emphasize race, but if you do not strive to be the best you can be, then you will be miserable. The Quran says that pride should be anchored in one’s character. Black pride does not necessarily mean self-love, it must be placed in context of the goodness of God’s creation.<sup>39</sup>

Another Muslim imam and chaplain, Yusuf Muhammad, works in the Louisiana State Prison Farm at Angola, and shares similar experiences with Imam Ameen. He joined the Nation of Islam listening to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, calling out whites as blond-haired, blue-eyed devils. “I said, ‘Yes, that’s right! I agree!’ I think that was probably one of the main things that inspired me to come in. I had a racist mind, in part because I was a skilled construction foreman, but could not get hired in New Orleans. After I came to understand the teachings of the Quran and of the Prophet, I began to grow out of the racist mind.” For Chaplain

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<sup>39</sup> Ameen interview.

Yusuf, the coming of Warith D. Muhammed was “a breath of fresh air.” He freed members from the “terrible burden” of having to sell copies of *Muhammed Speaks*, and banished the Fruit of Islam, characterized by Yusuf as a band of thugs. He described their use of intimidation and extortion tactics to soak members of their money. W. D. Mohammed recognized that taking charity by force was not part of true Islam, nor was recognizing one race as superior to another. Imam Yusuf is affiliated with a Sunni mosque in Baton Rouge with about 200 members: African Americans, Arabs, West Indians, and others. During congregational prayers, some dress in casual attire, others traditional garb. Women and girls cover their heads and pray peaceably behind men and boys.

However, he knew several members of the NOI who were ready to follow Farrakhan in 1978, mainly out of loyalty to Elijah Muhammad. “In truth, not all brothers could turn their backs on everything they had learned, even the ones that left the Nation. It might be an extreme example, but look at Imam Abdullah Al-Amin—he used to be called H. Rap Brown, and takes credit for the naming of ‘rap music.’ Anyway, after all of his associations with the [Black] Panthers, and his book, *Die, Nigger, Die*, he converted to Islam. Now, he really struggled, but I believe his conversion to be sincere, and now he’s in prison. Shot and killed an Atlanta cop in 2000. He ain’t getting out. I don’t think, in the end, he could escape his past. You know, he said that violence is as American as cherry pie.”<sup>40</sup>

Because the violent content of rap music mirrors the lived experiences of many African Americans, the NOI’s defiant tones are often seen, by black prisoners, as a complimentary ideology to the music they love. However, Imam Yusuf notes the complex nature of conversion, and turning on one’s former self. According to him, conversion to Islam is triggered sometimes

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<sup>40</sup> From a personal interview with Imam Yusuf Muhammad, March, 2014.

by an attempt to come to grips with the past and one's transgressions, and then deciding a dramatic change is necessary. Converts adopt a new worldview while examining what was broken in their lives. It is a spiritually powerful experience that enables them to "restart" their lives based on a new religious foundation. With Allah's healing mercy, they learn to forgive themselves, reorder their lives, mature, and move from hopelessness to hope. In Minister Yusuf's experience, the NOI holds little appeal for prisoners who can let go of their anger towards white people, and take responsibility for their own situations. While Yusuf admits to the pervasiveness of racism in American society, he firmly believes that the prisoners he works with are there because of their own actions. Self-responsibility is a constant theme in black Islamic religion, no matter the variety.

The next chapter will focus on the historical progress of, and obstacles to, Islam in the American south, including the experiences and reflections of southern imams.

### Chapter 3: African American Islam in the South

In examining the progress of black Islam throughout the American South, it is unavoidable to conclude that it lacked the widespread appeal there as in the North. However, a few things must be kept in mind. First, a demographic feature—the Nation of Islam emerged as a result of the Great Migration, the flow of black southerners into northern cities. In those circumstances, the NOI's brand of black nationalism flourished, but trickling those nationalist currents into Dixie went against the migratory stream. Second, black southerners have historically resisted the call to nationalism. It had a fierce advocate in Reverend Henry McNeal Turner, a bishop in the African American Episcopal Church of Georgia. He used his position to criticize the Federal Government's retreat from protecting black civil rights after Reconstruction. However, most black ministers at the time preferred the conservative doctrine of black accommodation, as espoused by Booker T. Washington. And third, most African American civil rights organizations, whether secular (NAACP, Congress of Racial Equality) or religious (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) had integration as their goal. Plus, it is important not to exaggerate the popularity of the Nation of Islam, or even Malcolm X, in the north. In his book, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (2008), Thomas Sugrue shows that mainstream civil rights groups enjoyed far more support among black Americans than the NOI, even in poor urban communities.<sup>41</sup> This is one reason why Marable Manning, a left-leaning author and critic of the far right, dismisses the NOI as no more than a “cult” in his treatment of Malcom X, undermining its legitimacy as a true religion. When

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*; Random House, New York, 2008.

Malcolm X died in 1965, he was not well liked in the United States, and would not achieve iconic status until the release of Spike Lee's biopic film in 1994.<sup>42</sup>

Malcolm X led the NOI's attempts to organize in the South, mainly to blunt the progress of integrationist reformers. The first Nation of Islam temple was Temple #15 in Atlanta, established in 1955, the same year that Ms. Rosa Parks helped spark the Montgomery bus boycott. Given the popularity of the boycott, Malcolm had to move cautiously, publicly praising Ms. Parks's courage.<sup>43</sup> But, he hoped to exploit the powder keg of racial tension in the South by advancing the goals of the NOI: separatism, not integration, and black capitalism to achieve economic self-sufficiency among African Americans. However, by 1958 he counted few successes. On a southern "Goodwill Tour" in 1956, Malcolm spent most of his time in Georgia and Florida, but Atlanta was the only city where the NOI saw any real progress. It could not counter the moral and emotional urgency felt by most black southerners to abolish Jim Crow. Malcolm was out of step with most of his target audience.

Malcolm X's southern campaign sputtered, but there were a few newsworthy occurrences. In February, 1957, he traveled to Flomaton, Alabama to secure the release of two black Muslims charged with battery with intent to kill. They had disarmed and beaten a police officer trying to get two black women to move from a whites-only bench at the train station. After Malcolm's arrival, the two men were released with relatively light fines. Quite remarkable given the severity of the charges, the county solicitor simply told Malcolm that they were not "our boys," one indication of how far the Nation of Islam had gone in distancing itself from mainstream civil rights advocates.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Marable Manning, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, The Penguin Group, New York, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 274.

<sup>44</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, "Moslems Fight R.R. Station Bias, Jailed," March 7, 1957.

A second tour through Florida in 1958 bore little fruit, as Malcolm seemed intent on ignoring regional issues in favor of NOI dogma. However, the NOI hampered its own efforts in the South by making errors, both in strategy and tactics. For one, it never occurred to NOI leadership that white southerners could be coerced into letting go of Jim Crow, so outspoken were they in their hatred of black people. This reasoning led to a tactical error—reaching out to make deals with white supremacist organizations. Elijah Muhammad believed that a relationship with the Klu Klux Klan was possible given a mutual desire for racial separation. To his thinking, the NOI had more in common with the Klan than any group that favored integration. Such thinking was not unique to Muhammad or Malcolm X. Three decades prior, Marcus Garvey made the same mistake. According to FBI files, in January, 1961, Jeremiah X, head minister of Temple #15 in Atlanta, and Malcolm X met with Klan leaders to discuss the purchase of land in some unspecified region of the South, with the goal of establishing a politically independent Muslim stronghold.<sup>45</sup> Malcolm X later denied involvement, reflecting his unease with the whole affair. The NOI's willingness to forge alliances with groups that harassed and killed African Americans could not end in anything but failure. By way of excuse, Malcolm said, "You can say for many Southern white people that, individually, they have been paternalistically helpful to many individual Negroes. I know nothing about the South. I am a creation of the Northern white man."<sup>46</sup>

Malcolm X expressed regret for his role in meetings with the KKK to Alex Haley, mainly because he did not want to alienate moderate black leaders, but the hypocrisy continued with other NOI heads. Elijah Muhammad openly courted the lunatic right by inviting American Nazi

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<sup>45</sup> Malcolm X FBI file, Summary Report, New York Office, May 17, 1961, pp. 5-19.

<sup>46</sup> *Autobiography*, pp. 276-77.

Party founder George Lincoln Rockwell to twice address large crowds of black Muslims.<sup>47</sup> Jeremiah X participated in a daylight Klan rally, and received public praise from its leader, Robert M. Shelton.<sup>48</sup> The affinity between ultra-right wing nationalist organizations was and is grounded, in part, on shared anti-Semitism. In 1985, American neo-Nazi leader Thomas Metzger donated one hundred dollars to Louis Farrakhan's NOI, seeing the potential for cooperation. Both expressed hatred of Jews and Judaism (Farrakhan condemned Judaism as a "dirty religion"), and a desire for racial separation.<sup>49</sup> More recently, in the run-up to the 2016 Presidential election, both David Duke—a professed "white nationalist" and former Louisiana governor—and Farrakhan supported Republican candidate Donald Trump. Farrakhan praised Trump for refusing to accept donations from Republican Jewish organizations. With the election of Trump, Farrakhan sees an opportunity to revive the old language of separatism as a response to the President's enabling of white nationalist organizations. As will be discussed later, Farrakhan's rhetoric on separatism has been inconsistent, to say the least.<sup>50</sup> At any rate, the Nation's willingness to form ties with white hate groups dimmed its prospects for recruiting black southerners, too often the victims of Klan violence.

### **After Malcolm**

Malcolm X was never a part of the Civil Rights Movement, but was in conversation with it, and affected by it. He chafed at the political incuriosity enforced by the NOI top brass, and could not help but admire the courage and sacrifice of protestors in the South. His wholehearted embrace of political activism coincided with the adoption of an internationalist and revolutionary

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<sup>47</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, "U.S. Nazi Boss Among 3,000 at Rally," February 26, 1962.

<sup>48</sup> Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 273.

<sup>49</sup> *New York Times*, "White Supremacists Voice Support of Farrakhan," Wayne King, October 12, 1985, Sec. 1, p. 12.

<sup>50</sup> *The Denver Post*, "With Trump's Victory, Farrakhan sees a new opening for black separatist message," Rachel Zoll, December 18, 2016.

orientation, more leftist than conservative. At the time of his assassination, however, few people were paying attention to his travels abroad. Rather, it was the memory of his strident nationalism that transformed the thinking of some civil rights workers, especially members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the South, this was particularly apparent in the city of Atlanta.

Jeremiah X, head minister of Temple #15 in Atlanta, remained loyal to the Nation of Islam despite his affection for Malcolm, whose efforts had doubled the Atlanta congregation. It was here that a number of SNCC workers, out of curiosity, visited to see what attracted converts to the nationalist perspective. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was founded in 1960 with the goal of achieving racial integration through peaceful protest, but members were influenced by the NOI's militancy. While Minister Jeremiah turned most SNCC observers off, it was in part because his rhetoric and tone were not matched by a program of action. The desire to combine militant black nationalism with activism led SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael to embrace the "Black Power" slogan, a symbol of uncompromising anger against white oppression. The appeal to nationalism was felt so keenly in Atlanta, SNCC activists voted to purge the organization of its white members in March, 1966, and the national organization followed suit in December. John Churchville—whose career led him into and then out of the NOI—sponsored the vote, saying, "All whites are racists; that is, no white person can stand to deal with black people as humans, as men, as equals, not to mention superiors. They can't stand the thought of black people ruling over them or ruling independently of them."<sup>51</sup> Black activists in the South were not immune to influence from the NOI, but most joined organizations that

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<sup>51</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Harvard University Press, 1981, 1995, p. 195.



bridged the gap between the call to power and the call to action. NOI doctrine did not yield to their demands, at least not until its “Third Resurrection” under Louis Farrakhan.

After Malcolm, the Nation of Islam had no coherent southern strategy. Jim Crow crumbled under the weight of federal law. The magnitude of that accomplishment underscored the futility of Malcolm’s southern overtures, and perhaps the impotence of the organization as a whole. The press’s fascination with Malcolm X was matched by its fear of him, which boosted the reputation of more “moderate” civil rights leaders and furthered their goals.<sup>52</sup> For Alex Haley, co-author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the message to white Americans was clear: support reform or risk pushing more African Americans into violent fringe movements.

Yet, the Nation carried on, settling for whatever foothold it could get in southern cities and prisons. Its influence on SNCC was palpable, but even there limited, as SNCC confronted problems facing black communities with greater sophistication than the NOI. The Nation diagnosed the problems of black America through a purely racial lens, and offered few prescriptions other than self-defense and retreat. SNCC’s adoption of the Black Power mantra coincided with conscientious efforts to address not just issues of race, but also of class, culminating in the formation of the Atlanta Project in 1966. The end of Jim Crow exposed sharp class differences among black neighborhoods in Atlanta. Project workers organized in poorer black areas in order to emphasize the economic dimensions of racism, and highlight the vicious effects of poverty.<sup>53</sup> The NOI’s brand of bootstrap capitalism was deemed inadequate given the lack of economic opportunities for the black and poor.

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<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2004, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> Ogbar, *Black Power*: pp. 73-74.

However, all was not woe for the Nation of Islam, as its message of economic independence hit pay dirt with an 1800 acre farm in Dawson, Georgia. It operated without interference from white neighbors, in part because it contributed over a million dollars to the local economy between 1967-69. The farm included 75 head of cattle, producing 200 gallons of milk a day to the Georgia Milk Producers Association. Farmers grew soybean, corn, and pecans, while a canning facility provided thousands of cans of green beans, squash, okra, corn, and tomatoes to black Muslim retailers and restaurants in the North and West. A non-Muslim, black rancher saw to the day-to-day care of the herd, and expressed satisfaction with his employers, going so far as to defend the reputation of black Muslims: "I like the way they operate. They are not out in the streets clubbing each other with sticks or shooting at the police." Though the farm operators did a lot of business with local white-owned businesses, the stated goal of the farm was to promote the establishment of a separate black Muslim nation. That is, not to move Muslims onto southern farms, but to have a steady food source for wherever they found a home. When the farm director, David Spencer, was asked by a reporter, "Why start in Georgia?" He replied, "If we can farm successfully in Georgia, we can farm anywhere." And laughing, Spencer quipped, "I'm talking about the red Georgia clay making it hard to farm."<sup>54</sup>

The Nation also operated a farm in Michigan, but met with stiff opposition when it tried to expand its agricultural enterprise into St. Clair County, Alabama. There, the NOI intended to build a massive canning operation, along with a beef processing plant. In contrast to Georgia, however, white residents of St. Clair opposed the presence of a black Muslim farm. They objected to the Koranic view of Jesus as a relatively minor prophet compared to the centrality of

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<sup>54</sup> *New York Times*, Martin Waldron, "Black Muslim Farm is Accepted in Georgia: 'Money Talks,' says Leader, Explaining White Attitude," December 12, 1969, p. 33.

the Prophet Muhammad, fueling charges that Muslims were “anti-Christian.” Local whites also feared that the farm was an initial attempt to create a separate nation in their midst.

