

## **CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH ISLAM AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS IN PRISON**

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African American prison inmates convert to Islam at a rate faster than any other demographic group in the United States. In this paper, I focus on the Christian encounter with Islam among African Americans in prison. First I examine the wider demographic and historical context influencing the rise of Islam among prisoners. I trace the tendency of African American prisoners to first join heterodox Black Nationalist Islamic groups and then to move toward Sunni orthodoxy. I then explore why some African Americans, especially inmates, find Islam more attractive than other Americans do. I discuss prison policy changes to accommodate Muslim practices within a society where the predominant faith is Christianity. Finally, I offer recommendations for Christians to meet challenges and seize opportunities in the encounter with Islam among African American prisoners.

### *Muslim Growth in America*

Islam has a significant and growing presence in the United States. While estimates of Muslim population vary, the most widely accepted number, as of the year 2000, was about six million (Poston and Ellis 2000, 15; Bailey 2001b, 189). The majority of these are Muslim immigrants and their descendants (Haddad 2000, 20). Still, at least a third of the Muslims in America are converts (Haddad 1997).

Of these converts, up to 90 percent may be African Americans, (Ellis 2001, 39; Jones 2003, 59-60) and “many of these converts are young black men” (Turner 2003, xxvi). Among non-black Americans, a few join Islam through marrying a Muslim, and a miniscule number convert through a personal change of conviction. However, conversion to Islam would be next to nothing among native-born Americans were it not for “a Black Pilgrimage to Islam” (Dannin 2002, 16).

Furthermore, the most fertile ground for Muslim recruitment of young black men is the American prison system. “The type of work that Muslims are presently using most effectively to penetrate nominal Christians is prison ministry” (Bailey 2001a, 167). Precise numbers cannot be determined, but it was estimated several years ago that there were more than 300,000 Muslim converts in prison, with a yearly conversion rate surpassing 30,000. The ramifications of this extend beyond prison because Muslim ex-prisoners who “reintegrate into society form a growing segment of the population of American Muslims.” The Muslim community “is developing initiatives to continue their education in Islam and to help integrate them into the community” (J. Smith 1999, 165).

Haddad (2000, 21) regards “the prisons of America, both state and federal facilities” as “major centers of Muslim reflection and identity.” Incarceration is a catalyst for conversion to Islam. Many young blacks go to prison and return to society that Islam is claiming an increasing proportion of the black community. According to Haddad (2000, 21), “some scholars estimate that by the second decade of the twenty-first century the majority of

African-American males will have converted to Islam.” Solid data is lacking, and this projection may be far-fetched, but few would dispute that Islam “has gained a strong foothold in the African-American community” (Elass 2004, 160) or that prison experience has played a major role in this movement.

*Prisoners Past and Present*

For many decades, African American varieties of Islam have established connections with prisoners. In recent years, as the rate of incarceration has soared among black males, opportunities to expand prisoner-friendly Islam have soared accordingly.

Prison experiences play a key role in the history of African American Muslims. This is true for many of the leaders in the Nation of Islam (NOI) and its predecessors. Noble Drew Ali, who founded the Moorish Science Temple in 1913 and created many precedents for the later Nation of Islam (Tsoukalas 2004, 453), faced frequent trouble with the law (Lincoln 1994, 48-52). Black Nationalist, Marcus Garvey, another leader admired by Black Muslims, spent two years in prison (Gardell 1996, 29). Nation of Islam founders Wallace Fard and Elijah Muhammad served prison terms, as did Elijah’s son Warith Deen Muhammad, who later led many African Americans toward the Sunni mainstream (Lincoln 1994, 265). Even Malcolm X, now an icon among African Americans, joined the Nation of Islam while a prisoner in 1947 (X and Haley, 1965; J. Smith 1999, 85-86).

As early as the 1930s, some of the key members of “Islamic-nationalist cults” serving prison time for draft evasion were striving to recruit fellow blacks incarcerated for other crimes. For a while they remained a seemingly negligible minority of the prison population, but their significance became more evident in “the mid-1960s, when blacks and Hispanics first began to outnumber whites in state and federal prisons” (Dannin 2002, 169).

In recent years, incarceration rates have risen so drastically that some speak of a “prison industrial complex” (Wright 2003, 63). In two decades, the number of black inmates more than quintupled, outnumbering black university students. “There were 791,600 black men in prison in 2000, and 603,032 enrolled in colleges or universities. This is a dramatic reversal of the situation in 1980 when... there were 143,000 black men behind bars but 463,700 enrolled in higher education” (Jones 2003, 61). Almost a third of black men in their twenties spend time in this “new prison/industrial complex” (Turner 2003, xxvi).

