



An Unholy Alliance: The Nation of Islam Discourse and The Vicious Circle of Racism

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Abstract

The Nation of Islam (NOI) was born amid the political, cultural, and social strife that African Americans experienced during the Great Depression. The organization was a product of the early twentieth century social and political landscape of blatant racism, segregation, disenfranchisement, educational and economic deprivation, Ku Klux Klan, and peripheral citizenship of African Americans in a sovereignty based on the principles of freedom, and democracy. Whereas organizations such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909), the National Urban League (1911), and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816) resorted to an integrationist approach to confront the legally sanctioned system of racial subjugation and demand civil rights for African Americans, the NOI concocted a unique conflation of religion and nationalism in appealing to black agitation and defiance against white supremacy. Building on the pro-racist theology of the Southern white Churches, and a sense of double consciousness with which African Americans grappled, the NOI developed a peculiar religious mythology that provided an antidote for black people. This research analyzes the movement and its discourse as a repercussion of the racism and bigotry experienced by African Americans: like its Christian counterparts, the NOI exploited religious doctrines of Orthodox Islam in order to append religious legitimacy to its racist propaganda. The paper argues that although the Nation's racist ideology is in conflict with all mainstream religions of the world, scholarship on the organization must expand beyond an outright condemnation of its ideology and leadership to account for the institutionalized racism that continues to engender cults like the NOI.

Keywords:

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The Nation of Islam (NOI) was born amidst the political, cultural, and social strife that African Americans experienced during the Great Depression. The organization was a product of the early twentieth century social scenario of blatant racism, segregation, disenfranchisement, educational and economic deprivation, Ku Klux Klan, and peripheral citizenship of African Americans in a sovereignty based on the principles of freedom, and democracy. Whereas organizations such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909), the National Urban League (1911), and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816) resorted to an integrationist approach to confront the legally sanctioned system of racial subjugation and demand civil rights for African Americans, the Nation of Islam came up with a unique conflation of religion and nationalism in appealing to African Americans' agitation and defiance against white supremacy. Building on the pro-racist theology of the Southern white Churches, and a sense of double consciousness with which African Americans grappled, the Nation of Islam developed a peculiar religious mythology that provided an antidote for black people.¹ This research views the movement as a repercussion of the religious-based racism and bigotry experienced by African Americans: like its Christian counterparts, the NOI exploited religious doctrines of Orthodox Islam in order to append religious legitimacy to its racist propaganda. This

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings: *The Souls of Black Folk*," (New York: NY, Simon & Schuster, 2005) 4

paper suggests that although the Nation's racist ideology is in conflict with all mainstream religions of the world, scholarship on the organization must expand beyond the outright condemnation of its ideology and leadership to account for the institutionalized racism that continues to engender cults like the NOI.

The history of racism is profoundly entrenched in religious indoctrination over a period of centuries. All the major religious gospels of the world have been manipulated to justify inherent disparities among different populations in order to buttress and reassure the racial superiority of one group over another. In this regard, the 'divine authorship' of post-biblical as well as Islamic literature played a significant role in the establishment of an underlying association between blackness and servitude: Biblical accounts of the Curse of Ham and the Curse of Cain as etiological narratives underlined the supernal justification for the enslavement of the black race. This scriptural basis for racism evolved over a period of centuries to reach its apex in the Confederate States' justification of the institution of slavery, and the concomitant racial inferiority of African Americans in the United States. Although the Emancipation Proclamation symbolized an era of revolution in the U.S. history, the fall of the Confederacy and the liquidation of slavery did little to undermine the religiously sanctioned racism. Despite the abolishment of the institution, certain Christian groups like the Christian Identity movement, the Ku Klux Klan, and Christian Reconstructionists continued to hold religious justification for the hierarchy of human races.² Thus, in the post-Emancipation Christian world, blacks were not welcomed to the white man's church owing to their racial inferiority:

The convert may have found spiritual salvation in the White Man's faith; he may have acquired the White Man's culture and learnt to speak his language with the tongue of an angel; he may have become an adept in the White Man's economic technique, and yet it profits him nothing so long as he has not changed his skin.³

Although African Americans embraced Christianity and enthusiastically joined the Churches soon after emancipation, they were still faced by the institutionalized racism in and outside the Churches due to segregationist policies. Leading Baptist clergymen of the period explicitly asserted the dogma of Negro inferiority and vindicated racial segregation in organized religion as a means of avoiding racial amalgamation. A distinguished representative of this position was Jeremiah Bell Jeter, who vigorously promoted his ideas through the *Religious Herald*, Richmond.⁴ Thus, the white church served as a highly dormant agent in employing its moral authority to establish social justice for black people. Indeed, since Christianity had failed to make sound in-roads among blacks during slavery, its contentious position in the subsequent periods further added to disconnect a certain class of African Americans from the Church.⁵ Despite the establishment of organized black churches, the black masses felt disappointed with Christianity's source of redemption and continued to associate the religion as well as the Church with "the white man:" Christianity became a Caucasian religion, and the Christian Church represented the house of a "white Savior."⁶