Over 2,000 white residents of Pell City, Alabama packed a high school gymnasium to air out their grievances in late November, 1969. Angry rhetoric dominated the room, with one Baptist minister promising violent opposition, “I for one am willing to lay my life down for the cause, if necessary.” Widespread news that the Nation of Islam had purchased over 900 acres near Pell City through a front company sparked the town meeting. Anger also targeted the agent who sold the property, a white resident and well known owner of a Ford dealership named J. Ray Wyatt. He complained of a severe loss of business, anonymous death threats, and vandalization of his car lot. Police arrested a man for attempting to plow the soil at the Muslim farm. They cited trespassing and failure to register as a black Muslim, required under Alabama state law. Tensions mounted when the Chicago headquarters of the NOI threatened to mobilize 1,000 Muslims into the area for security. As a more conciliatory gesture, white residents were flown into Dawson, Georgia to get a firsthand look at the farm and its peaceful relations with neighbors. Most whites in St. Clair County were simply unmoved by the model farm operation in Dawson, even with the promise of economic benefits and jobs for them.<sup>55</sup>

The St. Clair County district attorney’s office filed suit against the NOI for violating an Alabama statute that required corporations to receive permission to do business in the state. The Alabama governor, Albert Brewer, voiced his support for the ouster of the Muslims, just as the American Civil Liberties Union stepped in, calling for an end to harassment of black Muslims,

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<sup>55</sup> *NYT*, “2,200 Alabama Whites Protest Buying of Land by Black Muslims,” by Martin Waldron, Nov. 23, 1969, p. 39.

and for a judge to strike down the Black Muslim registration law.<sup>56</sup> Amid the lawsuits, violence escalated. The aforementioned Mr. J. Wyatt's dealership was destroyed by arson, and black Muslims became the victims of scorched earth tactics. Through the winter and early spring of 1970, sixty-three head of cattle were killed, some shot, most poisoned by cyanide dumped in the ranch's water supply. Elijah Muhammad warned that the perpetrators were "playing with fire."<sup>57</sup> His threat was hollow. Given that the land surrounding the Muslim farm fell into the hands of Klansmen, along with a complicit police unwilling to round up suspects, the farm was eventually abandoned, the acreage sold.<sup>58</sup> Later, Warith Deen Mohammed liquidated all of the NOI's agricultural assets in the south to pay off a long ledger of back taxes.

As a silver lining to this story, in June of 1970, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Alabama's law requiring the registration of black Muslims, as well as communists and Nazis, was unconstitutional, based on the First Amendment's protection of the right of association. Under consideration by the panel of three federal judges was whether the Nation of Islam was a religion, or, in fact, a nation. Witnesses opposed to the black Muslims testified that they constituted a separate, and dangerous, nation. The panel disagreed, unanimously. A consolation victory, but one nonetheless.<sup>59</sup> Going forward, African American Muslims—both free and in prison—often found the courts to be protective of their right to worship in the manner prescribed by Islam, an issue that will be picked up in Chapter Four.

In January, 1972, black Muslims in Baton Rouge captured the attention of the entire nation through a dramatic street demonstration that ended in catastrophe. As Imam Yusuf

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<sup>56</sup> *NYT*, "A.C.L.U. Files Suit Supporting Black Muslim Farm in Alabama," by Martin Waldron, Dec. 10, 1969, p. 40.

<sup>57</sup> *NYT*, "Poison is Suspected in the death of 30 Cows On a Muslim Farm," March 16, 1970, p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> *NYT*, "Black Muslims Would Sell Farm to Klan," James T. Wooten, March 17, 1970, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> *NYT*, "U.S. Court Backs Muslims, Voids Registry in Alabama," June 11, 1970, p. 45.

Muhammad explains, this event coincided with his initial interest in the NOI.<sup>60</sup> At the time, the NOI leader in Baton Rouge was a minister named George Four X. According to Yusuf, Minister George had a working relationship with the police, they knew his congregation was not likely to cause trouble, leaving lots of questions about why this violent confrontation happened here. The record shows that it started with the arrival of a group of young Muslims from Chicago. They were on a multi-city tour, trying to drum up support for a rival faction of Muslims, out of a belief that NOI leadership had become greedy and out-of-touch. The visitors to Baton Rouge attracted police attention through assertive street preaching, which provoked complaints—their boldness was a sharp contrast to the conservative habits of local black Muslims. And, in what was apparently a machismo stunt, at noon on January 10<sup>th</sup>, they invited a confrontation with the police by using cars to blockade an intersection. Witness accounts vary as to what happened after the police arrived. A standoff ensued between the police and the Muslims in question, attired in jackets and theatrically floppy red bow ties, but otherwise unarmed. When an officer moved forward he got involved in a struggle, and in the confusion, shots were fired. Police claim they saw someone pull out a revolver, but never produced guns as evidence. The shoot-out killed four people, two officers and two Muslims, and injured 31 others. The two policemen who died were shot by .38 Specials—police handguns—confiscated by Muslims during the chaos.<sup>61</sup> Baton Rouge, a city of 170,000, went into lockdown mode under a curfew, and arguments over who fired first raged for months. The event prompted a rare appearance by Elijah Muhammad to the press, issuing a statement disclaiming the Muslims involved by saying, “They are not on our registry as good Muslims.”

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<sup>60</sup> From a personal interview, March 2014.

<sup>61</sup> *NYT*, “Internal Struggle Shakes Black Muslims,” Paul Delaney, January 21, 1971, p. 1. There was some debate as to whether the two policemen killed could have been hit by “friendly fire.”

The repercussions in Baton Rouge's black community were seismic, according to Imam Yusuf, and this event cemented his dedication to the NOI. "And I wasn't the only one. No one but the police said that [the Muslims] had guns. Those guys were not armed." Their courage was inspiring in a ghetto community plagued by police brutality. The year before, three unarmed black men were gunned down by cops. "They were brave. Stupidly brave, but brave. And it was a show. You know, they were being macho, or whatever, but they were not expecting violence. Those young men were a tower of pride. The police let this get out of hand."

The police claimed that they were not trying to pick a fight, but simply clear the road before someone pulled a revolver. The rest was self-defense.<sup>62</sup> "Of course the police would say that," said Yusuf, "but no one was going to give them the benefit of the doubt. Not after their history of violence towards us." What eyewitnesses carried away was a memory of the strength, discipline, and resolve of the Muslim men, leaving a deep impression, and an example of pride in the face of oppression. Yusuf said that for all the problems with the NOI, on the level of the street, few could deny its power. That event changed everything for him, as it brought into sharp focus his own dealings with white people and their intentions. It laid bare the life-and-death stakes of living in, and accepting, a racist society.

I asked Imam Yusuf if he initially joined the NOI more for political than religious reasons. "Remember, this was forty years ago. I was young, and emotional. It was an emotional time for me, and many others. Living conditions, job opportunities, didn't seem to be improving much in Baton Rouge, or New Orleans. I was frustrated, a bit adrift, and again, emotional, and looking for something. That demonstration led many black folks, not just me, to say, 'How come I can't be more like that.' So, to answer your question, it wasn't really about

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<sup>62</sup> *NYT*, Delaney, "Internal Struggle"

politics or religion. I already believed in God, and I wasn't joining anything to go in and *change the system* (said somewhat mockingly) like Angela Davis (a leftist, grass-roots organizer affiliated with SNCC and the Black Panther Party of California). It was about pride. Black people needed it. I needed it. And the Nation preached it, and lived it.”

At the same time that Yusuf Muhammad joined the Nation of Islam in Baton Rouge, Imam Abdullah Ameen, formerly Larry Holmes, converted in Memphis, Tennessee. Both experienced the transition that occurred under Warith Deen Mohammed's leadership within a brief time of joining. Imam Ameen reflects on the period, avoiding direct criticism of Elijah Muhammad.<sup>63</sup> “Elijah Muhammad approached Islam out of his own experiences, not out of deep knowledge of Islam. Yes, he accepted Wallace Fard as a divine being, but Elijah had no more than a third grade education out of Georgia. Elijah did not teach out of the Koran, but his son, Warith, did. And Imam Warith told his followers, ‘Pick up your Koran and learn from it.’ I was astounded by its power, and was hit by the simplicity of Islam—OBEY GOD. Obedience to God is the way to get to God, to have peace. The simplicity of the *shahadah* defies confusion, saying ‘There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his Prophet.’<sup>64</sup> In Christianity you have the Trinity of God, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Is that a spook, or something? How is that not confusing? We believe Allah to be the same god worshiped by Jews and Christians. God does not play favorites: are you truthful or a liar? Honest or false? Racist or not? Obeying God is the key, and also, we must communicate with each other, because the Devil calls us into confusion. Satan is the enemy, and though the Nation of Islam equates white men with the devil, the Koran does not. Satan is found in wicked behavior, not in whites or blacks. By emphasizing

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<sup>63</sup> From a personal interview, May 2013.

<sup>64</sup> The *shahadah* is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, the confession of faith. A Muslim's first *shahadah* is a memorable moment, marking one's symbolic entry in the *umma*, or community of the faithful.

the importance of the Koran, we Muslims have much to thank Imam Warith Mohammed for, in terms of bringing us into a truer understanding of the faith we confess. Thank Allah, blessed be his name.”

As noted in Chapter 2, Imam Yusuf also welcomed the changes made under W.D. Mohammed, but the disruption was not viewed favorably by all. Dawn-Marie Gibson relates the story of an Atlanta family devastated by the Imam Mohammed’s changes, as told through the experiences of a woman named Susan, who was 15 years old at the time. She explained how, without the Fruit of Islam enforcing codes of behavior, many families broke down when the men, fathers and husbands, began neglecting their responsibilities. Her world seemed to change overnight. She used to wear traditional garb, along with the other Muslim girls, and spend most of her free time at the mosque. The garb was discarded for jeans, and the mosque became less important to her social life, forcing wider engagement with the non-Muslim world. Her father slipped back into a thuggish street life.

“What had held the families together was the strong restrictions that Muslims had in the NOI to keep them balanced, and without the restrictions, they became imbalanced again. At one point I really hated what Wallace had done.”

In addition to suffering broken families, Susan, and others, were dismayed by the rapid sell-off and closing of Muslim-owned businesses. Nevermind that many were unprofitable, in debt, or mismanaged, it was what these businesses represented, the idea of black people “doing for self,” and contributing to the overall quality of life and pride in black communities. W. D. Mohammed made his case in person at the Atlanta *masjid*, but deep divisions lingered, erupting at one point into a fight. Converting to Sunni Islam, Susan’s brother followed Mohammed, causing an



irreparable rift between the siblings. When Louis Farrakhan visited Atlanta to test the waters in 1977, he approached Susan's family, and she eagerly asked, "What took you so long?"<sup>65</sup>

Minister Yusuf eyed Farrakhan's rise wearily, paying attention to his speeches and style. Farrakhan trafficked in rumor, suggesting that the first Nation's demise was the result of outside forces and compromised leadership. He made wild claims, like Elijah Muhammad was the Christ for the Christians, and that America had entered a period of divine judgment. He cast himself as a defender of African Americans against a conspiracy of Jews, Arabs, and the U.S. government, determined to topple the Nation of Islam.<sup>66</sup> Yusuf believed that Farrakhan was a shameless self-promoter. "Look, lots has come out about Elijah Muhammad since his death. Brother Malcolm new about some of it. Elijah could be a hypocrite, he was flawed, but at least he was sincere in his desire to find ways to help black folks." Here, Yusuf is referring to the well-documented fact that Muhammad had 13 children out of wedlock, with multiple teenage secretaries.<sup>67</sup> In today's climate, he would be labeled a predator. But in the contest for souls, Yusuf feared that Farrakhan would fill the spiritual void of his followers with anger and hatred, and that prisons would be a key battleground. Prisons were incubators of black anger that had been harnessed for decades by the Nation of Islam. And though Warith Deen Mohammed was, by nature, ill-equipped to counter Farrakhan's rhetorical blows, Yusuf and other followers of the Imam knew they could not yield the field. Muslim chaplains, not merchants of hate, had to minister to black prisoners across the nation. Yusuf saw this as an urgent calling in the 1980s.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim, *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam*, NYU Press, NY, pp. 133-34. This is an excellent study into the cross sections of religion, gender, and race. Gibson and Karim show that black Islamic women demand respect, assert dignity and independence, as well as struggle to expand their leadership roles within the context of the Islamic faith.

<sup>66</sup> Vibert L. White, Jr., *Inside the Nation of Islam*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2001 pp. 98-99.

<sup>67</sup> Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, NY, 1995, pp. 251-52.

<sup>68</sup> From personal files.

Muslim imams carry out an obligation to missionize called *da'wa*, or inviting others to the faith. Ministers Ameen and Yusuf fulfill their *da'wa* obligations by working with prison inmates. Appealing to prisoners means combining a spiritual message with concrete guidelines for living. That is why, according to Imam Ameen, Islam is the perfect vehicle for reform and rehabilitation. Islam is not just a religion, but a total way of life. It provides a model for integrating one's belief with aspects of everyday life, from the ordinary to community leadership. Whether talking about family life (marriage, divorce, marital relations), the way an individual acts in society, how he relates to his job, or how he feels about the government is all Islamic. Minister Yusuf emphasizes the kind of character development that comes from making the right decisions on a daily basis. If inmates can discipline themselves to observe *salat*<sup>69</sup> five times a day in a prison environment, it cultivates a reorientation towards Islamic modes of life, in which Koranic values become central.

Yusuf finds that he is most successful when converts take the rigors of Islamic life seriously, and in doing so, find spiritual liberation and empowerment. "We're not just looking to lower recidivism to prove that religion is good for the inmates. We're trying to build an Islamic community of true believers." Yusuf adds that lots of prisoners attend Islamic services in the prison chapel, but most do not commit or convert. It simply gives them something to do. They are unwilling, in his belief, to break free from cycles of dependence and self-destruction. Systemic racism plays a role, as he himself has experienced it, but that is too often an excuse for what boils down to poor decision making. Yusuf said that too many men become dependent on employed women, whom they use for a place to stay and sexual pleasure, but have no desire or

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<sup>69</sup> *Salat*, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, requires believers to pray five times a day, facing the Arabian city of Mecca.

means to help support offspring. For those willing to take the steps, Islam is a path out of that death spiral.

The concept of *da'wa* also implies demonstrating how Islam, a dynamic faith community, positively influences the religious and spiritual life of the nation. In Atlanta, the Masjid of Al-Islam helped revive a downtrodden black neighborhood by purchasing a vacant strip mall in an East Lake block, and converting it into a mosque. Organizers placed loud speakers outside to broadcast prayer times, five times daily, as a convenient reminder for the faithful, who began moving into the area in greater numbers. The effort revitalized a neighborhood plagued with crime and failed schools, bringing in businesses, good jobs and schools, and greater security. A faith community drove East Lake's revitalization, providing a model of action and positive impact for other faiths to follow.<sup>70</sup> The success of Atlanta's masjid reflects the "Social Gospel," a divine obligation to aid the poor, and is a vital aspect linking Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Another aspect of Muslim life, and prison chaplaincy, is the necessity for interfaith dialogue—a hugely significant issue for W. D. Mohammed.<sup>71</sup> While Minister Farrakhan launched vigorous attacks against Jewish Americans—sinking Jesse Jackson's Presidential campaign in the process—W. D. Mohammed built bridges to Jewish and Christian organizations.<sup>72</sup> For him, living in a religiously plural society meant that interfaith dialogue was not optional. Especially in the United States, where Islam was a minority religion and viewed suspiciously, interfaith engagement was absolutely necessary. It would be up to younger Muslims and future leaders to bridge the gulfs of misunderstanding. Persistent false stereotypes

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<sup>70</sup> Clare Zanzucchi, "Our Tribute to Imam W.D. Mohammed," in *Living City*, November 2008, vol. 47, No. 11, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Haney, Marsha Snulligan. "Envisioning Islam: Imam Mohammed and Interfaith Dialogue." *The Muslim World* 99.4 (2009): 608-34.

<sup>72</sup> White, *Inside the Nation of Islam*, pp. 104-05.

about Islam—that it promotes violence, subordination of women, and contempt for other religions—still dominate popular views of the religion.

In addition to interfaith dialogue, W. D. Mohammed also promoted *interethnic* dialogue among Muslims. He believed only a united front of all Muslims would be an effective force against anti-Muslim prejudice. Today there is still a divide between black and immigrant Muslims. Thirty percent of Muslims in America are native born, African Americans, but most Muslim congregations are not ethnically mixed.<sup>73</sup> The results of a Pew Research Center study, released in May, 2007, offers further evidence of a split. With a subheading of “Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” the study found that American Muslims are “largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims around the world.” In fact, a majority said that they considered themselves as Americans first, and Muslims second. However, African Americans were an exception to the rule. The study noted that, on the whole, black Muslims were more pessimistic than their immigrant counterparts, and less certain about identifying as “American.”<sup>74</sup> Citing the study, Minister Ameen said, “Yes, there’s still work to be done in the African American Muslim community. We never preach that we’re not Americans. But it is also true that, especially in the 1970s, some Muslims resented what they saw as a condescending attitude from Middle Eastern arrivals. You know, folks don’t like being talked down to. That’s something Imam Mohammed never did—he always spoke from a perspective of sympathy and understanding, even when asking for dramatic changes.”