Perhaps this trend stems from the fact that many African Americans view the legal system with suspicion or contempt. Many blacks have seen little moral evil in breaking the laws of a society they perceive to be unjust and rigged for white advantage. From their perspective, whites “ha[ve] the judges, the juries, the shotguns, the law—in a word, power. But it [is] a criminal power, to be feared but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever” (Baldwin 1962, 36-37). Feeling justified by their frustration with the system, African Americans have not considered a prison sentence to be a shameful thing as it has been among white Americans.

In fact, when Black Muslim leaders were imprisoned for tax or draft evasion, many African Americans viewed them as political prisoners, heroes who refused to pay for or fight for a white-dominated system. Serving time in prison could be viewed as a badge of

courage or a rite of passage for Muslim advocates of black empowerment, much like it was for advocates of civil disobedience in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Those arrested and imprisoned for street crime (such as Malcolm X) might be seen as flawed. But even such offenders could be viewed as objects of oppression with white-imposed inferiority complexes, rather than as perpetrators of evil. The Nation of Islam and similar groups offered a narrative that denounced a society dominated by white devils, (E. Muhammad 1965, 115) providing instead identity and dignity to prisoners of color. They also offered strict standards and communal pressure to correct former faults and cultivate an upright, disciplined life (X and Haley, 1965; Farrakhan 1993, 112-117; McCloud 1995, 123-126; Dannin 1996).

Berkeley sociologist Loic Wacquant depicts blacks going “from slavery to mass incarceration” (2006, chapter 2). He calls mass imprisonment of blacks “the new ‘peculiar institution,’” contending that its purpose is to do what black slavery once did: “define, confine, and control African Americans” (2000, 378). Wacquant depicts a “deadly symbiosis” which operates in poor urban areas “to *make the ghetto more like a prison*” and alters “the U. S. penitentiary system... in ways that *make the prison more like a ghetto*” (2001a, 97).

Whatever one thinks of Wacquant’s ideology, two realities stand out: the burgeoning number of blacks who go to prison and the symbiosis between prisons and black ghettos. These realities provide the context for Muslim expansion among black prisoners and black communities outside prison.

#### *Allah Incarnate and the New Muhammad*

Before looking more closely at the prison context of Muslim expansion, it is helpful to consider the major variants of Islam among African Americans. Carl Ellis (2000) identifies two main kinds: “Black Nationalists” and “mainline Muslims.” The two differ sharply in doctrine and practice. Muslim orthodoxy insists that Allah cannot be incarnated, that prophecy ended with the final revelation of the Qur’an and that all ethnic groups of humanity are equal (Kateregga and Shenk 1997; Ellass 2004). In contrast, Elijah Muhammad, leader of Black Nationalist movements, contradicted these tenets of orthodox Islam (Cragg 2000, 207). Elijah proclaimed Wallace Fard as Allah incarnate, himself as prophet and whites as misbegotten reprobates (E. Muhammad 1965).

According to Elijah, in July 1930 Allah traveled from Mecca to Detroit in the person of Wallace D. Fard, also known as Master Fard Muhammad. The mysterious Fard had various brushes with the law and vanished in 1933. Elijah Muhammad claimed to be Fard’s chosen prophet and worked to build the Nation of Islam for the next four decades, until his death in 1975. Elijah Muhammad taught that Fard said, “My name is Mahdi; I am God.” Fard spoke of America’s doom and the destruction of “the present world of white mankind” (E. Muhammad 1965, 17). He went on to say that humanity was originally black. Furthermore, whites are a race of devils, developed through selective breeding 6,000 years ago by the evil scientist Yakub, in order to “kill and destroy the black nation” (E. Muhammad 1965, 115). In this ideology, Allah, the one true God is “the Supreme Black Man among Black Men, all of whom are divine” (Lincoln 1994, 220). Such ideas lack

factual grounding and contradict orthodox Islam, but they resonate with the hurts and hopes of many African Americans.

Despite deviating from Muslim orthodoxy, the NOI and other Black Nationalist groups use the labels “Islam” and “Muslim.” Once African Americans are drawn in and label themselves “Muslims,” many tend to keep the label. Later they may come to see key NOI teachings as “fairy tales” (Ellis 2001, 46). However, rather than repudiating Islam, many choose to redefine their Muslim identity in a more mainstream direction. They see themselves becoming more truly Muslim as their thinking and practice become increasingly Sunni.