It is against this backdrop of religiously sanctioned racism, and the social upheaval of the Great Depression that the Nation of Islam evolved: W. D. Fard Muhammad capitalized on the hatred of the socially disadvantaged African Americans against the Church's association with colonialism and slavery and in its stead presented Islam as an African religion. Taking the resentment of blacks against Christianity to an illogical extreme, the organization took full advantage of the manipulation of Christian doctrines as well as the racist standpoint of some Christian ideologues in the formation of its religious and racial mythology. Indeed, most of the Muslim converts were drawn from Protestant and Catholic families, while some Muslim ministers were former Christian preachers who protested against Christianity in view of an avant-garde religion that promised them the comfort that "white Christianity" had seized from them.

² Chester L. Quarles, *Christian Identity: The Aryan American Bloodline Religion* (Jefferson: NC, McFarland, 2004) 68. Chester L. Quarles, *The Klu Klux Klan and Related American Racialist and Antisemitic Organizations*. (Jefferson: NC, McFarland, 2008) 155. Andrew Sandlin, Walter Lindsay, and Andrea Schwartz *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*. (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon Vol. 14 No. 2. 1997) 71

³ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1935) 224

⁴ Smith 210

⁵ Anne H. Pinn and Anthony B. Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 2001) 10

⁶ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed. (Africa World Press, Inc. Trenton, New Jersey, 1994) 57

Islam is the natural religion of the Black Nation...There is no hope for us in Christianity; it is a religion organized by the enemies (the white race) of the Black Nation to enslave us to the white race's rule. But our unity under the crescent with our Allah's guidance can get us anything we desire and some of this earth we can call our own.⁷

Yet the Nation of Islam was not simply a reaction to the religious racism posed by Christianity. Indeed, the movement was part of the chain of Black Nationalist mass movements against white supremacy at the outset of the twentieth century. Black Nationalism aligned with the agenda of the NOI in representing pride in the distinctiveness of black heritage in the face of its outright rejection by the dominant white culture. Based on the mythology of inherent racial superiority, Black Nationalism invoked glories of black heritage in the hope to inspire action in the present and the future. Thus, it is based in racism as much as white supremacy is.

Among Black Nationalist organizations prior to the NOI were The Moorish Science Temple Movement (1913) led by Noble Drew Ali and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (1914) by Marcus Garvey. The Moorish Science movement was essentially religious while Garvey's UNIA was primarily political: both upheld the *raison d'être* of resistance against white supremacist American society. Whereas Noble Drew sought a psychological escape by resorting to cultural symbols, Garvey sought to establish an independent African state outside America.⁸ Both movements were primarily supported by lower class blacks, however, they failed to alter the conditions that were ultimately responsible for their establishment.

Building on the legacy of its precursors, the NOI recognized the fact that Black Nationalism was the most effective political standpoint in subverting the nonidentity from which African Americans suffered in the post-Emancipation era. A religiously fundamentalist organization, the NOI advanced "race-organism thesis by adding divine intention to the meaning of its existence."⁹ The organization represented an avid form of Black Nationalism by making Nationalism its faith and motto: by professing that the black man is the primogenitor of all civilization, and the eventual ruler of "planet Earth," they turned black into "the ultimate value," and it was this fundamentalism in black worship that was mainly responsible for the popularity and allegiance that the movement garnered.¹⁰

The NOI's Black Nationalist stance differed from its precursors in that it expanded its Nationalist realm to include all people of color as a black family against the "blue-eyed devils." Racial identity formed such an essential part of the Black Nationalist program of the NOI that they embraced the term "black" instead of "American," despite the fact that some African Americans regarded the term as derogatory. Like a classic Nationalist organization, the NOI demanded a separate state within the United States; however, unlike other nationalist organizations, it did not limit its vision of the "separate state" to a confined physical territory. Rather the NOI fulfilled its agenda on a metaphorical level by building a bona fide nation with its own educational, economic, religious, cultural, and political structure.