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<sup>73</sup> Farha Ternikar, “Tribalism in Muslim America,” in *Islam in America: Images and Challenges*, ed. Phylis Lan Lin (Indianapolis, IN: University of Indianapolis Press, 1998) p. 41-42.

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/>

Aside from history, another important element divides African American Muslims from the immigrant community, and that is economic status. Immigrant Muslims enjoy a level of prosperity that is unknown in most black Muslim communities. The class division contributes to a sense among African Americans that immigrant Muslims are not just different, but see themselves as “better.”

For many African-American converts, Islam is an experience both spiritual and political, an expression of empowerment in country they feel is dominated by a white elite. For many immigrant Muslims, Islam is an inherited identity, and America is a place of assimilation and prosperity.

Many African Americans are living out the “American nightmare” articulated by Malcolm X in his Ballot or the Bullet speech in 1964, in pockets of rural or urban poverty where the American dream seems unattainable. These are places that immigrant imams may never visit or see. In prisons across the United States, Nation of Islam chaplains exploit the crippling sense of “nobodiness” felt by many black inmates, and speak to their alienation by echoing Elijah Muhammad’s charge that all America is a prison. By uniting all Muslims of the Sunni branch in common struggle, W. D. Mohammed hoped to exorcise the heresies of the NOI.<sup>75</sup>

In Arkansas and Louisiana, Muslim chaplains work with, and under, Protestant Christian chaplains. In the hierarchy of prison administration, there is a head chaplain who coordinates religious activities. Muslims are accorded the same rights of worship in prison as Christians under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (2000), which calls for reasonable accommodations for the exercise of religion (and the focus of a number of suits filed by Muslim inmates). Chaplains, regardless of faith, cooperate to ensure that all religious groups have access to worship programs. As to the content of sermons, even NOI chaplains can have

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<sup>75</sup> *NYT*, “Between Black and Immigrant Muslims, An Uneasy Alliance,” by Andrea Elliott, in the series *Distant Brothers: Bridging a Divide*, Sec. 1, p. 1.

their say, as long as it does not incite violence. Dr. Max Mobley, retired head of Mental Health and Treatment for the Arkansas Department of Corrections, said that during the 1980s, recorded sermons of Elijah Muhammad were prohibited in prisons because they were deemed too incendiary.<sup>76</sup> Imam Yusuf said that the Angola State Penitentiary also limits access to NOI materials because of its classification as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Security considerations have a limiting effect on freedom of religion, but prison ministry has long been a part of the penal landscape. Governor Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas called on an interfaith community to participate in what he called a “Summit to Restore Hope,” an initiative to help freed inmates transition into lives in the outside world, citing a 40% unemployment rate among ex-cons.<sup>77</sup> However, it is well documented that there are institutional preferences for evangelical Christianity in Arkansas and Louisiana corrections departments.<sup>78</sup> Minister Yusuf is not bothered by it, saying, “It’s not a competition.” He added that inside the confines of a prison, inmates have more opportunities to engage in interfaith confrontations than people in the outside world. They have to get along. As for Yusuf, he ministers to a group of approximately 250 Muslims, 90% of them are there for life. It is a community that he has fostered for years. “They feel forgotten when they come in, and hopefully know better if they get out.”<sup>79</sup> The reforming possibilities of Islam is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>76</sup> By telephone interview, April 17, 2009.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2015/jul/07/hutchinson-announces-faith-based-summit/>

<sup>78</sup> For example, see: Eckholm, Erik. "Bible College Helps some at Louisiana Prison Find Peace." *New York Times* (1923-*Current file*): 15.

<sup>79</sup> From personal interview.

## Chapter 4: The Prisoners' Crusade for Reform

Convicted of a brutal assault on his ex-girlfriend, Gregory Holt received a life sentence in an Arkansas court. Remanded to the Varner Super Max Unit, a prison in the southeast corner of the state, Holt came to grips with his criminal past by converting to Islam. As with most Muslim converts, he adopted an Arabic name, Abdul Maalik Muhammad, abstained from eating pork, and worshiped in the prescribed Islamic manner. What may appear as a minor matter landed him in the United States Supreme Court—his desire to keep a trim, half-inch beard. Arkansas prison authorities prohibited the beard, claiming it posed a security risk. Holt, or any other prisoner they said, could use beards to conceal dangerous contraband. The Supreme Court ruled for Holt, finding his right to grow a beard protected by religious liberty, and not in violation of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA).<sup>80</sup> Justice Samuel Alito commented that it is “almost preposterous to think that you could hide” a dangerous weapon in a half-inch beard. Furthermore, Arkansas’s no-beard policy was unusual given that most prisons around the nation allowed facial hair for religious reasons.<sup>81</sup> The Court shredded the ADC’s argument that it had already made reasonable accommodations for Holt and the beard was unnecessary. SCOTUS countered that while RLUIPA allows for tests to determine the sincerity of religious beliefs, there was no evidence suggesting that Holt was not a devout Muslim, and the government’s actions burdened his religious exercise. As Paul Greenberg, editor of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, wryly noted, “It’s a small beard, only half an inch long, but the principle it raised is a great one.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Holt v. Hobbs*, Docket No. 13-6827, Supreme Court of the United States, 2015. Ray Hobbs was the Director of the Arkansas Dept. of Corrections.

<sup>81</sup> *Arkansas-Democrat Gazette*, “Justices toss ban on beards in prison—Religion prevails in Arkansas case,” Sarah D. Wire, January 21, 2015; Front Section, P. 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, “Let Freedom Ring,” Editorial, Jan. 23, 2015, P. 14.

Abdul Maalik Muhammad's legal victory was largely seen as a triumph for religious liberty. Muhammad, however, clearly viewed it as a blow to institutional discrimination against his adopted religion of Islam. He sent a 15 page, handwritten letter to the Supreme Court asking it to consider his case, saying, "This is a matter of grave importance, pitting the rights of Muslim inmates against a system that is hostile to these views."<sup>83</sup> As such, Muhammad placed himself firmly in a tradition of Islamic American challenges to discriminatory penitentiary practices. Many of these challenges came from African American converts to Islam.

Despite the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment of prisoners, in 1871 the Virginia Supreme Court declared convicted criminals to be "slaves of the state" (*Ruffin v. Commonwealth*). This signaled a "hands off" attitude of American courts toward prisoners' rights, deferring instead to the judgment of prison officials over how to treat inmates. Absent regulation or oversight, prisons became rife with abuse, dramatized by a 1971 prisoner riot at the Attica Correctional Facility in New York that left dozens dead.<sup>84</sup> During the 1960s, minority groups and women mobilized in the streets to demand political and social equality, but prisoners turned to the judicial system as the only avenue available for recognition of their rights. Seeking religious liberty, incarcerated members of the Nation of Islam paved the way by petitioning the courts.<sup>85</sup>

Elijah Muhammad was hesitant to endorse such actions. As a former prisoner, he understood the plight of incarcerated black Americans, but he held a conservative view on black criminality. He believed that African Americans had lost their way in the "wilderness" of North

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<sup>83</sup> <http://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/islam/muslim-prisoner-wins-supreme-court-case-to-keep-his-beard>.

<sup>84</sup> A new history of the Attica riot is available: Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood In the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Essien-Udom, E. U., *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America*, University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1995, p. 288.



America, controlled, as it was, by the “white devils.” He scored his fellow African Americans for mimicking the evils of white society, especially in terms of black-on-black crime.

Conversion to Islam held out promises of redemption and hope for black prisoners—a turning away from wickedness in obedience to Allah. With that came a new awareness of one’s identity as a superior being and an abandonment of criminal behavior.<sup>86</sup> Elijah Muhammad’s attitude towards fighting white power structures in prisons was the same as his relationship with the Civil Rights Movement—he preferred disengagement. He recruited in prisons in order to establish a redemptive community on the streets. In this regard, Muhammad was out of step with rank-and-file converts, who petitioned American courts to end abusive treatment behind bars.

The legal assaults on anti-Muslim discrimination in prisons began in 1959 with suits filed by African American converts to the Nation of Islam.<sup>87</sup> Prisoners filed dozens of petitions, and mostly without aid from the NOI. Muhammad wanted his members to follow the rules and not buck the system, plus the petitions implicitly recognized the authority of American governments, rejected by NOI doctrine. Prisoners took it upon themselves to win their religious rights. According to the FBI, there were almost 200 petitions filed by black Muslim prisoners in 1963, pending in federal courts.<sup>88</sup> In early 1961, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, James V. Bennett, singled out Atlanta’s federal penitentiary in testimony to the House Appropriations Committee, saying that, “Several gangs of Black Muslims had caused a lot of trouble. I have been in the business a long time and I have never met a more aggressive hostile group. They refuse to accept any kind of leadership from our officers.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Black Man in America*, Phoenix, Secretarius Publishing, 1965, p. 322.

<sup>87</sup> Zoe Colley, “All America is a Prison: The Nation of Islam and the Politicization of African American Prisoners, 1955-1965,” *Journal of American Studies*, May 2014, Vol. 48, Issue 2.

<sup>88</sup> FBI files, COINTELPRO, Criminal Research Section report, May 1965, p. 88, available at <http://vault.fbi.gov/Nation%20of%20Islam/Nation%20of%20Islam%20Part%202%20of%203/view>

<sup>89</sup> *NYT*, Lawrence O’kane. “Muslim Negroes Suing the State.” Mar 19 1961, p. 1.

Despite fears of escalating violence, most black Muslim efforts centered around legal action rather than direct confrontation with prison authorities. The self-assertion and determination of black Muslims to worship freely in prisons coincided with a growing willingness of U.S. courts to weigh the merits of prisoners' rights cases, especially the activist Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren (1953-1969). The first breakthrough for Muslim prisoners came in 1964 with a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Cooper v. Pate*. The Court found that prisoners could file suits against state correctional departments under the Civil Rights Act of 1871.<sup>90</sup> This decision affected the rights of all prisoners, not just incarcerated black Muslims. Lower court rulings affirmed the right of black Muslims to practice their religion despite the NOI's teaching of black supremacy (*Banks v. Hariener*, 1965).<sup>91</sup> Other victories followed in 1968 and 1969 with two cases brought by the same plaintiff, Henry Walker, a black Muslim serving in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Appearing before the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals twice, Walker asked for a wide range of concessions from prison warden Olin Blackwell. The Court granted the demand for a paid black Muslim chaplain to lead prison worship services on the first hearing. Judge Frank Cooper noted that Christian and Jewish chaplains were provided at government expense, and that the fifty or so Muslims constituted only a slightly smaller population than Jewish prisoners. However, the Court denied prisoner access to the weekly NOI newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, based on its inflammatory content. On a second hearing, the Court reversed that decision, saying the newspaper promoted spiritual and material well-being, with no incitement to violence. The Court also reversed an earlier decision allowing for prison officials to block any correspondence with Elijah Muhammad.

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<sup>90</sup> *Cooper v. Pate*, 378 U.S. 546 (1964)

<sup>91</sup> Marsh, Clifton E., *From Black Muslims to Muslims: The Resurrection, Transformation, and Change of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America, 1930-1995*, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Md, 1996, p. 130.

However, the Court refused a special meal accommodation for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, usually observed in December, or the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Commemorating the first revelation of the Koran to the Prophet Mohammad in 610 A.D., the event is marked by a 30 day period of fasting, in which no food is eaten between sunup and sundown. At 9 p.m., a modest, pork-free meal is permissible. The Warden argued that while Jews are allowed a once-a-year Seder, a thirty day accommodation was not possible given the lack of funds required to purchase special ingredients, and the additional staff that would have to be hired. Plus, according to testimony, “Although the essence of swine was present in some of the food at all penitentiary meals, an inmate could sustain himself very well with the items that do not contain pork from the regular daily menu.”<sup>92</sup>

In 1971, Martin Sostre, an incarcerated convert to Islam, won a civil rights suit after serving a year in solitary confinement. Sostre claimed that he was punished for his religious beliefs, and sought compensation. A federal court found that prisoners could be awarded compensatory damages if denied their Constitutional rights, and that prison authorities could not arbitrarily interfere with a prisoner’s correspondence with an attorney.<sup>93</sup>

Since passage of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA, 2000), many religious based legal suits against corrections departments claim that certain prohibitions on religious practices—put into place out of concerns for prison security and safety—impose a substantial burden on the religious exercise of inmates. RLUIPA protects

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<sup>92</sup> *Walker v. Blackwell*, 1968 and 1969; see, *NYT*, “Muslims Win Right to Minister at Federal Prison,” January 13, 1969, p. 28; also, <https://www.courtlistener.com/opinion/284893/henry-e-walker-v-olin-g-blackwell-warden-united-states-penitentiary/>. The Atlanta Federal Penitentiary also barred Roman Catholics from corresponding with the Pope, a practice Judge Cooper put on notice. Evidence as to the inflammatory nature of *Muhammad Speaks* included cartoons, described as depicting white police officers severely beating black men, with the smiling approval of an on-looking Uncle Sam. The Court dismissed the images as not representative of the whole paper, which was primarily news and opinion.

<sup>93</sup> *Sostre v. McGinnis*, 442 F.2d 178, Second Circuit Court of Appeals, cited in, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 62, Issue 4, “Recent Trends in the Criminal Law,” 1972, p. 531.

“any exercise of religion, whether or not compelled by, or central to, a system of religious belief.”<sup>94</sup> However, prison authorities can assess the sincerity of religious beliefs, and courts consider the essentialness or non-essentialness of some practices.

In cases involving Muslims, Muslim chaplains are called upon to testify as expert witnesses. Usually they are advocates for the state against the plaintiff. Chaplain Muhammad Ameen has weighed in on the state’s behalf on a number of cases. In one, a Varner Super Max Unit (VSM) inmate named Malik Khabir sued the Arkansas Department of Corrections for taking away his prayer rug while in solitary confinement, claiming he could not pray on a dirty floor. Chaplain Ameen testified that “a prayer rug is a convenience, not a requirement” for Muslims.<sup>95</sup> The court sided with the state, finding that the burden imposed on Khabir was justified by legitimate security concerns, without regard to the essentialness of the practice.

Chaplain Ameen also testified as a defendant in a case in which an inmate, Marvin Muhammad/Smith, sued the ADC for violation of his rights under the First Amendment and RLUIPA. Specifically, the complaint read that the warden denied him a special holiday meal called Eid ul-Fitr (“Festival of Fast-breaking”). In the Islamic tradition, once the thirty day Ramadan fast is over, Muslims celebrate with a sacred feast. In this case, Muslims in the VSM were treated to a meal catered by the Popeye’s fast food chain. However, because of numerous violations of prison rules, Muhammad/Smith was in solitary confinement, was not allowed to join fellow Muslims, and served the regular prison fare. He claimed that these measures

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<sup>94</sup> *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*, No. 13-354, April 2014, p. 1. [www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/13pdf/13-354\\_olp1.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/13pdf/13-354_olp1.pdf)

<sup>95</sup> *Malik Khabir v. Benny Magness*, United States District Court, E.D. Arkansas, Pine Bluff Division, Case No. 5:06CV00275, August, 2010; <https://cases.justia.com/federal/district-courts/arkansas/aredce/5:2006cv00275/66467/274/0.pdf?ts=1295646452>

constituted a denial of his religious liberties. In testimony, Chaplain defended the actions of the ADC:

“While participation in the Eid feast is a highly recommended tradition, it is not a requirement for inmates, especially for those Muslim inmates in the administratively segregated areas of prison, who are not entitled to the same privileges as free-world Muslims. The food to be consumed during the Eid feast need only be food approved to be served by the prison and should not contain pork. There are no special quantities that a Muslim must consume during the feast.”