#### *Toward the Muslim Mainstream*

Two pioneers in the transition “*From Black Muslims to Muslims*” (Marsh 1984) were Malcolm X and W. D. Muhammad. Malcolm X was Elijah Muhammad’s most effective minister, starting temples and befriending high profile figures such as Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali). However, Malcolm and his mentor parted in early 1964. A year later, Malcolm was shot to death; NOI gunmen were convicted of the killing. Malcolm’s influential *Autobiography* recounts not only his prison conversion to the Nation of Islam, but also his parting from Elijah Muhammad, his hajj to Mecca and his embrace of orthodox, multiracial Islam (X and Haley 1965, 323-388). Ever since Malcolm’s murder, African Americans have viewed him with growing reverence, and many have followed Malcolm’s path.

Wallace D. Muhammad (later titled Imam Warith Deen Muhammad), son of Elijah, befriended Malcolm and aided his move toward mainstream Islam. Wallace had contacts with Ahmadiyyah Muslims and was familiar with their multiracial mission (Turner 2003, 6). His studies with Sunni scholars led him to doubt his father’s doctrines and to deny Fard’s divinity, resulting in repeated expulsions from the NOI. However, shortly before Elijah’s death in 1975, he named Wallace his successor.

Before long, Wallace declared whites to be human, disbanded the martial Fruit of Islam group, sold off NOI businesses, renamed the Nation of Islam and in 1985, “instructed his local mosques to integrate themselves into the larger Muslim community” (Ahmed 1991, 20). W. D. Muhammad still encouraged black cohesiveness, but he insisted that Islam is compatible with being a loyal American and pursuing such American ideals as “personal freedom, individualism, and democracy” (Curtis 2002, 122).

As Imam Warith Deen Muhammad, he would go on to be the first Muslim to open the U.S. Senate with prayer and to participate in a presidential inauguration (Smith 1999, 93). He even visited the Pentagon to address America’s military elite—a complete reversal from earlier times when he and his father served prison sentences for refusing military service (Lincoln 1994, 265).

As Imam, he thus achieved the “re-Islamization” and “re-Americanization” of the movement (Nyang, in Turner 2003, xxii). He also “adopted a more assimilationist, ecumenical outlook toward Christianity” (Esposito 2000, 11). Following Malcolm X’s cue and W. D. Muhammad’s leadership, more than two million African American Muslims are now Sunni (Ellis 2001, 46).

By the time of Elijah Muhammad's death, the Black Nationalists had won a significant following in the prison system. However, W. D. Muhammad's move toward mainstream Sunni practice took many inmates in that direction as well. The African American Sunni community—inside and outside prison—would be far fewer without the large inflow of members from Black Nationalist groups. Sunni efforts in earlier decades had won some converts among African Americans, but never on the scale that occurred when many Black Nationalists began moving toward orthodoxy.

However, this merge didn't result in long-term unity among black Muslims. Mosques attempting to unite immigrant Muslims and African Americans had failed to satisfy blacks. By the late 1950s and 1960s, "tensions between indigenous Muslim converts and the immigrant community came to a head." In 1963, some Sunni African Americans split from Sunni Arab immigrants to form the Yasin Mosque in Brooklyn. This launched the Darul Islam movement, which spread to black urban communities across the U.S. "For several years, Darul Islam excluded immigrants from its community in order to exclusively convert African Americans to mainstream Islam." In 1968, the Darul prison committee helped establish Masjid Sankore in Green Haven State Prison and in other New York prisons. Blending commitment to Sunni Islam with "deep commitment to grassroots activism in poor black communities and prisons," Darul Islam established "the primary model for mainstream African-American Islamic identity" (Turner 2003, ixx-xxi). Black Sunnis built the model, but the most growth came through the addition of former NOI members.

### *Continuing Black Nationalism*

Despite the widespread movement toward Sunni Islam, not all Black Nationalists followed Malcolm X and W. D. Muhammad. Various splinter groups strove to claim the mantle of Elijah Muhammad and to continue his teachings. Foremost among these was a group led by Louis Farrakhan, which held on to the original label, "Nation of Islam" (Lincoln 1994, 267-269). To this day, the NOI officially opposes integration, calls for a separate state, demands release for all African American prisoners, rejects military service and claims that Allah came to earth "in the person of Master W. Fard Muhammad, July 1930—the long-awaited 'Messiah' of the Christians and the 'Mahdi' of the Muslims" (Farrakhan 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; Nation of Islam 2006).