Thus, the NOI developed on the legacy of the preceding Nationalist movements, however, its ultimate success owed much to the charismatic leader that the other movements lacked: it was on July 4, 1930, that this "prophet," Wallace D. Fard Muhammad appeared as a mysterious peddler in the black ghetto of Detroit with the mission of revealing an unknown history and a forsaken religion i.e. Islam. He claimed an Arab ancestry; however, his true identity has always remained a mystery. Fard visited the households of African Americans, supposedly selling artifacts; but underlying this was his true motive: he told these socially and economically disadvantaged blacks that he was on a mission from God, who wanted his chosen people back. In his house-to-house meetings, Fard taught black people unknown facts about their own race, heritage and culture: he told them that the "so-called Negro" was really the Asiatic black man who was the founder of civilization and the Original Man, created in the image of God i.e. Allah. African Americans, he professed, belonged to the tribe of Shabazz that had been stolen by the "blue-eyed devil" and brought as slaves to the Americas. Fard claimed to have brought their true religion and culture back to them: they must

⁷ Muhammad, Elijah, *Message to the Blackman* (Philadelphia: Hakim's Publications, 1995) 80

⁸Lincoln 47

⁹Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Duke University Press; Durham, 1996) 13

¹⁰ Lincoln 33

embrace Islam and undergo a process of rejuvenation in order for God to redeem them by returning them to the promised land of Mecca where they would find eternal peace.¹¹

The uneducated and impoverished blacks struggling against the Great Depression in a racialized social setting were deeply inspired by Fard's explicit denunciation of the white people and the prophecy of a resplendent future, and soon began to convert to this innovative religion. Black people came in throngs to attend his meetings, which further necessitated the establishment of a temple, followed by an organizational structure in which members were formally registered and underwent a process of recruitment in order to become "brothers" in religion. Fard authored two manuals, *The Secret Ritual of the Nation of Islam*, and *Teaching for the Lost Found Nation of Islam* in order to make his ideology accessible to the members. Within three years, he developed an organizational structure based on a temple, a University of Islam, the Muslim Girls Training Class, and a military organization for men called the Fruit of Islam. Now the organization was ready to transfer leadership to Fard's disciple, Elijah Muhammad, the son of a Georgian Baptist preacher. Soon after Muhammad was declared the Minister of Islam in June 1934, Fard disappeared as mysteriously as he had arrived. After the prophet's disappearance, the movement became dormant for a while; however, soon Elijah Muhammad set up new headquarters in Chicago and resumed the movement under his assertive leadership. As for Fard's disappearance, Muhammad revealed that Fard was not a prophet, but God incarnate. He had appeared in person in order to commence the process of regeneration for African Americans and had subsequently chosen Elijah Muhammad as his Messenger to lead the lost-found Nation of Islam through the successive journey.

Thus began the golden period of the Nation of Islam: Elijah Muhammad laid down the ideology of the NOI in various publications: *The Supreme Wisdom, Solution to the So-called Negroes' Problem* (1957); *The Supreme Wisdom, Volume Two* (undated); *Message to the Blackman* (1965); *How to Eat to Live* (1967); *How to Eat to Live, Book Two* (1972); *The Fall of America* (1973); *Our Savior Has Arrived* (1974 [a]); and *The Flag of Islam* (1974[b]). In his publications as well as speeches, Elijah Muhammad taught that God was a Black Man and not an invisible spirit; his true name is Allah and he appeared in the person of W. D. Fard Muhammad. His arrival was a prophecy of both the Bible and the Quran as he was the Messiah of the Christians and Mahdi of the Muslims. Allah is the Supreme Black Man who is the sole Creator of the universe and its people, and it is an unpardonable sin to worship anyone other than him. "Allah is not, however, godhead complete in himself. All blacks represent Allah, or at least participate in him, for all blacks are divine... Pure Black is equivalent to Absolute Perfection."¹² Allah declared the black man to be the Original Man: he is not the inferior "so-called Negro" but rather the creator of the universe as well as the primogenitor of all other races. Allah created black man in his own image, and out of his own essence which makes him superior to all the races. Brown races are inferior to blacks in lacking the 'Pure Black' essence in the same proportion, while since white is an ultimate absence of black color, whites are devils in being bereft of the "Pure Black."¹³

The NOI also presented a mythology about the creation of the Heavens and the Earth. According to its teachings, in the beginning there was "a triple blackness of space, water, and divinity." The one Supreme Black God came into existence at the origin of the universe, seventy-six-trillion years ago when a great explosion divided the earth and the moon. He created himself out of the blackness of space and the blackness of water, and later created black man out of the same matter which forms three quarters of his body. Thus, while history is 6000 years old, black man has existed since the creation of the world. Despite their obliviousness, all blacks are Muslims who descended from the Asiatic Black Man, and the tribe of Shabazz.¹⁴ Before the white race achieved supremacy, the ancient black civilization had already created all intellectual institutions, and mastered all knowledge; however, later, the white devil subjugated the black man through a clever stratagem.