The court was less moved by the “requirement” argument than by Ameen’s assertion, in another statement, that Muhammad/Smith’s repeated disciplinary violations indicated a lack of religious sincerity. Again, the court found for the defendant, on the grounds that serving a special meal to a prisoner in solitary was “counter-productive to prison reformatory strategy,” and that the ADC’s actions properly balanced the competing interests of the Plaintiff’s Constitutional rights and the government’s need to maintain security.<sup>96</sup>

Still pending a decision is the case of Abdulhakim Muhammad, formerly Curtis Bledsoe, who sued the ADC for the right to a “halal” diet—a religiously pure diet that includes beef from ritually sacrificed cattle. Muhammad’s complaint is that the ADC regularly serves meals that he considers “haram,” which means unclean or improperly handled. Because of its expense, beef is a scarcity on prison meal trays, but, “RLUIPA may require a government to incur expenses to avoid imposing a substantial burden on religious exercise.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, the court may reject budgetary concerns in the state’s argument against the Plaintiff. The case carries emotional weight, as Muhammad is serving a life sentence for killing a soldier outside of a

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<sup>96</sup> *Marvin Muhammad/Smith v. Charles Freyder*, United States District Court, E.D. Arkansas, Pine Bluff Division, Case No. 5:06CV00022BD; April 12, 2007; [www.casemine.com/judgement/us/59146e81add7b04934337674#](http://www.casemine.com/judgement/us/59146e81add7b04934337674#), pp. 1, 2, 5, 6, 8.

<sup>97</sup> *Holt v. Hobbs*, slip opinion, pp.2-4; [www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/13-6827\\_5h26.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/13-6827_5h26.pdf)

recruiting office in Little Rock.<sup>98</sup> However, in these decisions, courts do not take into account the circumstances of the plaintiffs' incarceration.

The American Civil Liberties Union intervened in a suit brought against the Louisiana Department of Corrections by Henry Leonard, an inmate and convert to the Nation of Islam. He challenged the State's prison ban on Louis Farrakhan's weekly newspaper *The Final Call*, implemented in 2005 because of a statement of beliefs listed on the back page of every issue called "The Muslim Program." State officials objected to one of the points calling for African Americans to separate from the United States, citing the language as inflammatory. In litigation for three years, Henry's case bounced from district court to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, both finding in favor of the Plaintiff. Lawyers for the A.C.L.U. argued that the ban was arbitrary and politically motivated, while a district court found the ban to be an unnecessary response to security concerns.<sup>99</sup> The Fifth Circuit affirmed the district court's decision, finding that any inflammatory language in *The Final Call* did not merit blanket censorship.<sup>100</sup>

Legal challenges brought on by black Muslims paved the way for broader prison reforms, ending an established pattern of non-interference by the courts into the conduct of penal institutions. But Muslim prisoners demanded justice primarily for religious reasons—namely, to allow for the creation of a temple space inside their correctional home, a permanent one for many. "It was about survival," said Imam Yusuf Mohammad. "The Muslims in prison were presenting a united front against authority, and it had the officials scared, because Islam was still something new." Yusuf explains that Louisiana's Angola is a prison farm that sits on a former

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<sup>98</sup> Satter, Linda. "Inmate's Muslim-meal trial underway before U.S. judge." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (Little Rock, AR), 26 Sep. 2017, Arkansas, p. 9, 16.

<sup>99</sup> *Leonard v. Louisiana*, United States District Court, WD Louisiana, Shreveport Division, No. 07-813 (W.D. La., July 10, 2013)

<sup>100</sup> *Henry Leonard v. State of Louisiana*, United States Court of Appeals for the 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit, No. 10-30982 (Nov. 11, 2011); <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca5/10-30982/10-30982.0.wpd-2011-11-10.html>; [www.aclu.org/news/judge-rules-state-louisiana-cannot-ban-religious-publication](http://www.aclu.org/news/judge-rules-state-louisiana-cannot-ban-religious-publication).

plantation, or, as he puts it, “Slavery is in its DNA.” The white guards culled from the rural areas surrounding Angola were raised in a Jim Crow south, and those racist attitudes carried over into their work. The existence of Islam was not seen as just a challenge to prison authority, but as a dangerously revolutionary force, therefore the guards acted to disrupt any religious or social activities undertaken by Muslims. They were denied jobs and other privileges enjoyed by white inmates in good standing, including the ability to meet and pray. The courts were their only recourse to survive as a religious community. “It was very much an ‘us-against-them’ attitude,” continues Yusuf, “and frankly, lots of brothers joined up because they had a beef with the white guards, a vendetta, you might say, and they saw the Muslims as a way to get at them.”<sup>101</sup> Whatever their motivations for joining, incarcerated Muslims were aware of the outside forces agitating for change, and borrowed the vocabulary of political protest for their own ends.<sup>102</sup> By taking matters into their own hands, Muslim litigators switched the perception of Islam from that of a subversive gang to a source of stability among inmates.

The legal activism of black Muslims in the 1960s created a context for addressing broader failures in the South’s penal institutions. For instance, the entire Arkansas Department of Corrections would be declared as un-Constitutional in early 1971, a status that would last a decade.<sup>103</sup> In the landmark case *Pugh v. Lock* (1976), a federal judge sighted Alabama’s prisons in his cross-hairs, finding them “Insect infested, dilapidated, unsafe, and wholly unfit for human habitation.”<sup>104</sup> The claims by incarcerated black Muslims for their Constitutional rights sparked a legacy of penal reform that continues to this day. Ironically, their victories undercut the NOI’s

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<sup>101</sup> From personal interview with the author

<sup>102</sup> Smith, Christopher E., “Black Muslims and the Development of Prisoners’ Rights,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 24, No. 2, Dec., 1993, p. 137.

<sup>103</sup> The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture, “Prison Reform,” by Laura Choate, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4159>

<sup>104</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center’s website, [www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/pugh-v-locke](http://www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/pugh-v-locke)

stance against protest by repeatedly demonstrating the value of such actions within America's governing institutions.

While the legal victories for Black Muslims were significant, they took place in the midst of a profound transformation taking place in post-World War II America that saw the rise of the "carceral state." Scholarship by sociologists and historians has attempted to grapple with the dramatic surge in the number of Americans put behind bars in recent years, or otherwise had their lives affected by harsh sentencing guidelines.<sup>105</sup> Currently, the United States incarcerates more people than any other nation, and the vast majority of those jailed are people of color. In the 1960s, Black Muslims successfully agitated for religious liberty and for recognition of their Eighth Amendment rights, but those efforts remained confined to prison walls. In the free world, black Islam was not a stimulant for social change, and that political quietude remained in effect under the leadership of W. D. Mohammed. The conservatism of American Muslims left them ill-equipped to confront an explosive crisis caused by the mass incarceration of African Americans. This dissertation examines what answers, if any, Islam has to offer its African American adherents to the deep social injustice of the American legal system, which perpetuates a form of racial control on a scale so massive that legal scholar Michelle Alexander calls it a "new Jim Crow."

In her essay, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters," Heather Thompson calls on historians to re-write traditional histories of postwar America to take into account the effects of mass incarceration on the life of inner-cities. The numbers are staggering: in the years 1935-1970, the number of incarcerated Americans increased by around 52,000; in the decades following, the

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<sup>105</sup> See: Thompson, Heather Ann, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: 'Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History,'" *Journal of American History*, Vol. 97, Issue 3, Dec. 2010, pp. 703-734; and, Alexander, Michelle, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, New York, 2010 and 2012.



number skyrocketed to over 1.25 million people. She argues that, along with de-industrialization and white flight, the rise of the carceral state significantly contributed to the deterioration of America's urban landscape.

“The dramatic postwar rise of the carceral state depended directly on what might well be called the ‘criminalization of urban space,’ a process by which an increasing number of urban dwellers—overwhelmingly men and women of color—became subject to a growing number of laws that not only regulated bodies and communities in thoroughly new ways but also subjected violators to unprecedented time behind bars.”

Drawing on the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, Thompson notes that black males are incarcerated at 6.5 times the number of white males. Combine that with the fact that nearly all states have laws denying convicted felons of the right to vote, the implications are clear: not only are African Americans disproportionately represented in American jails, but their democratic rights are eclipsed long after their prison terms are over.<sup>106</sup> The Sentencing Project reports that nearly six million Americans are disenfranchised, 2.2 million of them are black citizens.<sup>107</sup> A prison record can dog ex-convicts for life, and as almost all employment applications include questions about felony convictions, job opportunities are limited for those who have served time. Ex-cons face wide ranging discrimination, as described by Alexander:

“Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” pp. 703, 706, 734.

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/felony-disenfranchisement-a-primer>

<sup>108</sup> Alexander, p.2.

Alexander links post-1960s black criminality to a historical cycle of legalized racial control, beginning with slavery, then transitioning to Jim Crow segregation. As segregation laws crumbled under the weight of the Civil Rights Movement, Alexander locates the seeds of a new form of race control in the calls by white conservatives for restoration of law and order. They associated lawlessness and rising crime rates with mass protests and civil disobedience campaigns. Scrubbed of any explicit reference to race, the language of “law and order” became a white mantra that disguised its true intent—to use criminal codes to subjugate minorities and reinforce a status quo of white privilege. Today, “getting tough on crime” is viable political rhetoric, and in the early 1970s it even appealed to black activists in Harlem concerned about the security of their neighborhoods. This was used as proof that new and highly punitive measures against drug-related offenders carried no hidden racial bias. But the result of so-called crackdowns on crime, as in New York when Governor Nelson Rockefeller passed a series of tough drug laws, was the criminalization of the black urban poor. Their numbers soared in New York prisons, and elsewhere as other states followed suit.<sup>109</sup> Ten years later, President Ronald Reagan’s “War on Drugs” initiative escalated arrests in inner-city ghettos, wracked by poverty because of a lack of jobs, and riddled with drug addiction in the form of crack-cocaine. For state and local police agencies, the War on Drugs translated into a bonanza of federal dollars as long as arrest quotas demonstrated tangible results and money well spent. For their part, state legislatures passed mandatory sentencing guidelines that imposed long jail times even for first time, nonviolent offenders. Justice Bureau statistics tell the story: in 1970, there were 322,300

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<sup>109</sup> Alexander, pp. 40-42; Thompson, pp. 707-08. In the same discussion, Thompson cites studies dating to the Progressive Era that tried to link blackness with criminality, and justified greater police scrutiny of black neighborhoods.

adult arrests for drug violations; in 2000, adult arrests reached 1,376,600.<sup>110</sup> Courts meted out stiffer penalties for crack-cocaine related crimes—dominant among urban black populations—than the powder-cocaine variety, more common among white users. Combined with intense policing of inner-cities, the result was that poor black Americans were arrested in disproportionate numbers to whites, and served significantly longer sentences.<sup>111</sup>

The media played a role in the incarceration frenzy. To boost sagging viewership, local news outlets across the country adopted an “if it bleeds it leads” mantra to capture audiences. This created the popular perception that crime was a major public issue—by 1994, 40% of Americans cited crime as the number one problem in society, a whopping 35% increase over the prior decade. Legislators responded to public opinion with tougher sentencing guidelines and building more prisons. Ironically, the national crime rate actually dropped by five percent in the period between 1990-1994.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, a study by the Sentencing Project shows that crime reporting overwhelmingly characterized African American men as perpetrators, and whites as the victims. Racially biased crime reporting calcified the link between crime and blackness in the popular imagination, reduced empathy for black victims of crime, and created demand for harsher punitive measures by whites. In addition, the report notes:

“Crime policies that disproportionately target people of color can increase crime rates by concentrating the effects of criminal labeling and collateral consequences on racial minorities and by fostering a sense of legal immunity among whites.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> “Drugs and Crime Facts,” Bureau of Justice Statistics Report. NCJ 165148, pp. 61–62. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs. Washington, D.C., <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/dcf.pdf>.

<sup>111</sup> “War on Drugs,” Alexander, pp. 49-50; for racial disparities in drug sentencing, p. 53.

<sup>112</sup> Patterson, Thomas E., *The American Democracy*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 309-310.

<sup>113</sup> Nazgol Ghandnoosh and Christopher Lewis, “Race and Punishment: Racial Perceptions of Crime and Support For Punitive Policies,” The Sentencing Project, 2014, p. 6 and 24; <http://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Race-and-Punishment.pdf>

The U.S. Department of Health conducted a study on drug abuse, and found that white youth were a third more likely to possess or sale illegal narcotics than any other racial group.<sup>114</sup> The evidence points to a massive miscarriage of racial justice. Its lasting impact on black and poor communities has erected a legal apparatus of race control that can justifiably be described as a “new Jim Crow.”

The Arkansas and Louisiana prison systems are microcosms of the national story. According to a state published fact sheet, Louisiana incarcerates 35,000 people, 66% of them African Americans, doubling the 32.6% of African Americans in that state’s general population. The Angola State Penitentiary is the largest single penitentiary by population in the United States, housing approximately 6,000 inmates, 75% of them African Americans.<sup>115</sup>

Arkansas is worse. While African Americans make up 16% of the general population, that percentage is nearly tripled behind bars, where black prisoners are 44% of the population. In Little Rock, 2014 crime statistics show that 80% of drug related arrests were black men, despite the fact that they only make up about 40% of the city’s population. In the years 2008-2013, Arkansas’s incarceration rate jumped 17%, the highest in the nation, despite no rise in population and an actual drop in violent crime.<sup>116</sup> The Department of Corrections responded to a gruesome murder committed by a parolee by revoking the paroles of over 4,000 Arkansans, sending them back into jails and prisons that did not have room for them. This kind of reactionary policy making has created an incarceration crisis for Arkansas, already with an inmate population of 19,000, it is projected to hit 25,000 in a handful of years. Overcrowded conditions exacerbate

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<sup>114</sup> U.S. Department of Health, *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, 1999* (Washington, DC: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies, 2000), table G, p. 71; [www.samhsa.gov/statistics/statistics.html](http://www.samhsa.gov/statistics/statistics.html).

<sup>115</sup> Fact Sheet, Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, Sept. 30, 2017 <http://www.doc.la.gov/media/1/Briefing%20Book/Oct%2017/demographic.oct.17.pdf>; for general population statistics, United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts-Louisiana, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/LA>.

<sup>116</sup> <http://www.seedsofliberation.org/arkansas-incarceration-crisis/>

other problems, such as inadequate healthcare and physical abuse, including charges of rape, plaguing Arkansas prisons.<sup>117</sup>

One question for this dissertation is whether African American religious communities, particularly those affiliated with Islam, are complacent in the face of blatant discrimination in policing and sentencing, or willing to confront the unjust carceral states of Arkansas and Louisiana. Various manifestations of African American religion have been catalysts for social reform. Black Muslims in American prisons won legal recognition of their religion, and the right to practice it, but those struggles were carried out by rank-and-file converts without aid, or even encouragement, from leadership. This suggests that African American Islam is not, by default, an engine of protest for the sake of reforming institutional behavior. As an important expression of black religiousness, the activities of black Muslims can be situated within the larger framework of African American religion, shaped by a history of white prejudice and social subordination. Much of the historiography of black American religion centers on a problem first articulated by Karl Marx in 1863—is religion an agent of oppression by providing an other-worldly orientation that pacifies those subordinated; or, is it a liberating ideology that acts as a force for social justice.<sup>118</sup> The moral leadership, organization, and emotional commitment of black church-goers during the Civil Rights era seems to suggest the later, but that was an exceptional period in American history. No similar movement has emerged to oppose the new crisis of black mass incarceration. To be fair, Jim Crow conditions persisted throughout most of the South for sixty years before seriously challenged. During that period, did religion merely divert, distract, comfort, and entertain African Americans?

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<sup>117</sup> <sup>117</sup> Millar, Linidsey, “Arkansas’s prison population, and related expense, is exploding—Will tough-on-crime conservatives truly embrace reform?” *Arkansas Times* (Little Rock, AR), July 23, 2011, p.1.

<sup>118</sup> See Chapter 1; and, Marable, Manning, “Religion and Black Protest Thought in African American History,” in *African American Religious Studies*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989, p. 333.