It is questionable whether Farrakhan still holds such positions firmly or merely maintains a time-honored formula so that Black Nationalists will not defect from him. When addressing hardcore followers, Farrakhan still invokes the old ideas. However, in meetings with international Muslims and in thawing relations with W. D. Muhammad, Farrakhan has implied movement toward orthodox Islam (White 2001, 210).

Today, Sunni African Americans, estimated at over 2 million, far outnumber all in Black Nationalist groups that still claim the legacy of Elijah Muhammad (Ellis 2001, 46). However, such numbers do not tell the whole story. To dismiss Louis Farrakhan, for example, as someone with "an almost negligible number of adherents" (Poston 2001, 5) overlooks the ongoing Black Nationalist role in drawing African Americans to Islam.

Many Muslims of both strands, seeking identity in their African roots, think Islam was their ancestors' religion and should therefore be theirs as well—even though in reality the vast majority of these do not come from Muslim ancestry (Elass 2004, 161). Most

who join a Black Nationalist group later make a “transition from what some have called proto-Islam to more traditional or mainstream Islam” (Esposito 2000, 10). While fewer than 10 percent of African American Muslims belong to Black Nationalist groups, over 70 percent of black converts to Islam begin in such groups (Ellis 2001, 40).

Former NOI member Vibert White (2001, 206-215) fears that groups like Farrakhan’s will disappoint their followers and inoculate them to all forms of Islam. This may happen in some cases, but in many others, NOI lures people away from churches or non-affiliation onto a path that eventually leads to Sunni Islam. Because Farrakhan offers a variety of potent ideas and strategies, “it is quite easy to find someone in an African American church who is sympathizer to the Nation of Islam” (Darden 2001, 84). “African Americans have commodified selected aspects of Farrakhan’s message,” says Turner (2004, 466). “As the commodification process popularizes elements of Islamic culture among non-Muslims, Islam could indeed prevail in Black America in the twenty-first century.”

### *Perceived Problems of Christianity*

Whether or not Black Nationalists end up becoming Sunni, most people in both groups originate “from Protestant families or traditions.” Even younger Muslims who never had strong Christian belief, primarily come from Christian homes. “All too often, their conversion reflects a serious inadequacy in their religious environment” (Lincoln 1994, 25-26). They believe Islam will provide what their childhood churches lack.

A “corrupt system” linked with Christianity, whether it be ancient Byzantine rule or more recent American racism, tempts the oppressed to accept “a better deal” offered by Islam (Ab-Dat Isa 2001, 31). To understand modern Muslims in other countries, one must reckon with the legacy of Western colonialism and the plight of Palestinians (Cragg 2000, 178-181; Lewis 2003). Likewise, to understand NOI and other black Muslims in the United States, one must recognize the legacy of white racism and the plight of impoverished African Americans.

Much of the NOI’s attraction lay (and still lies) in its anti-white, anti-Christian stance (White 2001). Some blacks who resent “the domination of whites” also reject what they see as “the white man’s religion” (Lincoln 1994, 26-27). The church is often depicted as part of the problem—not part of the solution—to black suffering. Muslims, whether Black Nationalist or mainline, accentuate the church’s past complicity with slavery and its ongoing segregation on Sunday mornings (Poston 2001, 11).

However, white churches are not the only ones faulted; black churches, too, have deficiencies—perceived or real—that prompt some African Americans to search elsewhere. Some middle-class black churches blame people’s failures on “individual behavior rather than on structural impediments.” This repels those African Americans who still see “a system designed to keep them down” (Rouse 2004, 89) and view meek, submissive Christianity as part of that system.

Carl Ellis, writing as a black Christian, thinks African American churches have focused too much on suffering and not enough on empowerment. This was not always so. After the Civil War, African American churches pursued a vision to contribute to American society out of their own unique experience, to use their labor skills to prosper and to carry out a special Pan-African mission to bring Christ to people of African heritage in

many nations. “By 1870 the indigenous African American church was experiencing explosive growth. Why? Because core cultural issues were being addressed theologically” (Ellis 2001, 41).

Then, on the heels of this progression came three crippling tragedies: (1) Southern whites barred blacks from educational and political participation; (2) European immigration and white-only trade unions excluded blacks from skilled labor opportunities to build prosperity and dignity; (3) colonial powers who controlled much of Africa “began a systematic program of barring entry to new African American missionaries and expelling the ones already there,” thus destroying the mission and vision of African Americans. It was then that the African American church “reverted to the theology of suffering that had developed during slavery... no longer addressing empowerment concerns [such as] dignity, African identity, and the divine significance of the African American experience” (Ellis 2001, 42-43).