The white man is contrasted with the black man on the basis of his artificial origin of birth that was not willed by God. The white man's race was grafted by Mr. Yacub, a black evil scientist who resisted God by creating an evil race that would rule the world and subjugate black people. As Jeffrey O. G. Ogburn pointed out, the story of Yacub is "the eschatological centerpiece of the Nation's dogma" in laying the ideological basis of the inherent inferiority of the

¹¹ Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*, 2nd ed. (Secretarius Mempis Publications, 2006) 33

¹² Lincoln 69

¹³ Lincoln 69

¹⁴ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom* 33-39

whites.¹⁵ It is argued that about six thousand years ago, Mr. Yacub practiced a strict code of birth control, killing all the darker babies and breeding the lighter ones to gradually generate the brown race. By further gene manipulation, he continued to create lighter races over a period of 600 years so that eventually, a race of “weak-blooded, weak-boned, weak-minded, pale-faced people” was finally grafted who the Nation regards as “the blond, blue-eyed white devil.” The white man is thus neither truly human nor created by God; rather he is inherently evil owing to his creation. As soon as this “blue-eyed devil” was created, he started practicing immorality and promiscuity so that he was eventually driven out of the vicinity of the Original People and forced to live in the caves of the Caucasus Mountains where he crawled on all fours and mated with animals.¹⁶

God granted the devil 6,000 years to develop and rule the earth, during which he subjected the black race to colonialism, slavery, racism, and socio-economic subjugation. Black people suffered spiritual as well as intellectual death at the hand of the white devil; however, the era of the devil had come to an end, and a resurrection process had begun with the appearance of Fard Muhammad. Allah had chosen Elijah Muhammad as the Messenger to continue the process of rejuvenation and guide his people in attaining the ultimate knowledge of God and self. At this point, all black people, even those with a single drop of black blood, needed to unite and dedicate themselves to the cause of Islam against white supremacy. They must eradicate all evil from the face of the earth by replacing it with a black kingdom in which egalitarianism, justice, and morality will prevail under the umbrella of Islam.¹⁷ Thus, Muhammad created a “black theodicy” that assured African Americans that they were inherently good. Having been the victims of an evil stratagem; they now must grasp the opportunity to vigorously work for the regeneration promised by Allah and his Messenger.¹⁸

In order to systematically pursue reconstruction, the NOI laid down a program of ethical and social decorum for its members. Blacks Muslims followed a strict code of spiritual and sexual morality on private and social levels. They performed their prayers on a daily basis and were required to attend temple meetings. They avoided certain foods, alcohol, tobacco, and gambling. They also followed a strict dress code that was a symbol of their newly achieved self-respect and dignity. Muslim men were to be socially and morally responsible patriarchal heads of the family. Women’s equality in all spheres of life was stressed; however, they were encouraged to become devoted wives and mothers. Muslim children were expected to avoid street culture and dedicate themselves to purposeful lives. The Nation also established two organizations for young black men and women: the Fruit of Islam was composed of the physically and psychologically strongest males who represented a uniformed army to defend their nation. Similarly, the Muslim Girls Training Class was established to teach domestic duties and self-defense to Muslim women.

Unlike previous religious as well as nationalist organizations, the NOI began to attract the black lower-class population readily. There is a plethora of reasons for this popularity and the high number of adherents that the NOI captured. One of the most effective mechanisms employed by the leadership was criticism of Christianity. Muhammad recognized the effectiveness of an anti-Christian stance to appeal to the emotions of black people. He portrayed Christianity as an ideological weapon of white supremacists and ensured that the Nation’s own doctrinal structure was in contrast to that of Christianity. He argued that whites had very craftily promoted Christianity among black people in order to legitimize their enslavement and subjugation; however, black people must not intermingle with Christians. Hence, for the black masses, “the rejection of Christianity symbolized the Nation’s rejection of the “slave culture” of black people as well as Eurocentric Christian churches in black communities.”¹⁹

Indeed, the transformation of the black clergy’s standpoint was also significant in the advancement of such racist diatribes against Christianity. The black Church was originally the most radical black institution, however, the deradicalization of the black church began in the first part of the twentieth century with the social and political upheaval of the time. Jim Crow laws, lynching, the Great Migration, and the subsequent Depression threatened the black churches’ “newly established status” as respectable institutions. The black clergy came to be labeled accommodationist for upholding the evangelical Christian understanding of “a nonviolent, patently suffering, and

¹⁵ Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2004) 13

¹⁶ Ogbar 13

¹⁷ Elijah Muhammad, *History of the Nation of Islam* (Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 2008) 15-20

¹⁸ The term “black theodicy” has been borrowed from Edward E. Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religion In The Nation Of Islam, 1960-1975* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 11