Michelle Alexander is pessimistic about the black church's ability to confront the modern crisis. In the drive to achieve respectability, middle class congregations and ministers have constructed an image of the black church as a refuge for good, law-abiding citizens. Though churches extend a helping hand to those less fortunate, pulpits are often the source of messages about self-responsibility. Thus, law-breaking is a failure to take responsibility, for self and family. The status of ex-con goes against the grain of "upstanding citizen." It carries a stigma of low class, the families of former prisoners are often ashamed of them (and of themselves), and churches appear particularly unwelcoming to their presence. For Alexander, calls for "self-responsibility" can blind people to social injustices and hinder meaningful responses.<sup>119</sup>

Appeals to black self-responsibility have a long tradition in American history. Frederick Douglass encouraged African Americans to take up arms and fight for their freedoms, just as he pressured President Lincoln to allow black soldiers into the Union army. Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute promoted economic black self-determination and education; and of course, Marcus Garvey combined themes of black nationalism, pride, and self-improvement. Prominent journalist, and biographer of Thurgood Marshall, Juan Williams follows in this tradition with his book, *Enough*, which accuses black Americans of squandering the gains made during the civil rights era. He blames failed leadership and chimerical movements (reparations for slavery) for impeding overall black progress. He diagnoses skyrocketing crime as a result of crack related violence, turning urban black neighborhoods into warzones.<sup>120</sup> The whole book is a scathing rebuke of those who blame white people and American institutions for problems facing black communities. Though argued well, *Enough* is

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<sup>119</sup> Alexander, pp. 166-67.

<sup>120</sup> Williams, Juan, *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America—and What We Can Do About It*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006, pp. 106-116.

not as convincing as Alexander's thesis, but still falls within a spectrum of well-thought responses to deep and complex problems. He scoffs at the movement to pressure the U.S. government for reparations for slavery as illusory and diverting, a twist on the Marxian critique of religion.

As already stated, self-responsibility is a constant theme in black Islamic ministry. Imam Abdullah Ameen, an Arkansas prison chaplain, emphasizes Islamic theology as an enabler for rehabilitation, and the possibilities of societal reform. When asked if Islam speaks to the injustice of racially discriminatory penal practices, he replied that Islam encourages creative engagement with the world to promote peace. "We have a concept called *ajeelah*—it means that nothing happens by accident. Muslims are not just totally embraced by God's love, but also by God's plan. Allah will sort things out on Judgment Day, but until then, we have to work to bring about peace on earth. Another Islamic concept is *waleeyah*—to protect. We have an obligation to protect one another, in that we are all custodians of the Muslim community. But, if the community is in danger, from evil within or external forces, there is also *jihad*. You know, I hate using that word, because it is so misunderstood. At heart, it's an obligation to keep one's self, and one's community, pure, free from vice and corruption. What you're talking about—a broken system that unfairly jails brothers and sisters—that could be the basis for a *jihad*, to restore justice. We're just not there yet." Minister Ameen believes the potential for Islamic agitation exists, but there is neither a felt urgency, nor an organization, poised for such a task.<sup>121</sup>

Chaplain Yusuf Muhammad of the Angola state prison replied to the same question with less of an emphasis on Islamic theology. "Wait. Just wait until you come with me inside, and see what we're up against. Maybe we can't see the forest for the trees, but it is a day-to-day

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<sup>121</sup> From personal interviews with the author.

struggle. I don't have time to tackle the larger issues. I'm a minister to over 250 inmates. And while *clearly* there's a problem with sentencing, a lot of the trouble that these guys get into are caused by their own stupid decisions, and they want to shift the blame, but I don't let them. I have to talk about self-responsibility because these guys, for the most part, have no sense for that. They want to blame this, that, or the other. So for me, it's about what's going to get through to *them*." Yusuf and other ministers understand that there is a larger problem afoot, but feel overwhelmed given their relatively small numbers, and somewhat resigned.

Aid from emigrant Muslim communities is not forthcoming. As already discussed, divisions in race, class, and ethnicity prevent the formation of a uniquely Islamic political force against oppression. Minister Ameen adds that there is also a difference in priorities. According to him, "They don't often see our problems as their problems." Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Arabs and immigrants from majority-Muslim countries have been fending off perceptions of Islam as an inherently anti-American and violent religion. They have focused on educating the public to ward off these ugly, and untrue, stereotypes. As a black Muslim resident of New Medinah, Mississippi put it, "They only come to us when white folks whip them upside the head. We have a history of dealing with discrimination and abuse. We got the answer!"<sup>122</sup> It may be that the Muslim followers of W. D. Mohammed have been so diluted as a population that they are in perpetual survival mode. The vast majority of prison converts will never join free world society, adding fuel to the idea that the *umma* gathering behind bars is set apart from the mainstream. Plus, they are still working to shed a leftover stigma from the NOI and its racial policies.

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<sup>122</sup> Washingtonpost.com, "In Mississippi, aging Muslim community worries about its future; The Nation of Islam's descendants face shifting demographics in today's Muslim America," by Abigail Hauslohner, July 19, 2017. [www.washingtonpost.com/national/in-mississippi-aging-muslim-community-worries-about-its-future/2017/07/19/9b609662-6346-11e7-8adc-fea80e32bf47\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/in-mississippi-aging-muslim-community-worries-about-its-future/2017/07/19/9b609662-6346-11e7-8adc-fea80e32bf47_story.html)



This chapter provides a small sampling of legal suits initiated by black Muslim prisoners incarcerated in Arkansas and Louisiana. Nationwide, litigation is ongoing in dozens of suits related to religious and Muslim rights for those behind bars. Taken as a whole, some appear petty, and the occasional victories small compared to the monumental problems of discrimination that African Americans face when tangled up in America's justice system. However, in the day-to-day lives of Muslim inmates, many of whom will never step outside the confines of a maximum security facility, each legal victory is significant, as it confers a tiny measure of freedom to feel more whole and human. In Book 2 of Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), the author explores how black religion helped perpetuate a pattern of accommodation and resistance by slaves in response to the paternalistic attitudes of their white masters. For the slaves, religion served as a means for ordering their world, and a source of self-identification apart from that imposed by white southerners. Out of fear that religion could be a unifying and insurrectionist force among slaves, white masters tried to use Christianity as a tool to control slaves by emphasizing messages of submission. It did not work. Though armed revolt was rare, slaves molded Christianity into a meaningful religion for them, a spiritual ground of hope for actual liberation.

With modification, Genovese's model can be applied to imprisoned African American Muslims. The legal victories that expand their rights also serve to better accommodate them to their confined, regimented, and supervised circumstances. Despite hard labor, brutal guards, bad food, and fatally inadequate healthcare, violent confrontations involving black Muslims are relatively rare, and they are often described as model inmates, a stable element in the carceral community. Prison wardens such as Burl Cain (retired in 2015) of the Angola Penitentiary viewed religion as a tool of pacification and control. His philosophy of prison governance

recalls the words of fictional warden Samuel Norton from the movie *Shawshank Redemption*: “I believe in two things—discipline and the Bible. Here you’ll receive both.” Cain authorized the Baptist Theological Seminary of New Orleans, Louisiana, to open a seminary and chapel on the prison grounds, and dispensed favors and privileges to prisoners who graduated as evangelical ministers. He cited religion as the prison’s primary weapon for promoting peaceful relations among prisoners and staff, and mitigating violence behind bars.<sup>123</sup> While Muslim inmates do not have access to similar facilities, those that I interviewed derived satisfaction from not walking in lockstep with the warden’s emphasis on Christian rehabilitation. Their Islamic identities were a source of pride, in that, as opposed to submitting to authorities, they submitted to God. It is their words to which I dedicate the next chapter.

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<sup>123</sup> Goldberg, Jeffrey, “The End of the Line: Rehabilitation and Reform in Angola Penitentiary, *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2015; [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/a-look-inside-angola-prison/404377/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/a-look-inside-angola-prison/404377/); and, Katie Rose Quandt and James Ridgeway, “Cruel and Unusual Healthcare: At Angola prison, getting sick can be a death sentence,” *In These Times*, Dec. 2016, Vol. 20, No. 12, p. 24.

## Chapter 5: The Prison Narratives

Despite the fact that my father retired as a counselor and social worker for the Arkansas Department of Corrections, nothing prepared me for entering a state penitentiary unit. Officials at Angola in St. Francisville, Louisiana, have, over the years, cultivated an image of a model prison through a public relations strategy that includes ticket sales to rodeos (eight weekends each year), and the operation of a museum and gift shop. The hottest selling item is a tee shirt imprinted with, “Angola: A Gated Community.” And though the prison sits on 18,000 acres of tilled cotton fields, what is not advertised is the back-breaking labor—performed predominantly by black prisoners under unbearably hot conditions—required by prison officials. In addition, Louisiana authorities working for the prison and the Attorney General’s office are fending off accusations of fabricating inmate violations of prison rules to justify confinement of some inmates in poorly ventilated, steaming hot isolation cells.<sup>124</sup> Inside the prison, with its guards, locks, and procedures, even as a voluntary visitor, one wants out as soon as you are in. The *Angolite* estimates that 90% of the prisoners will die there, either because of a life sentence, or a lengthy term. Neither the professionalism of the staff, nor the friendliness of the prisoners that I encountered on my two visits, shed the weight of that oppressive reality. However, for the employees (many of whom live on the grounds, with their families) and inmates, it is simply routine.

The importance of faith based rehabilitation is recognized under Louisiana state law: “The Legislature finds and declares that faith based programs offered in state and private correctional institutions and facilities have the potential to facilitate inmate institutional

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<sup>124</sup> Andrew Cohen, At Louisiana’s Most Notorious Prison, a Clash of Testament, *The Atlantic*, Oct. 11, 2013, available at [www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/10/at-louisianas-most-notorious-prison-a-clash-of-testament/280414/](http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/10/at-louisianas-most-notorious-prison-a-clash-of-testament/280414/).

adjustments, to help inmates assume personal responsibility, and to reduce recidivism.”<sup>125</sup> The Louisiana Department of Corrections conducted a study in 2003 that found that the recidivism rate among released inmates who had received religious education while incarcerated was only 30 percent, an 18 percent decrease from the state average.<sup>126</sup> Tasked with determining the threat posed, if any, by radicalized Islamic converts, religious historian Philip Jenkins confirmed the rehabilitative effects of Islam on American prisoners. The stringent restructuring of an Islamic convert’s life—in the way he dresses, eats, worships and socializes—leads to personal reform, and promotes overall prison security by moderating behavior. He writes, “Islam is a major presence in American prisons, and this is a good thing because the Muslim influence encourages people to get their lives together, to get off drink or drugs, to learn self-discipline.”<sup>127</sup>

An important and satisfying part of my dissertation research was gaining a perspective on Black Islam from Muslim inmates through interviews and their contributions to prisoner written and published newsletters. Prisoners of Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana have the distinction of producing the longest-running uncensored prison newsletter in the United States, the *Angolite*, published since 1952. Its coverage of a 1980 execution, including photographs of the severely burned corpse, led Louisiana officials to abandon the electric chair (but not the death penalty). While the “Religion in Prison” section is dominated by the contributions of Angola’s Roman Catholic prisoners (one thousand, on average), it includes a regular subsection for “Students of Islam.” The *Angolite*’s counterpart in Arkansas is called the *Long Line Writer*, published by inmates of the Cummins Prison Unit, located in Grady, in the far southeastern

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<sup>125</sup> Louisiana Revised Statute 15:828.2.

<sup>126</sup> *Prison Faith-Based Education Reduces Rates of Recidivism*, Corrections Education Bulletin, Oct. 29, 2003; see LA Dept. of Public Safety and Corrections, Recidivism in Adult Corrections (Faith Based), available at <http://doc.la.gov/wp-content/uploads/stats/2u.pdf>.

<sup>127</sup> Philip Jenkins, “Islam in America,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2003, p.5; available at [www.fpri.org/www/0404.200307.jenkins.islaminamerica.html](http://www.fpri.org/www/0404.200307.jenkins.islaminamerica.html).

corner of the state.<sup>128</sup> Prisoner interviews required internal review board approvals to visit the respective units. I visited Cummins and Angola twice each, taking four separate trips. Interviews with the imams took place outside of those state penitentiaries. I met with Imam Ameen at the ADC Diagnostic and Intake Unit in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. My initial interview with Imam Yusuf took place at an IHOP in Baton Rouge. The majority of prisoner interviews took place following Friday afternoon prayer services, called *Jumm'a*, which include sermons that act as reminders of the obligations of the faith, as well as opportunities for discussion. Despite the sense of dread that accompanied my visits into these institutions, the services usually struck an optimistic tone. Inmates engaged imams in sophisticated question and answer sessions, with subjects ranging from Islamic views on the death penalty to conceptions of forgiveness. I felt nervous and out of place on my first visit, wondering if any of the inmates would open up to me, and if they would be truthful. My worries were quickly allayed, and particularly on my second visits I felt completely comfortable. I was humbled by their generous spirits, to the point that some treated me as though I was someone important, a diplomat from the outside world. The inmates that I interviewed were each unique, thoughtful, and articulate. I cannot identify a set of characteristics or circumstances that make up a “typical” prisoner. There is no such thing according to *Angolite* editor Kerry Myers:

No, Angola is not some warped fusion of television and Hollywood -Oz, Shawshank Redemption, Cool Hand Luke, or an old gangster film. As titillating as it sounds, sweaty, muscle bound, tattooed and hygienically challenged monsters rattling bars and howling sexual insults... waiting to pounce at the first opportunity, do not populate this prison.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Neither of these publications are available as digital collections. Copies of the *Long Line Writer*—a pun on “long line rider,” the name of guards and trustees that oversaw prison field labor—are collected in the Special Collections of Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas, vertical file ARK COLL-OV HV 8301.c82; copies of the *Angolite* courtesy of Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Natchitoches, microform HV9475 .L22 L63 LACOLL.

<sup>129</sup> Kerry Myers, *Angolite*, editorial, August/Sept., 2003, pp. 1,2.

In their sermons to inmates, imams try to connect Islamic practice with the possibilities of personal rehabilitation. On my first observance of *Jumm'a* service at Angola, Imam Yusuf spoke of the importance of the two Islamic *Eids*, or festivals, in a Muslim's way of life.<sup>130</sup> There is the *Eid al-Fitr*, the "Festival of Fast-Breaking," which celebrates the completion of 29-30 days of fasting by Muslims from before sunrise to the sunset each day of this special month commemorating the Qu'ranic Revelations to the Prophet Muhammad. There is also the *Eid al-Adha*, the "Feast of Sacrifice," which celebrates completion of the *hajj*—the pilgrimage to Mecca, obligatory for all Muslims—and the command of Allah that the Prophet Abraham sacrifice his first son, Isaac.

These observances, explained Yusuf, enhance rehabilitation in a number ways. Through fasting, believers find that they can control their bodily desires and whims of their emotions which often get them into trouble initially. Adherence promotes "self-policing," reducing the need for external controls. Greater chances for success in the free world comes from developing a well-integrated personality. Through observance, Muslims feel themselves to be whole. Their spiritual needs are met by the extra worship and study. Their bodily needs are brought under their control and are fulfilled as prescribed by their Creator. Mentally they become sharper and more alert, as a result of the fast, to the ways in which they can assume a more responsible position in the larger society. Through self-discipline, they learn that bad habits can be broken, addictions can be overcome. The void left when they give up their previous bad habits can be filled by the new good habits they come to practice in Islam. Finally, they learn that fasting is more than refraining from food and drink. In addition, they refrain from the habits of lying,

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<sup>130</sup> Thursday and Friday, June 19 and 20, 2014. *Ramadan* began one week later, Saturday, June 28. My second visit to Angola was on Thursday and Friday, Sept. 18 and 19, 2014. My visits to the Cummins Unit in Arkansas took place on Thursday and Friday, May 23 and 24, 2013 and October 17 and 18, 2013. I formally interviewed 35 prisoners on those four visits.

cheating, slander, gossip, cursing and negative patterns of thought. In other words, they “lose their taste” for those traits of their character which are negative during the month of fasting.

Many of the articles written by Muslim inmates and published in prison newsletters reflect on the difficulties and rewards of self-discipline. Ronnie “Rafiq” Owens (ADC, #88825) wrote,

Moral demands are designed to strengthen the individual’s character, develop his personality, and strengthen his bonds with Allah. Making one’s daily prayers is said to be a difficult thing except for those who have fears of displeasing Allah. If a believer fails to pray, he feels he is falling short of the excellence which Allah requires of him. Constantly fulfilling the obligation of prayer may be hard for some who are confined in a prison such as this, but what will make it easier is turning to Allah with sincere humility and giving complete devotion to Him.<sup>131</sup>

Other articles emphasized taking self-responsibility in explicitly Islamic terms, such as this one:

The role of a person in Islam, is a person that has taken charge of themselves. Taking charge requires being in constant *jihad* (conflict or war within one’s self), to establish the good in their own human make-up, because *jihad* is only the war between good and evil, so that the person should not perceive themselves as criminal or inferior, because God said he was created in the most excellent mold, meaning that he is not inferior, criminal or anything else negative, but that his biggest problem is that he has failed to make *jihad* within himself, and he becomes a victim of the evil influences that produce criminals.<sup>132</sup>

Self-discipline and responsibility strike deep chords in the African American Islamic tradition, but Imam Yusuf believes that it is a particularly crucial message for a population that already shows a predilection for trouble. His sermons do not include the word “jihad,” which he says is a problematic term to throw around in a prison setting. It spooks authorities who associate the concept with violent radicalism in the name of Islam. While holy war can mean defending the faith against attacks by enemies, *jihad* requires the believer to be vigilant against vice within the self and corruption in the community. For those Angolite Muslims who do get another shot at

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<sup>131</sup> Ronnie “Rafiq” Owens, *Long Line Writer*, “What It Means To Be a Muslim,” Arkansas Dept. of Corrections, Vol. X, Ed. 4, April 1989, p. 17.

<sup>132</sup> Johnny Aleem Hasan, *Long Line Writer*, “The Holy Qur’an,” AR Dept. of Corrections, Vol. V, No. 2, Feb., 1983, p. 15.

free world living, Yusuf says that falling back into destructive habits is the most dangerous draw. Once freed, rather than seeking independence through job training and steady employment, many men find shelter and sexual gratification with women. What often results is pregnancy and recidivist behavior that lands the men back behind bars, leaving an expecting woman and possible child without any kind of support. It is a cycle of poverty, broken families, and permanent institutionalization.

National recidivism rates are alarming. Statistics provided by the National Institute of Justice indicate that within three years of release, nearly 68 percent of released prisoners were rearrested; within five years, the number was nearly 77 percent. Over half of released prisoners were rearrested within the first year.<sup>133</sup> And though Islamic ideology places responsibility on the individual, this obscures the real obstacles faced by convicted felons in the free world. They are denied federal housing and welfare benefits, have difficulty getting jobs, and are often the target of police surveillance. In short, ex-cons are relegated to second-class citizenship.

Taking self-responsibility cannot be the only answer in overcoming these hurdles. At the turn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois attacked Booker T. Washington's position on black self-improvement through personal effort in exchange for the dubious acceptance of white Americans at some future time. Washington's philosophy of gradualism accepted anti-black racism as a given, placing the burden of social advancement on the shoulders of African Americans. In contrast, DuBois framed the problems facing black Americans as a national problem, and he believed that all Americans had a role in "righting these great wrongs."<sup>134</sup> More recently, economist and Brown University professor Glenn Loury has called for a nuanced approach to the problem of mass incarceration. He argues that self-responsibility must be

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<sup>133</sup> <https://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/Pages/welcome.aspx>

<sup>134</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Blackfolk*, 1903, New York, Bantam, 1998.



matched by “social responsibility,” meaning that communities should act to reform social conditions that create inducements to crime.

We need to ask whether we as a society have fulfilled our collective responsibility to ensure fair conditions for each person--for each life that might turn out to be our life. We would, in short, recognize a kind of social responsibility, even for the wrongful acts freely chosen by individual persons. I am not arguing that people commit crimes because they have no choices. My point is that responsibility is a matter of ethics, not social science. Society at large is implicated in an individual person's choices because we have acquiesced in--perhaps actively supported, through our taxes votes, words and deeds--social arrangements that work to our benefit and his detriment, and which shape his consciousness and sense of identity in such a way that the choices he makes, which we may condemn, are nevertheless compelling to him.<sup>135</sup>

Convicted felons cycle in and out of the prison system in what sociologist Loïc Wacquant calls a "closed circuit of perpetual marginality," and as such become members of a permanent underclass.<sup>136</sup> Changing the laws to reduce the barriers that former prisoners face when they try to rejoin mainstream society will require a collective effort, including and especially the efforts of faith communities. Islam has within its theological breadth the means to empower believers to challenge systems of injustice as embodied by *zakat*, the Third Pillar of Islam. *Zakat* refers to a Muslim's obligation to tithe for the benefit of the poor, but it also implies--along with the social gospel of Christianity--a responsibility to defend the weak and vulnerable from oppression and injustice.

At a Friday *Jumm'a* in Cummins Prison, conducted by Imam Abdullah Ameen, the subject of the sermon was *zakat*. As I took notes, I was curious as to whether *zakat* could be the basis for a radical understanding of economic and political justice. What follows is a summary of Ameen's remarks. He acknowledged that it was often difficult for Muslim prisoners to

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<sup>135</sup> Glenn Loury, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values*, MIT Press, Boston, 2008, pp. 34-35.

<sup>136</sup> Loïc Wacquant, "The New Peculiar Institution: On the Prison as Surrogate Ghetto," *Theoretical Criminology* 4, no. 3 (2000), p. 378.

implement *zakat* as a matter of day-to-day practice. And in the free world, many Muslims tended to put selfish desires ahead of the message of Allah. The worthwhile attitude of "saving for a rainy day" becomes simply a pretext not to give anything when it is another person's rainy day. Wealth is tied down in banks, accruing interest, for long periods and useless to the needy. That is not to say that Muslims are not generous in nature, but frequently need to be reminded of what Allah has to say about *Zakat*. Numerous verses of the Quran allow for the accumulation of wealth, but they also note that whatever is spent for the welfare of your community is the Way of Allah. In his final revelation to humanity, Allah said, "If you lend unto Allah a goodly loan, He will increase it manifold."<sup>137</sup>

Though Muslims have the right to possess property, if wealth is not employed "In the Way of Allah" it can render human beings into misfits in the eyes of God. To be inconsiderate of others is alien to the spirit of Al-Islam. *Zakat* is a reminder to all Muslims of the fact they have a social responsibility and a religious obligation to the poor. The Quran calls for the redistribution of wealth as a means of purifying the money and sanctifying the poor who receive it.<sup>138</sup> Ameen joked that it was a way of "laundering" money for the purposes of Allah. This purification of wealth forbids money to be honored, withheld from the poor, or confined to only the rich. According to Ameen, following the commandments of Allah could solve global problems rooted in economic disparities.

In his conclusion, Ameen said that those who practice *zakat* regularly will not only reap rewards in the next life, but will develop a socially conscious mind. In addition to awareness of social and economic injustices, Allah requires believers to act to alleviate unjust conditions. In other words, to answer my original question, it appears that Islam offers a formula for radical

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<sup>137</sup> Quran, al-Baqarah 2:245. English Translation, by Talal Itani, published by ClearQuran, 2015.

<sup>138</sup> Quran, al-Hajj 22:37.

action on behalf of the poor and dispossessed. However, for many Muslim inmates, faith is a vehicle for simply getting by on a daily basis.

In an interview with Jackie Mahdee Blue, a converted Islamic inmate at Cummins (ADC #71875), he spoke of the difficulties of incorporating *zakat* into one's daily routine. "We're in the trenches, you know. The Imam is in the trenches with us. We're trying to survive, and he's trying to help us survive. We come to Allah because we are at a total loss. Drugs, alcohol, homelessness, violence—there are as many stories as there are brothers in this room. And *zakat* is hard because we have nothing to give one another but our stories, and our shared pain. And Imam, Peace Be Unto Him, he's a gift from god, because he understands, and says that our *zakat* is to support one another. We needed that support 'out there,' my friends and family need that support more than ever today." Mahdee knows that the religious obligation to support the poor is shared by Muslims and Christians, and feels as though it is a neglected obligation by too many of both faiths. "We're left to ourselves," he said, "and it's not enough."

From the interview with Jackie Mahdee Blue:

In here, those of us who are sincere in our faith practice *zakat* through worship, prayer, and showing basic generosity to everyone. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peace makers." Well, we try to live that and be that in here. We recognize our shortcomings and what we've done wrong, and that helps us practice tolerance for others. We receive instructions from the Imam, and we are obedient to that, and that submission will help us down the road in making decisions if any of us get another chance. Our gifts are our faith and obedience. Allah willing, if I get another shot at a free life, I'm not going to ask for a handout, but for a helping hand. This nation's churches and government must begin to find ways to create jobs for the poor. Every church in the United States, and I'm talking about mosques too, should consider starting some sort of business to employ those who otherwise would not have jobs. Jobs that don't screen ex-cons to keep them out. Our ministers need to speak truthfully to their congregations about wasteful living, using a part of what they have to help those less fortunate. If everyone did their part, it wouldn't be asking a lot. From white Christians especially. I know if I get out I would practice *zakat* by working on the problems that people like me face every day—problems plain to see in front of your eyes. *Zakat* is not complicated to understand, nor is it a difficult thing for free people to put into practice. All you need is a little compassion for your fellow man who is less fortunate, regardless of race.

*Go back to that phrase, 'in the trenches.' Is there a war? Are you at war?*

I don't know if I would use the word "war"—we *are* on the frontlines of a major problem centered on police and court practices. We're in the trenches, but we can't afford to keep our heads down. We are just so limited on what we can do from here. We can see, we can see a lot, but we need help from folks like you. Get the word out, because either no one knows, or no one is listening.<sup>139</sup>

By his own admission, Mahdee's chances of ministering to the outside world are slim. He is serving a mandatory life sentence for second-degree murder, but religious rehabilitation offers a sliver of hope that keeps him going every day. As with many religious converts behind bars, Mahdee's faith serves as a day to day coping mechanism, as well as a ground of hope for eventual liberation.

The obligation of *zakat* to act on behalf of the poor speaks to Islam's emphasis on ethical behavior. Prisoner interviews revealed a common criticism of Christianity—that it is a religion of belief and no action. They described Islam as a religion of resistance and action, involving both self and community. *Resistance* implies a rejection of internalized oppression, feelings of powerlessness, and destructive actions; *action* conforming with Islamic teaching is demanded to create the moral self and society. According to Angola convert Al-Amin Abdulzul (formerly Greg Spencer), the prescriptions of Islam offer a clear path to a righteous life and a sense of personal worth, and was a better alternative for him than Christianity. "The imams here present Islam as a religion that brings clarity," said Al-Amin, "they give detailed explanations on how to deal with life's day to day struggles. It is a religion that offers a practical and sensible guide for daily living, and it has taught me physical and moral discipline. As the Imam preaches, there is no difference between the word of Allah and the work of Allah."

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<sup>139</sup> From an interview conducted May 24, 2013.

Sitting next to Al-Amin and nodding his head is Hiram James Muhammad, who said, “I agree with Brother Amin. I’m not going to get into Islam versus Christianity and all that. I have Christian brothers that I love. But my faith gives me hope, and it saved me. Saved me from a hell of my own making.”

*Do you have hopes of getting out?*

“Hope? No. I think about it. Maybe fantasize about it. I have lots of thoughts. I’m young (48), but I think I’m going to die here, behind these walls. I have resentments about that. Hatreds, sometimes against whites, that creep up on me. But, the thing with Islam is, everybody has thoughts. We have thoughts of revenge. We miss women, you know. Impure thoughts that bring shame. But Allah doesn’t care about that. The Quran teaches us that our actions, as we do not as we think, determines our standing with Allah in the end. If I die here, I’m going to die a man. I have Allah to thank for that. I thank Allah for sending me Imam Yusuf to show me that I can be a man again.” Hiram smiled as he received a hug from Al-Amin. “I need my brothers, too.”<sup>140</sup>

Muslim contributions to the “Students of Islam” section of the *Angolite* reflect on Islam’s concern for ethics as a defining trait of the religion. Amin Omar Sharit submitted the following lesson:

The Prophet Mohammad eloquently explained the truth of religion and the principles and decrees it carries to mankind. In Islam you will find “Ethics.” Ethics constitute the positive side of Islam. They are the most important of all its objectives and principles which lead to “righteousness” (goodness). This was the core of the Prophet’s call and the subject matter of his religious commands and prohibitions. In Allah’s address to His Holy Prophet the following is noted: “We sent thee not but as a mercy for all creatures.” There is no doubt that Allah’s mercy requires man’s morals to become good, and his relations with other people improve. This is the meaning contained in this Quranic verse: “For the mercy of God is always near to those who do good.” The doers of good are those people whose hearts have been opened by God to goodness, and who have been guided on to the proper path. This, in fact, is the objective of the message of Islam—to create a good man in a good society. A man can never become good unless his material and moral powers are counter-balanced. He must also build for himself a personality, and exercise influence on

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<sup>140</sup> From interviews conducted June 20, 2014.

the society in which he lives. These things can only be accomplished by developing a good reputation, performing useful work, and leaving traces of himself on all aspect of his life.<sup>141</sup>

A typical question that I posed to inmates was, “What does Islam do for you?” The responses often highlighted the ethical values and practical benefits of the religion, as with William Mukhtar Muhammad, a New Orleans native serving a life sentence at Angola: “I always felt like I was trying to achieve equality in a society that frankly wasn’t my own. Islam taught me that I need to be part of something larger—to elevate my seeing and thinking—and begin acting to re-establish an altogether new society cast in the infinite love of Allah. Islam is the source of true equality and justice. The Quran offers the building blocks for a truly moral civilization, a peaceful civilization made possible through submission to Allah. Through Islam I know how to direct my efforts, and in unity we can overcome obstacles—racism, imprisonment, depression—you name it.”

*You mean unity among all Muslims?*

“Well, yes. I believe Islam has a universal appeal. But, look at my circumstances, look at who I am, and look at everyone in this room. I am not a member of the Nation. As far as I know, no one in this room is, and certainly the Imam lets his feelings known about the Fruit when asked. But no one here would deny that Elijah Muhammad had an important message in his time, has an important role in black history and the Islamic religion as we know it in this country. Black Muslims had to move beyond the teachings of the Honorable Elijah, but I still think Islam has a particular appeal to black Americans because of our history in this country, and our complicated relationship with Christianity. Islam gives us a plan to move forward. We don’t want to leave out our Christian brothers and sisters, but as a Muslim I educated myself about our history, and I

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<sup>141</sup> Amin Omar Sharit, “The Plants and Fruits of Islam and Yourself,” *Angolite*, “Religion in Prison” section, 2005, pp. 17-18; Quranic quotes are from sūrat I-anbiyāa 21:107 and sūrat I-a’rāf 7:56, respectively.

get so much strength and pride in that, and I know that we can continue to progress in the spirit of Allah, Blessed Be His Name.”

Connecting the religion of Islam with pride in one’s racial identity is, of course, a strong feeling among most African American converts. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed never divorced the emergence of Islam in the United States from its African American context. He interprets the role of Islam as a minority religion in the United States from a historical perspective. He compares Muslims in the U.S. with religious minorities living under early Islamic rule in the Middle East. In the early years of Islamic growth across the Arabian peninsula, Christian and Jewish minorities were tolerated as long as they contributed to the general social welfare through a tax (*jizyah*). Muslims in the U.S. should be able to practice freely, as well as contribute to the needs and prosperity of the state.<sup>142</sup>

Returning to my interview with Mr. Mukhtar Muhammad, I asked, “Does your sentence in Angola conflict with your aspirations? Do you see them as realistic?”

“Allah is merciful. As for the state of Louisiana, we’ll see.” I pressed him. “Religion behind bars,” he continued, “has got to mean something in here, and out there. And frankly, the way OUT THERE. After all this. The Quran says that what we do matters to Allah. I have the fear of god in me. I’ve messed up enough, and have a lot to make up for. Allah is helping me, and I have to keep hoping. Imam, he doesn’t sugarcoat his sermons. He doesn’t come in here and say, ‘DO THIS and you’ll get out.’ There are no guarantees, that’s not what we signed up for, most of us anyway.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Warith Deen Mohammed, *Focus on Al-Islam: A Series of Interviews with Imam W. Deen Mohammed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*, Zakat Publications, Chicago, 1988, p. 48.

<sup>143</sup> Interview took place on September 19, 2014.