¹⁹ Ogbar 29

otherworldly white Jesus” viewpoint. Thus, “[m]odeling itself on the white counterparts, the black church rejected the black nationalist position of Henry McNeal Turner, Marcus Garvey, and Alexander Crummell, and assumed an increasingly more conservative or collaborationist position in American society.”²⁰ The NOI capitalized on this situation in order to denounce Christianity and the Church in general. Elijah Muhammad declared:

The Bible is the graveyard of my poor people.... And here I quote another poison addiction of the slavery teaching of the Bible: “Love your enemies, bless them who curse you; pray for those who spitefully use you; him that smiteth thee on one cheek offer the other cheek; him that (robs) taketh away the cloak, forbid not to take (away) thy coat also.” ... The Slavemasters couldn’t have found a better teaching for their protection.²¹

He argued that the black Christian preacher was the whites’ most effective tool for subjugating blacks. Black preachers’ motive is to gain approval of the whites instead of confronting real issues, such as economic justice and social equality.²² Thus, there was no reason for blacks to adhere to Christianity; likewise, whites were not welcomed to Islam, for a religion of ‘peace’ could not embrace devils. The myth of Yacub always came in handy to justify the racism directed towards whites.

Being a strictly nationalist organization, the NOI supported the political, economic, and social segregation of the two races as being of utmost significance in order to reinstate the harmony of the world. The integrationist policies delineated by Martin Luther King Jr., the black clergy, NAACP, and the Urban League were severely censured. In their view, true integration was not only unrealistic, but it was also dangerous as the black blood had already been contaminated by the “blue-eyed devils” over a period of centuries. Resorting to the Nation’s mythology, they also professed that some whites supported integration because they were conscious of the inevitable doom awaiting their race and they wished to intermingle with the superior black race to salvage themselves. Thus, interracial marriage was condemned as severely as the white supremacists did based on the argument that the black race needed a moral, ideological, spiritual, and biological re-purification by practicing austere severance.

In order to achieve this policy, the Nation demanded a separate territory for African Americans: “I’m asking for justice. If they won’t give us justice, then let us separate ourselves from them and live in four or five states in America, or leave the country altogether.”²³ However, Muhammad did not wait in dormancy for the whites to fulfill his demands. The proclamation was enough to inspire the devoted members to follow Elijah Muhammad in establishing a black infrastructure. He encouraged Black Muslims to establish their own small businesses in order to create jobs as well as become self-sufficient. Soon the NOI developed into the most powerfully organized economic force in the black community and operated various businesses, such as bakeries, restaurants, snack shops, coffee shops, barber shops, supermarkets, groceries, cleaners, clothing factories, a fez factory, clothing and retail stores, real estate, residential homes, a newspaper plant, and the Guaranty Bank and Trust Company. They had a transportation system, including tractor-trailers, livestock trailers, refrigerated trailers, in-city trucks, as well as a jet, and a fixed-base aviation department at the Gary Municipal Airport. The NOI owned tens of thousands of acres of farmland in Michigan, Alabama, and Georgia, operated with modern machine equipment. They also owned apple orchards, canneries, dairies, poultry farms, cattle farms, grain mills, and warehouses.²⁴ Thus, it would not be a far-fetched claim to assert that the NOI went a long way in fulfilling its promise of rejuvenation to the socially disadvantaged black people at least in the economic sphere.

Another important landmark of the movement was the establishment of its own educational system, as they viewed the public schools as perpetuating white supremacy. Although the curriculum in the NOI’s “Universities of Islam” included science, mathematics, history, arts, and language, special emphasis was laid on black studies, black heritage, the Nation’s mythology of black man’s divine past and a glorious future. Many lower-class blacks preferred these “universities” to the public schools that instilled non-identity and self-hatred among black children. These

²⁰ Gardell 239

²¹ Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom* 13

²² Lincoln 13

²³ Malcolm X’s radio interview from Lincoln 91

²⁴ Gardell 60

schools were a great success and the cases of juvenile delinquency among children in these institutes were much fewer than the others.²⁵

One of the strengths of the organization was the rehabilitation of criminals, drug addicts, homeless, and economically disadvantaged black people. With the goal of transforming convicts into respectable, disciplined, and dynamic members, the Nation of Islam established a “self-improvement program” in mid-1980s to replace a criminal black identity with a spiritual one. Black prisoners were made to go through a spiritual journey from self-hatred to self-respect so that once they exited the prison, they were embraced by the Nation even when the Churches were reluctant to accept them. The NOI rehabilitated these spurned people by finding them employment and helping them to establish a household. Perhaps no other religious organization welcomed ex-convicts, drug addicts, sex workers, and unskilled and unemployed poor blacks so ardently. The NOI did a lot more to rejuvenate black criminals than most of the churches and social agencies of the time, and it was primarily based on the spiritual and moral message carried by the organization with solid nationalist roots.²⁶ One of the ex-criminals, Edward X related his experience: “What really won me over to the Messenger’s program is his philosophy that regardless of what you did yesterday, if you come in here and act like a man today, all of that is forgotten. That’s why I came in. I wanted somebody to forgive me for what I did.”²⁷

Organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League could not reach lower class blacks as their memberships comprised middle- and upper-class black population to whom impoverished blacks could not relate. The NOI, however, represented what C. Eric Lincoln refers to as a “mass movement.” Unlike other black organizations, the NOI did not wait for black people to approach them. Rather, Muhammad sent his ministers to jails, penitentiaries, bars, barbershops, drugstores, black churches, colleges and universities to distribute NOI’s literature. In order to attract converts, the Nation offered a full-fledged program of spiritual and moral rebirth. The converts underwent a recruitment process soon after their conversion. They cast off their old identity and took on a new suffix “X” added to their names which signified “ex” slave as well as the unknown quantity and quality of “X.” Converts not only changed their names but also their religion, language, moral and cultural values, and their very aim in life. They cast off their “Negro” identity that was a source of embarrassment and viewed themselves as respectable black men and women who were to be the divine rulers of the universe and shared the divine essence with God. Such programs rejuvenated people like Malcolm X who became the most significant mainstay of the movement. Perhaps, the NOI would not have enjoyed the same popularity if it were not for Malcolm X. Within three years after his release, Malcolm X travelled all over the country; his preaching and the subsequent conversions increased the number of temples from seven to twenty-seven.

However, the Nation’s decline also ensued from within its ranks: the ideological schism that developed between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad in 1963 went a long way to influence the reputation and authenticity of the organization. Malcolm’s questioning of the Messenger’s moral laxity was followed by his enlightening experience at his Hajj to Mecca (pilgrimage) where he realized that the Nation’s racist ideology stood in sharp contrast to the mainstream Islam. This discrepancy deepened the conflict between the two, and Malcolm established the Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964, declaring his allegiance to the mainstream Islam. Malcolm’s growing stature as a spokesperson for Orthodox Islam threatened Elijah Muhammad’s campaign to establish an “authentic” Islamic sect, which arguably resulted in Malcolm’s assassination in February 1965.

The second attempt at subverting the racist ideology of the Nation was made by Warith Deen Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad’s son, who took over the leadership of the organization after his father’s death in 1975. Imam Muhammad began a process of reformation aimed at transforming the Nation’s racist ideology in order to align it with mainstream Islam. To begin with, Fard was declared mortal and Elijah Muhammad came to be known as Imam rather than the Messenger of God. The theological dogma of Yacub’s creation of “blue-eyed devils” was discarded in view of recognizing the value of people irrespective of their races. Imam Deen Muhammad argued that the Nation was giving Islam a misleading image which he ventured to eradicate. In 1975, the color ban on the organization’s membership was lifted by Imam Muhammad: “Those whites who identify with our thinking can come in and join us and take a lead in giving moral direction to the world.”²⁸ As for the political standpoint of the Nation, Imam

²⁵ Lincoln 120

²⁶ Lincoln 28

²⁷ An ex-criminal’s interview, Curtis 24

²⁸ Gardell 109

Muhammad abandoned deep-seated criticism of the political system of the U.S., and discarded the extremist Black Nationalist demands for a separate state for black people. Indeed, he urged Black Muslims to participate in America's Independence Day celebrations. In 1976, he introduced a new flag with the Quran on it in order to discard nationalistic symbols: "There are no radical teachings in the Holy Qur'an on race [and] Islam is not a religion for any one race, it is a religion for all people."²⁹ Thus, the organization changed various names in its journey to align with the Orthodox Islam, and finally came to be known as The American Society of the Muslims in 1985. In December 1977, Imam Muhammad was invited to visit President Jimmy Carter at the White House; in February 1992, he was invited to the Pentagon as the first Imam to offer morning prayers in the United States Senate. The ideological transformation had taken place; however, the Muslim congregations were not yet ready to relate to it.