Islamic prisoners do not ignore the promise of heavenly rewards for good deeds done in life. Islam posits that there will be an end time in which one's deeds in life are accounted for, and Allah will be the final judge, as warned in this submission to the *Long Line Writer*:

A Muslim believes in a "Day of Judgment." Although we are being judged now as we live our daily lives (and rewarded or punished), a FINAL judgment day is coming. Full judgment with full punishment or full blessings will not come until this final time...the Day of Judgment, when all confusion will be cleared up. Each individual, as the Quran says, "Will be rewarded in full for everything he or she has done; though it be only an atom's weight, whether it was good or bad, though it was only an atom's weight, thee shall be rewarded in full." There is coming a time when the human being will be free to enjoy the fullness of his aspirations; as long as those aspirations are in accord with the Will of Allah.<sup>144</sup>

Apocalyptic hopes found in religious systems reinforce criticisms of religion as an opiate and other-worldly distraction. Though Islam acts as a coping mechanism for its inmate adherents, its ethical concerns may still be a motivator for real-world reform. Islamic belief and practice is one of unified purpose with Allah's plan, including Final Judgment, ultimately an evaluation of the Quranically prescribed ethical life. Furthermore, among prisoners, I found concerns about the afterlife to be marginal relative to other topics. They were usually more interested in the possibilities of seeing life, not in the Beyond, but beyond the walls of Angola. To be fair, death row inmates were not among the pool of prisoners that I interviewed. That could be a part of a future expansion of my dissertation.

What is the ethical life of a Muslim? I offer this answer from an interview with Cummins inmate Zahir S. Mahdi (formerly Al Higgins): "First of all, the Muslim learns from his or her mistakes. We don't ignore them, we try to correct them, and ask Allah for forgiveness. In all things we strive for knowledge. Morality for us is a matter of practice. As Muslims, we believe that peace comes from submission to God. That does not mean that we are to be passive

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<sup>144</sup> Owens, "What It Means to Be a Muslim," *LLW*, AR Dept. of Corrections, Vol. X, no. 4, 1989, pp. 18-20.



or indifferent. On the contrary, the Muslim moral code calls on us to be aggressive against corruption in any form, and protective of the weak and needy. If a Muslim is wronged, he has an obligation to do one of two things: he can resist and retaliate, eye for an eye, or he may forgive and allow Allah's justice to be satisfactory. The Muslim has no obligation to "turn the other cheek." It is impossible to survive like that, especially in here. When a Muslim retaliates against a wrong, that is not a violation of law, that is standing up for oneself and others. We can be model inmates and model citizens—that doesn't mean we're sleepwalking.

We don't withdraw from the world. Isolation is not an option. Tackling the daily struggles is important, but politics is not off limits. We know we can't vote, but that doesn't mean we can't write. And we have Constitutional protections that other prisoners fought for. We know it, and honor it. We expect justice to be done, and when it's not, Allah calls on us to right the wrong. We have to be Allah's agents for justice.

What we desire above all else is perfection. By following the customs, morals, and ethics prescribed by Islam, we can imagine a perfect society of ethical human beings who balance devotion, practice, and spiritual instruction towards realizing Allah's plan. A Muslim's race in life is not a race for material benefits, riches, or power, but a race for the attainment of good and the spread of good. That's why we talk about Islam any chance we get, including to you. I spent a large part of my boyhood in Florida, and had very little exposure to Islam—just here and there. It took coming here to discover the words of the Prophet Muhammad. Others need to see the Truth through Islam and the Holy Quran, before they end up here. That's part of the struggle. Are you persuaded yet?"<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> From an interview conducted on May 23, 2013.

*Struggle* probably defines the lives of most people who find themselves behind bars. For Islamic inmates, “struggle” is an obligation of the faith, but at times frustration seeped through in the words that I heard and read. For example, here is an excerpt of a poem submitted by Al-Kareem Amir to the LLW:

During this time of war  
I am backed against a wall  
Seemingly bricked of decisions  
Many of which I recall  
Being of the past.  
Should it be astounding  
Or confusing to me  
How they contrast—No!  
For if or when time made  
Things become bewildering  
I address them  
With the utmost of simplicity  
Henceforth, against this wall  
I shall continue to stand  
In opposition to earthly things  
For within their boundaries  
Man becomes as an offspring<sup>146</sup>

At times, the *Angolite* published letters to the editor written by Muslim prisoners, expressing outrage, as this one submitted by Ibrahim Ervin Lacy:

Louisiana is in a sad state. Its politicians are blatantly discriminatory and uncaring, its economy is closed to people of color, and its Christians are turning a blind eye to poverty. And take a close look at the conditions of the prisons. We need to take action before it is too late. No one is paying attention.<sup>147</sup>

And, in a rare anti-Christian outburst during an interview with an Angola convert named John Rahaman, I recorded this: “Looking back, I can’t believe I swallowed all that Christian dogma. That after I die, everything will be all right. That I should turn the other cheek with every slap. That I should allow my manhood to be stolen because that is how things are. Those teachings are

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<sup>146</sup> Al-Kareem Amir, “Discretion,” *LLW*, Poet’s Corner, Vol. IV, no. 2, 1983, p. 8.

<sup>147</sup> Ibrahim Ervin Lacy, *Angolite*, Letters to the Editor, p. 3, May/June, 2002.

immoral, and criminal. And it's all I ever heard coming from the mouths of Christians. And when I dwell on it, it still gets to me. The hypocrisy practiced by its loudest preachers is astounding. I came to Islam because I found the authenticity of its teachers and the morality of its message to be liberating, even in here."<sup>148</sup>

Imam Yusuf: "It's okay to get angry. I get angry. Not in front of them (we are interviewing in the prison chapel where several of the inmates are still gathered). And think about them, all of them with life sentences, all of them black. Wilbert Rideau said that a life sentence *is* a death penalty, just slowly carried out.<sup>149</sup> With all that time, you're going to get angry and look for ways to lash out. John [Rahaman] knows that Christianity isn't why he's in here. The trick is to not let it gnaw at you. Anger, self-pity, inadequacy, I see it all. Allah knows us, we're human. But hopefully, through sincere conviction, Islam can give them something bigger than themselves to believe in, to not be so egotistical, and to feel like an important part of a community. If you let the anger fester, it leads to types of behavior that are antithetical to a Muslim."<sup>150</sup>

Most of the prisoners I spoke with did not see their embrace of Islam as an indictment against, or rejection of, Christianity. Rather, they saw Islam as a better alternative. Basim Salaam, a Cummins inmate, said that in Islam, he found "freedom, justice, and equality." And, as an African American, he believes that Islam offers an antidote to internalized racism in a community that dispels notions of isolation and inferiority.<sup>151</sup> Tracy Malik Paterson (Cummins) told me, "What won me over to the Imam's message was, regardless of what got me in here, of

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<sup>148</sup> From an interview conducted Sept. 18, 2014.

<sup>149</sup> Wilbert Rideau is the award winning, African American editor of the *Angolite*, freed in 2005 after serving 44 years of a life sentence.

<sup>150</sup> Interview, Sept. 19.

<sup>151</sup> Interview, Oct. 13, 2013.

the things I've done, if you come in here and act like a man, all of that is forgotten."<sup>152</sup> Anthony Akeem (Angola) discovered a new sense of self, a sense of purpose, through Islam's theology, codes of conduct, and ethical directives. Becoming a Muslim transformed his whole life.<sup>153</sup>

Self-esteem, personal acceptance, forgiveness, finding a total way of life—these are some of the products of Islamization according to the three dozen converts I spoke with. Even in prison, one contributor the *Angolite* wrote,

I am immeasurably blessed, since the Prophet Muhammad opened my eyes to the truth; when I say blessed, I mean mentally and physically, not in the material wealth of this world, for that is not essential, nor will it long endure."<sup>154</sup>

Again and again my expectations were subverted by Muslim inmates who possessed both a grim acceptance of their incarceration along with an inner joy that spilled out during interviews with me. I was surprised by how often there was laughter during *Jumm'a* sermons, as the imams often used humor to connect with their audiences. And though the imams never provided false hope to their congregants, the prisoners I spoke with cherished the spiritual liberation of Islam while not abandoning hope for physical liberation in the future. A very common refrain I often heard was, "Don't serve time; let time serve you."

Unfortunately, the positive spirit of the prisoners inside is doing very little to transform the American penal system. The ministers of Islam working "in the trenches" will be keeping busy for the foreseeable future. Though the Louisiana prison population declined by 11 percent since 2012, a true solution to the problem of black mass incarceration includes ending the decades-long War on Drugs, as well as a reduction in sentences for serious crimes. The Sentencing Project advocates for a radical turn towards providing treatment for people convicted

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<sup>152</sup> Interview, Oct. 14, 2013.

<sup>153</sup> Interview, Sept. 18.

<sup>154</sup> Abdul Faruq, "Blessings of Allah," *Angolite*, "Religion in Prison" section, May/June, 2007, p.21.

of drug violations, rather than incarceration, especially in confronting the current national opioid crisis. In addition, it recommends scaling back life sentences, particularly by releasing prisoners who have “aged out” and are no longer a threat to public safety. Preventative measures include health insurance for drug treatment, and quality early education programs for at-risk neighborhoods.<sup>155</sup>

Islamic communities in Louisiana and Arkansas cooperate with state officials to aid released prisoners in their transition to the free world. But the obstacles to reintegration into mainstream American society are significant, and the cards are stacked against success in terms of meaningful employment, or even getting an education. Under President Bill Clinton, convicted felons became ineligible for Pell Grant funds. Denial of jobs and educational opportunities are primers for the ghetto-to-prison pipeline that keeps pumping black men into, and back into, our nation’s prisons.

Black Muslim prisoners agitated successfully to have their Constitutional rights protected under the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of religion, and the Eighth Amendments protections against cruel punishment. These victories aided all prisoners, regardless of religion, and shattered the notion that they were “slaves of the state.” But that reforming fire has not addressed the underlying causes of mass incarceration, and the racial injustices of American policing and sentencing guidelines. The skyrocketing rise in prison populations—600 percent between 1973 and 2009—was a result of political conditions, not a reflection of rising crime rates.<sup>156</sup> This begs to have the political winds challenged, especially by the people most affected.

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<sup>155</sup> Nazgol Ghandnoosh, “Can We Wait 75 Years to Cut the Prison Population in Half?” *The Sentencing Project*, Policy Brief, March, 2018, pp. 1-4; available at [www.sentencingproject.org/publications/can-wait-75-years-cut-prison-population-half](http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/can-wait-75-years-cut-prison-population-half).

<sup>156</sup> Ghandnoosh, p. 1.

Though removed from its nationalist roots (for the most part), African American Islam still speaks to the black and poor, in prison and on the streets. The entry of many of Warith Deen Mohammed's followers into a more prosperous middle class means that the economic and social resources exist for mobilization to achieve justice for the black underclass. However, forms of black Islam have an even deeper conservative strain than the black Christian Church. And though the theological implications of *zakat* create a platform for a comprehensive, broad-based movement for social justice, mobilization on such a scale is unlikely absent the emergence of a progressive Islamic movement, with members united with Christian and secular groups for the sake of social justice.

## Conclusion

The history that I have set out to write is really part history and part ethnography as I have tried to weave a story located at the intersections of race, religion, and mass incarceration. The ethnographical aspects of my dissertation derive from dozens of hours of interviews with Islamic prisoners and the imams who work with them, as well as their contributions to prisoner-produced newsletters. The qualitative research methods involved in collecting prison narratives took me inside prison walls where I could get first-hand knowledge of daily life for those living in “ground zero” of the carceral state. Penitentiaries like Cummins and Angola are brick and mortar expressions of a legal confinement system that circumscribes black lives long after they have been released from prison. Would I go back to those institutions? In a flash. There are a lifetime of stories to be collected, and countless others have been lost. For the Muslims that I interviewed, their careful adherence to Islam gave meaning to their daily social experiences. It is not my intention to romanticize. As I listened to prisoners and their recorded interviews, I often checked myself with the thought, *some of these guys are convicted murderers*. I cannot reconcile that with the basic fact of their humanity that came through with every interview.

As history, this dissertation shows that varieties of African American Islam expanded in a limited way into southern states and their prisons, where converts successfully challenged prison policies to have their religious rights protected. I also evaluate the potential for black Muslims to organize themselves against a racially biased penal system that populates prisons with highly disproportionate numbers of minority Americans. These efforts are a continuation of decades of scholarship in African American religion, along with more recent studies into mass incarceration. Earlier writings on African American religion are the seeds of historiographic arguments that will underpin scholarly works for years to come. As summarized in the following pages, my

dissertation draws on a number of these academic debates, which provided models for my thinking and writing. They include the fight over whether religion is a catalyst for defiance and political action (Raboteau, Genovese, Cone, Harding), or a sedative and tool of oppression (Frazier, Gordon, Reed). Though sociologist Emile Durkheim describes the function of religion as essentially accommodationist to a dominant status quo, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that is not always the case. Another dichotomy springs out of the conflict between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois over improvement of the African American condition. Washington's "Tuskegee gradualism" emphasized accommodation, self-help, and economic independence versus DuBois's philosophy of ceaseless agitation for full recognition as Americans. Washington's message of self-help informed the black nationalist rhetoric of Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X. The life and evolving thought of the later presents its own problems. While Malcolm X's fiery nationalism is linked to the origins of the Black Power movement, his later life shows movement towards an international, pan-African, and revolutionary concern for human rights. Then, imperfectly situated in the nationalist camp, or any camp, is Harold Cruse, who called for black cultural, if not political, separatism to stave off the intellectual death to which the white middle class had succumbed.<sup>157</sup> Finally, scholars devoted to revealing the racial prejudice and injustices supporting the carceral state include Glenn Loury and Michelle Alexander, whose works show how black mass incarceration perpetuates a minority underclass, a caste of Untouchables permanently alienated from mainstream society; and Heather Ann Thompson, whose work reveals a historical pattern of identifying blackness with criminality going back to Reconstruction.

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<sup>157</sup> Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, New York Review Books Classics, 1967, 2005.



Bound up with the history of African Americans and their responses to slavery and white oppression is the history of the Black Church, and all scholars of American religion owe a great debt to Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, published forty years ago. It describes the appropriation by slaves of white evangelical Christianity with fragments of African folk traditions to form a hybrid, covert, and subversive form of belief and worship that spoke to their desire for freedom. The adoption of Christianity by the slaves was not merely a survival strategy, but a spiritual vehicle for protest. From the perspective of white masters, Christianity was a tool of control. As Raboteau wrote, "From the very beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, conversion of the slaves to Christianity was viewed by the emerging nations of Western Christendom as a justification for the enslavement of Africans." For the Portuguese Catholics, the submission of African bodies came with the great benefit of saving their souls—delivering to them a higher freedom.<sup>158</sup> White missionaries preached obedience and humility to the slaves, but in secretive worship services held outside the supervision of whites, black preachers exulted the Book of Exodus as a model for God's liberating power. As James Cone noted, black liberation theology—based on the idea that God sided with the oppressed against the oppressor—provided a spiritual ground of hope for a this worldly, and very real, freedom.<sup>159</sup>

Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) also promotes slave religion as a vehicle for resistance that cannot be reduced to *just* a coping mechanism. He found that slaves also acted to extend the socially accepted belief that masters, out of Christian sensibilities, had obligations toward their slaves. They viewed Christianity as a social lubricant

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<sup>158</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, 2004, p. 95.

<sup>159</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1975, 1997.

that could be relied upon to ask for greater freedoms. Of course, this only went so far on the spectrum between “resistance and accommodation.”