The reconstruction process initiated by Imam Muhammad was met with opposition from within the ranks of the NOI. Members who had joined the Nation on the grounds that its racist ideology expressed their unvoiced suffering now felt disillusioned at the transformation and regarded it as devil's work. Although the Nation had become anti-racist, the social atmosphere had not; thus, the majority preferred to belong to the old Nation that gave voice to their hatred for the whites, as they still viewed themselves as victims of bigotry. Eventually, a great number of members who disagreed with Imam Muhammad started withdrawing from the new Nation; gradually, the organization's strength began to decline to the extent that it became bankrupt due to lack of support. In this scenario, Louis Farrakhan, one of the devoted followers of Elijah Muhammad, took complete advantage of the situation in attempting to resurrect the Nation. In 1978, Farrakhan took up the task of reviving the very spirit of the old Nation by reestablishing it on the vision of Fard and Elijah Muhammad. Since then, the Nation has been operating under his leadership and continues to uphold similar principles on which Fard and Elijah Muhammad had established it.³⁰

One of the issues regarding the NOI's religious standing has been its comparison to the mainstream Islamic religion, and the organization's capacity to be a legitimate Islamic sect. Questions like these have vexed the Muslim world as well as scholars. Whereas most of the Arab Islamic world does not accept the Nation of Islam as a legitimate Islamic sect, religious scholarship on the issue is divided. Scholars like Mattias Gardell and Sherman A. Jackson are hesitant to link the Nation to Orthodox Islam on the grounds that the NOI's basic belief regarding Fard Muhammad as God in person and Elijah Muhammad as the Messenger of God are in conflict with the traditional Islam's concept of *Shahada*.³¹ Indeed, Jackson argues: "[T]here was only the most perfunctory attempt to integrate even the most basic Islamic doctrines and rituals into the religious life of the community, from the Five Pillars to the finality of prophethood resting with Muhammad of Arabia."³² However, many other scholars have deemphasized the discrepancies between mainstream Islam and the NOI's mythology. C. Eric Lincoln, for example, declares the Nation to be a legitimate sect of Islam despite recognizing the blatant disparities between the ideologies of the two.³³ Similarly, Aminah McCloud has argued that the two theological frameworks are similar except for the relative importance each places on the principles of solidarity and the community of believers.³⁴ Finally, in a similar vein, Claude Andrew Clegg has claimed that "the basic outlines of both religious traditions do appear to overlap enough to allow the black organization to reasonably claim membership in the body of Islam."³⁵ However, such scholarship tends to undermine certain obligatory beliefs that Orthodox Islam demands of a believer before he or she can be declared a Muslim; the moment a believer steers away from those presuppositions, the Quran and Sunnah are very strict in their declaration of the person's non-Muslim status.³⁶ Unless the person aligns his or her faith with these basic beliefs, entitlement to the status

²⁹ Gardell 109

³⁰ See the "Muslim Program" on the website of the NOI which declares inability of two races to live together peacefully; prohibits interracial marriage; regards integration as hypocritical, and accepts Fard as God's appearance in person. "What the Muslims Want" <http://www.noi.org/muslim_program.htm>

³¹ Gardell 134; and Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Black American* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005) 43: *Shahada* is the belief that the only God is Allah who sent the Prophet Muhammad of Arabia as the seal on prophethood.

³² Jackson 43

³³ Lincoln 220-223

³⁴ Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (Routledge University Press, 1995) 4, 37-38, and 169-70

³⁵ Claude Andrew Clegg, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (St. Martin's Griffin, 1998) 69

³⁶ Sunnah refers to the Prophet Muhammad's words, actions, and practices that are the basis for Islamic theology next to the Quran.

of a Muslim is inaccessible. In this perspective, the Nation of Islam deviates from a number of basic beliefs of Orthodox Islam which exclude the possibility of the Nation's consideration as a legitimate Islamic sect.

To begin with, Islam necessitates the concept of *Shahada* i.e. the belief that Allah is the only God who sent Prophet Muhammad of Arabia as the seal on prophethood. Negating both these beliefs places one outside the realm of the religion of Islam so much so that further negotiation is impossible unless the basic faith is aligned with *Shahada*. The NOI's deification of Fard Muhammad and its declaration of Elijah Muhammad as the prophet are "blasphemous" as per mainstream Islam. Another very significant contrast between the two is based on the five pillars of Islam which include *Shahada*, daily prayers, annual almsgiving, fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca: Elijah Muhammad's version of Islam did not recognize the significance of these five pillars, which are incumbent on every Muslim.

Furthermore, the Nation's ideology of the relationship between God and man is against the Orthodox Islamic teaching. Islam places the Creator and his creation in two different spheres: human beings are incapable of transcending their status to become one with Allah. The Nation of Islam's theology violates this basic framework in seeing God as a Black Man while all other black men and women are perceived as his extensions. Indeed, the NOI's religious doctrines are based on the assumption that all creation ensued from God, which is in direct conflict with the concept of the division between God and humans in mainstream Islam.³⁷ The gods of the Nation of Islam are also declared to be mortals instead of being "a spook" or "spirit"; these gods live and die like human beings, which is unfamiliar to mainstream Islam that does not regard God as a physical being: instead Islam's concept of Allah is *Noor* i.e. God is light or illumination as opposed to having a corporeal existence.