Vincent Harding, a participant in the black freedom struggle of the 1960s, wrote a history of the dynamic ways that African Americans fought against enslavement and persecution from the American Revolution to Reconstruction. With *There Is a River*, Harding stated that he wanted to recover lost voices in black American history, and to find meaning in their collective struggle. How is it that a people found the strength to persevere through so much persecution? An important part of the answer was black spirituality and the institutions that gave it expression. During the American Revolution, Connecticut slaves petitioned for their freedom based on Reason and Revelation, the later derived from Biblical teachings and white Protestant doctrines that combined the language of liberty with God’s purposes. Slaves were all too aware of the hypocritical relationship between church teachings and the actual practices of white Christians. The pulpit was usually a platform for defending slavery, and slave conversion was intended as a tool for pacification. Christianizing the slaves was part of a concerted effort to erase any vestiges of their African identity. Knowing this, black Christians still chose to work for freedom from within the church. Addressing this contradiction, Harding writes, “In spite of the many crushing experiences of the slave ships, in spite of the attempts of America to deny them access to their own being, Africans continued to hold the religious experience at the center of their lives. Therefore the struggle in the churches was critical. So when black people moved beyond petitions to seize the time and break the white control over their lives in these religious institutions, they were obviously engaged in radical action on behalf of self-definition and self-determination.”<sup>160</sup> For Harding, the church nurtured the “black river” of struggle both for slaves

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<sup>160</sup> Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle For Freedom In America*, Harcourt Brace and Co., New York, 1981, pp. 43-45.

and free northerners, the latter eventually choosing to worship in independent black denominations.

By criticizing the Christian religion as a tool to pacify ever-increasing numbers of the industrial working class, Karl Marx introduced a thesis that still fuels debates about the function of religion. The thrust of the argument is that religion offers an other-worldly orientation that comforts, distracts, and entertains believers, rather than prompting them to challenge the status quo. Recently, in the column against black religion-as-stimulant is E. Franklin Frazier, who characterizes religion as an opiate in the strongest of terms. He condemns the black church as “having cast an entire shadow over the entire intellectual life of Negroes,” and blames it for keeping black Americans in a backwards state.<sup>161</sup> Eugene Gordon describes black Christians as “religiously enslaved,” choosing to ignore “the very real and very present now for the delirious pleasure of wandering in a vague, remote, and uncertain hereafter.”<sup>162</sup> Adolph Reed blamed Jesse Jackson’s failed 1984 Presidential campaign on the political quietude of black Christians.<sup>163</sup> Collectively, leftist critics view the black church as an institutional and ideological obstacle to the social progress of African Americans. In their opinions, this will remain substantially true until black Christians adopt the belief that human beings, not just God, can effect change in the living and present world.

The experiences of African American Muslims, in the free world and in prison, supports Raboteau and Genovese. First, black Muslims, like their Christian counterparts, show a remarkable ability to adapt mainstream values in ways that suit their own purposes. For

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<sup>161</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Black Church In America*, Knopf, New York, 1974, p. 90.

<sup>162</sup> Eugene Gordon, “A New Religion for the Negro,” *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, Citadel Press, New York, vol. 3, 1974, 1990, p. 574.

<sup>163</sup> Adolph Reed, Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986.

example, the Nation of Islam adopted Protestant ideals—hard work, economic independence, thrift, and heterosexuality—as part of their nationalist program. As Edward E. Curtis wrote, “NOI members certainly perpetuated American Protestant middle-class ideals...but through their “Islamization” of these norms, they challenged the cultural and ideological foundations of the American nation-state, its social structures, and its dominant religious institutions.”<sup>164</sup> Black Muslims were simultaneously conservative and radical. The usual attire of male members of the Nation, starched shirt and bowtie, symbolized a staunchly anti-American ideology. In the minds of black Muslims, there was no conflict between their conservative values and their radical agenda.

Likewise for black Muslims caught up in the carceral state, religion helps organize their lives on a spectrum of resistance and accommodation. Prison authorities see religion as a means of inmate control and rehabilitation. Within the system, privileges are parceled out for model behavior. At the Angola penitentiary, prisoners may get a chance to staff the various media outlets such as the *Angolite* magazine, the radio station KLSP (“the Incarceration Station”), or the new TV studio; they may work in the wood shop, or graduate with a degree from the seminary. All of these opportunities incentivize good behavior, promote feelings of “freedom” within the prison, but they also serve as tools of control by offering the carrot instead of the stick. Muslims participate in these activities, certainly, but for them rehabilitation comes from obedience to Islamic rules, self-purification, and the forgiveness that flows from Allah’s mercy. They see antagonism against their jailers and non-Muslim inmates as counterproductive, and still hold out hope to test their faith in the free world. And though Muslims have successfully

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<sup>164</sup> Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2006, p. 9.

challenged the state for the right to practice their religion, protesting the social conditions girding the carceral state will require inspirational leadership and greater mass mobilization.

A constant theme in all varieties of African American Islam has been one of black self-improvement and economic self-determination, an inheritance of the Tuskegee philosophy. Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute was born of the educator's desire to help black southerners learn industrial skills so that they could wean themselves off of the land and become wage earning workers. In this, he was part of the wider New South Movement, that had the goal of achieving southern prosperity through economic diversity and industrialization. That goal failed, but Washington continued to believe that African Americans could make their way in a racist and segregated society by keeping their heads down and working to achieve economic independence and material prosperity. It was Washington who invited Marcus Garvey to the United States to help him raise funds to start a college in Jamaica. And in the early years of the Great Migration, Garvey launched the first true black nationalist movement based on race pride, uplift, and economic self-sufficiency. And, as already discussed in this dissertation, Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) primed the pump for other, more radical, nationalist prophets, notably Elijah Muhammad and his famous acolyte, Malcolm X. In his angry manifesto, *The Fall of America*, Elijah Muhammad writes, "America must be taken and destroyed, according to the prophets, at the time and end of the wicked world, where the lost-and-found members of the ancient and aboriginal people are found. America hates and mistreats her slaves to the extent that it has reached the heart of Allah and the righteous people of the earth (the Nation of Islam)."<sup>165</sup> While Washington had hoped to achieve an equilibrium between the

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<sup>165</sup> Elijah Muhammad, *The Fall of America*, The National Newport News and Commentator, Newport News, VA, 1973, p. 45.

black and white Americas (while still accepting black inequality), Elijah Muhammad called for total separation from the “wilderness” of North America.

The cause of black nationalism and racial separatism was picked up by dissident members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Frustrated with the federal government’s unwillingness to enforce civil rights laws, and the impoverished conditions of black urban ghettos, they abandoned Dr. Martin Luther King’s philosophy of nonviolent protest and heralded the Black Power movement.<sup>166</sup> Though Black Power activists may have been inspired by Malcolm X’s hawkish rhetoric, Manning Marable makes it clear that they neglected the trajectory of his thought at the end of his life (he was assassinated in February, 1965). Contrary to Alex Haley’s depiction in the *Autobiography* of a Malcolm moving towards the integrationist main stream of civil rights, Marable argues that his conversion to Sunni Islam signaled a revolutionary turn towards recognition of universal black rights. In other words, the Black Power movement digested the wrong Malcolm X, one in a transitional stage, before he became El Hajj Malik el Shabazz. Any possible lessons from his later work were entirely lost on them. Malcolm moved beyond racial separatism as a solution to gaining black rights.<sup>167</sup>

Since Malcolm X was assassinated before publication of his *Autobiography*, co-writer Alex Haley set the tone of the book as a cautionary tale—ignoring the demands of the Civil Rights mainstream could increase the popularity of radical organizations. He watered down the meaning of Malcolm X’s “second conversion” to Sunni Islam, and included almost nothing about Malcolm’s international activities near the end of his life. It is important that Malcolm X abandoned the association of whiteness with innate evil, but that was only one aspect of an

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<sup>166</sup> Peter J. Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1991, pp. 128-29.

<sup>167</sup> Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, Viking Press, New York, 2011, pp. 484-85.

ongoing process of what Manning Marable described as “reinvention.” In his travels prior to the revelatory trip to Mecca, Malcolm experienced dignified and respectful treatment among European “whites,” leading him to second-guess the idea that whites were “incurable racists.” His trip to Mecca, in which he observed the racial diversity found within Islam, convinced him to break with the NOI and its rigid political incuriosity. However, as Peter Paris writes, “The break with Elijah Muhammad represented a change in Malcolm’s theological understanding of the nature of humanity and of the origins of racism. However, that change did not imply that Malcolm’s political understanding had become less radical.”<sup>168</sup> If one wishes to pinpoint the core difference between “early” Malcolm and “late” Malcolm, it is the movement from nationalism to internationalism. And though he signaled a willingness to cooperate with mainstream civil rights organizations in the United States, he continued to believe that armed self-defense was the right of every black American. His thoughts and actions were those of a revolutionary, not a reformer. In the last year of his life, the United States was a shrinking concern. His intense travel schedule and frayed family relationships point to his overriding concern to build his Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) as a revolutionary vehicle for unshackling black peoples everywhere from the legacy of Western imperialism.<sup>169</sup> At home, and after his death, Malcolm’s courage as an African American Muslim inspired Warith Deen Mohammed to follow in his wake.

Finally, on the issue of nationalism, we must include Harold Cruse’s enigmatic *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, originally published in 1967. It remains a masterwork of polemic. In it, Cruse criticizes the Communist Party that he once embraced, dismisses civil rights integrationists as “bourgeois” sell-outs to the white middle class, and emasculates the

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<sup>168</sup> Paris, *Black Religious Leaders*, p. 190.

<sup>169</sup> Manning, p. 390.

Black Power movement as defeatist. However, Cruse's nationalist arguments support Booker Washington's program of black economic independence, with the goal of sustaining a distinct black American culture and economy, neither appropriated by, nor integrated with, white America. Cruse was not a dogmatic nationalist along the lines of the NOI's call for total withdrawal of African Americans from the United States, but his economic philosophy shared DNA with those of Washington, Garvey, and Elijah Muhammad's. He believed that effective leadership and education had roles in mobilizing the black community to find group solutions to problems of economic growth. Once African Americans began realizing commercial success from black-owned businesses, profits would be reinvested into the community for further economic development.<sup>170</sup> For Cruse, economic success was a necessary precondition for black equality in the United States, and his program called for black businesses and communities to challenge the White economy. Though essentially nationalist in orientation, Cruse did not identify with any radical movements that he felt lacked effective plans for action, which is why he remained, publicly at least, aloof from Black Power advocacy. In his own life, Cruse seemed to try and overcome the historical conflict between black nationalism and the forces of integration—he taught for twenty years as a professor at the University of Michigan, where he launched an African American studies program that would become a model for academic institutions everywhere.

Cruse's biggest complaint against W.E.B. DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was that their integrationist goals lacked an economic dimension. And, Cruse feared that integration also meant the submersion and loss of distinct black cultural forms into just what the white middle class would find acceptable or

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<sup>170</sup> Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, NYRBC, New York, 1967, 2005, pp. 313-15.



unacceptable according to their tastes. The later turned out not to be true—even the white appropriation of jazz music did not erase its vital origins among black musicians. But his idea that black equality was impossible in a racially integrated, capitalistic economy has merit. Modern racial disparities in wealth are staggering. Black poverty affects all ages, and median net worth of households headed by retired black people is less than \$20,000, compared to roughly \$200,000 for retired white people. On average, the rate of black unemployment is twice that of white Americans. Roughly 40 percent of African American children live below the poverty line, compared to about 10 percent of white children. In addition, housing is still highly segregated, with only about a third of black families living in neighborhoods dominated by whites. Black and Hispanic neighborhoods are poorer, on average, with underfunded schools providing fewer educational opportunities for minority children. A result of poverty and deficient schools are higher crime rates, which translates into high incarceration rates of minority persons.<sup>171</sup>

Following the Great Depression, W.E.B. DuBois saw the need to find a middle ground between integration and nationalism, acknowledging the fact that Jim Crow segregation in the South, and *de facto* segregation in the North, had already created pockets of independent black economies. The Depression was viewed as a grand failure in capitalism. As a result, in some respects DuBois moved toward Washington, accepting the need to promote black enterprise. DuBois envisaged a “cooperative commonwealth” of black business leaders, workers, churches, artists, and others dedicated to mutual support and uplift, but not at the cost of total isolation from white America. He supported a self-segregation of the black economy for group protection,

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<sup>171</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People*, McGraw Hill: New York, 2017, p. 142.

while continuing to reject legal forms of discriminatory segregation.<sup>172</sup> Like Cruse, DuBois thought and wrote in ways that defied easy categorization of communism or capitalism, nationalism or integrationism. It is apparent that nationalism and integrationism are not static and permanently dichotomous notions, but dynamic and evolving concepts that help historians understand the conflicts in African American history and thought.

And finally I turn to mass incarceration. The gains of the Civil Rights era did not end assaults on the legal rights of African Americans, and indeed prompted a reformulation of measures to subordinate them. Heather Ann Thompson correlates the rise of the carceral state with the conservative turn in American politics at the end of the Sixties. She notes that in the 35 years prior to, and including, the 1960s, the number of incarcerated Americans rose by 52,249 people; from 1970-2005, that number jumped to 1,266,243 added to our nation's prisons. The skyrocketing rate of incarceration was not matched by a rise in crime, which actually dropped between 1990-1994.<sup>173</sup> The dramatic increase in the prison populations resulted, in part, on voter-pleasing "tough on crime" policies, along with a national War on Drugs that unfairly targeted black, urban, and poor communities. Courts are more likely to convict blacks accused of crime than whites, and African Americans, on average, receive stiffer penalties than whites convicted of comparable crimes. U.S. Department of Justice statistics shows this to be especially true of felonies related to drug violations—in state courts, half of black defendants receive sentences, compared to only a third of white defendants.<sup>174</sup> Michelle Alexander cites a study of over 2000 murder cases in Georgia. Among them, prosecutors sought the death penalty for 70

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<sup>172</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, "Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept," found in *Writings*, ed., Nathan Irvin Huggins. New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986, pp. 695-700.

<sup>173</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," in the *Journal of American History*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (December 2010), p. 704.

<sup>174</sup> U.S. Dept. of Justice, available at <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/dudsfp04.pdf>.

percent of the cases in which the defendants were black and the victims were white; and only 19 percent when the defendants were white and the victims were black.<sup>175</sup> Nationally, about 25 percent of the black male population will spend time behind bars, which is more than the number who will graduate college.<sup>176</sup>

Making sense of these numbers, the policies that justified them, and the American lives swept up in the statistics has recently occupied scholars interested in analyzing the phenomenon of mass incarceration. In *Race, Incarceration, and American Values* (2008), Glenn Loury blames white, middle-class, racial anxieties in the post-civil rights age for the adoption of harsh punitive measures by American courts to crack down on crime. Victims of the new punitive society are disproportionately people of color, which turns the penal system into one of racial subordination. If we are to end public policies that perpetuate racism, Loury believes that our criminal justice system must be re-evaluated on the basis of justice for all.<sup>177</sup>

In *The New Jim Crow* (2010), Michelle Alexander argues that the scale of racial oppression represented by black mass incarceration is comparable to that of the decades-long legal apparatus of segregation destroyed in the 1960s. The War on Drugs gave law enforcement officials the authority to relentlessly police black neighborhoods, and sweep thousands of people into the nation's prisons. African Americans constitute one-third of the nation's prison population, but make up only one-eighth of the U.S. population, contributing to the stigmatization of black men as criminally prone. And since a criminal record follows you,

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<sup>175</sup> Alexander, p. 110.

<sup>176</sup> Thompson, p. 705.

<sup>177</sup> Glenn Loury, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2008.

Alexander argues that ex-convicts are relegated to second-class status, often leading to recidivist behaviors like selling drugs to make some money.<sup>178</sup>

The American system of courts and prisons acts, as Alexander says, to permanently subordinate African Americans caught in its grip, and as such is an unjust institution that deprives them of their equal rights. Does the injustice rise to the level of Jim Crow? If there is to be an effective response from black religious organizations, I believe that will have to become the dominant perception.

Heather Ann Thompson's important project is to reconsider post-World War Two history in light of the rise of the carceral state. Given that mass incarceration was not a response to rising crime rates, studying its causes and consequences reveals more about the politics of white conservatives, who reacted against the new freedoms won by black southerners, and the loss of a black urban labor force, which weakened the bargaining power of unions.<sup>179</sup> By historicizing crime and punishment policies, we get fresh perspectives on a number of problems, including the role and response of religious organizations to modern racial injustice. Historians concerned about social justice and equality should take note of mass incarceration and its appalling legacy. I found that those living in the carceral state are all too happy to tell their stories.

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<sup>178</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, New York, 2010.

<sup>179</sup> Thompson, p. 706.

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