Furthermore, contrary to the NOI's blatant racism against Christians and Jews, mainstream Islam accepts both Christianity as well as Judaism as precursors to Islam carrying messages from Allah. Jews and Christians are regarded as fellow "People of the Book," and the Quran even allows a Muslim man to take a Jewish or Christian woman for his wife. Islam considers the prophets of Judaism and Christianity to be true messengers of God but regards Muhammad as the last and greatest of them all. Despite Islam's sharp theological differences with Christianity and Judaism, the Quran suggests that there is hope for the salvation of Jews and Christians: at the Last Day, distinct communities will be judged according to "their own book".³⁸ All these concepts are in sharp contrast to the NOI's rejection of Christians and Jews as infidels and their inherent incapacity, as devils, to become Muslims.

Certain other basic doctrines of the NOI are highly controversial in terms of Orthodox Islam: for instance, racial segregation, nationalism, and the black race's ultimate fate as the inheritors of the earth. These concepts are contrary to Islam's ideal of an all-embracing unity of humanity. Islam condemns racism, nationalism and racial segregation, and the establishment of racial hierarchies is a sin in mainstream Islamic religion. Irrespective of racial differences, all human beings are viewed as equals who are inferior only to Allah Himself. In this perspective, the NOI's refusal to compromise their racial doctrines and their faith in the spirit of pan-racial unity is against the mainstream Islamic theology.

This prompts us to probe into the motivation for Fard's decision to manipulate Islam for his campaign. Although Christian doctrines contain enough revelation to support an anti-racist stance of the religion, its distorted image in relation to blacks over the centuries was readily manipulated by Fard and Elijah Muhammad. Under such circumstances, Islam offered the best possible alternative to the prevalent Christian ideals of the time. However, Fard deemed it necessary to subvert the anti-racist ideology of the religion in order to make it appealing for his uneducated lower-class black audience.

Indeed, the Nation of Islam formed the most systematic reaction to the racism directed towards blacks by Christian ideologues of white supremacy. The counter-mythology of the NOI was purportedly created by "God in person" and "his Messenger" in order to respond to all the racist tenets based on Christianity. For example, the Curse of Ham was countered with the myth of Yacub; the "White Savior" was replaced with a "Black God;" the black man's alleged status of animalistic sexual being was transferred to Yacub's creation of an amoral creature; the black woman's

³⁷ "Never did He beget. Nor was He begotten." *The Quran*, 30: 112:3

³⁸ *The Qur'an* 42:13, 5:5, 2:62

ascribed promiscuity was carried over to the white woman; the one drop rule was transferred as it is and miscegenation was prohibited for the same reasons. The fact that the Nation gained great allegiance from elements of the black public is due to the deep resentment that they harbored for white Christians as well as their conviction regarding the futility of a peaceful and amicable transformation of the racist scenario of the time.

This was particularly reinforced when Warith Deen Muhammad attempted to reconstruct the NOI in aligning it with the mainstream Islamic ideology of communality. The intriguing question is, why did the Nation of Islam decline economically as well as politically when the leadership abandoned its racist ideology? Why did black people lose interest in the new Nation and aligned with Louis Farrakhan to bring about a resurrection of the old one? It is because the new Nation no longer appealed to the members once Imam Muhammad rendered its racist philosophy null; black people needed that derogation of the whites which had earned them a false sense of superiority. Thus, instead of condemning the Nation or its leadership for creating a cult of patent bigotry, one must understand how reverse racism is often the only choice for the victims of racism. Wallace Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad, and Louis Farrakhan were worshipped by their acolytes because these leaders had voiced the emotions of their people. C. Eric Lincoln refers to the tension created by the presence of the Black Muslims:

The [Black] Muslims are embarrassing to both the white and the black communities, for they call attention to a situation so irrational and so ugly that neither side wants to face it squarely. It is therefore to be expected that many people wish the Muslims would simply fold their tents and go away, that they will try to hex them away by refusing to admit that they really exist.³⁹

However, instead of “hex[ing] them away” or “refusing to admit that they really exist” we must confront the social forces that give rise to cults like the Nation. Why is it that racist rhetoric eventually becomes more appealing to a certain class of black people instead of suggestions of peaceful modes of transformation? Indeed, when we attack cults like these, we are actually assaulting the sentiments of black people evoked by institutionalized racism prevailing in the country. This vicious circle of racism will continue, and Louis Farrakhan will be replaced by another black leader who will echo the same propensity until black people experience a transformation in their condition and refuse to be led by such people. If racism, chauvinism, and subjugation continue, organizations like the Nation of Islam will continue to serve as a vent for the uneducated, impoverished, and underprivileged black people.

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³⁹ Lincoln 253

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