According to Ellis, this created a theological vacuum, and the Nation of Islam has taken advantage of it. The church far surpasses the NOI in “feeding lunch to the homeless and meeting community needs,” but African American churches are only beginning to wrestle with core issues they already addressed in an earlier era. These are issues that Black Nationalists have addressed vigorously: “dignity, identity, and divine significance” (Ellis 2001, 46).

A narrative that fosters black pride in opposition to whites is not the only form of empowerment offered by the NOI and other forms of Islam among African Americans. Their black achievement ideology and emphasis on education motivates adherents to strive for success (Akom 2003). The NOI has even won over impoverished blacks by pooling financial resources to foster black-run businesses and opportunities for employment (Smith 1999, 85; Edgerly and Ellis 2006).

Furthermore, most Islamic groups give men a sense of empowerment by emphasizing strength and leadership. This aspect of Islam appeals to men who want strong manhood and find churches too feminine in their membership and ethos (Lincoln 1994, 93; Ellis 2000; Jones 2003, 60). “Islam has never acquired the reputation of being a religion for ‘women and children,’ but instead has an air of masculinity attracting both genders” (Poston 2001, 10). Likewise, some women value the emphasis on modesty and “respect for black women,” and they will “adjust to a hierarchical system if it means saving the black male” (Jones 2003, 60).

The most prolific source of recruits for Muslim groups has been the prison system. First the NOI, and then more mainstream Muslim groups, have claimed success rehabilitating prisoners, addicts, street hustlers, pimps, prostitutes and others. Some dissolute lives become disciplined in a context of strict rules and communal accountability (Malcolm X 1964; Farrakhan 1993, 112-117; Lincoln 1994, 24; McCloud 1995, 123-126; Dannin 1996; Smith 1999, 165; Bailey 2001a, 167). Empowerment to live responsibly can come through Christian conversion; but if Christians fail to help, or if Christianity is refused, Islam (in both Black Nationalist and more mainstream forms) offers an alternative.

It would be misleading to overestimate Islam’s attraction for African Americans. Similarly, it would be unfair to underestimate the continuing strength of the black church. “African American Christianity remains a strongly viable entity... For most,

conversion from a vibrant Christian fellowship to a staid and formal Islamic orthodoxy is unthinkable” (Poston 2001, 10). Nevertheless, it is equally unwise to ignore the reality that more than two million African Americans have chosen Islam over Christianity.

*Community, Identity and Power Structures*

Most Westerners hold “a highly negative stereotype of Muslims.” Therefore, the vast majority of Americans would not even consider converting to Islam. However, people “who are strongly opposed to their sociocultural environment” are more open to a religion opposed by the surrounding culture (Poston 2001, 11). A history of slavery and segregation, coupled with the present experience of poverty or imprisonment, makes blacks more likely than other Americans to oppose the reigning system.

Converts to Islam “have opted out of the dominant American cultural identity” (Haddad 2000, 20). In doing this, African American converts may feel a new sense of liberty, dignity and community. “To be identified with a movement that openly rejects the fundamental values of the powerful majority is to increase vastly one’s self-esteem and one’s stature among one’s peers” (Lincoln 1994, 27).

Moreover, nowhere is the attraction to alternate community, identity and power structure more powerful than behind bars. Inmates negatively experience at least three kinds of power structures: (1) socioeconomic and judicial structures of nation, state and city; (2) official structures of the penal system and corrections officers of the particular institution in which they are incarcerated; (3) structures of coercion and dominance among the prison population itself.

Robert Dannin, a leader in ethnographic research among Muslim African Americans in prison, says that Islam helps to “redefine the conditions of incarceration.” A Muslim convert professes the shahada to others at the prison mosque. “His Islamic identity then means a fresh start, symbolized by the choice of a new name, modifications in his physical appearance and an emphasis on prayer. He is linked to his Muslim brothers worldwide [and] to his fellow Muslim prisoners” (Dannin 2002, 175). Thus the inmate’s new connection to the Muslim community redefines his relation to other power structures that impinge upon him.

Islam distinguishes between *Dar al-Harb* and *Dar al-Islam* (Lewis 2003, 31). “Through religious practice, the prisoner distances himself from the outside world, conceptualized as dar al-harb, and migrates (hijra) toward the ideal of dar al-Islam, defined not by territory but by Islamic practice” (Dannin 2002, 176). This doctrine nurtures independence from, and resistance to, non-Muslim structures of nation, state or city. Muslims emphasize communal loyalty and distinctive public practices such as daily prayers, seasons of fasting, dietary restrictions, codes of cleanliness, Islamic garb and Islamic naming (J. Smith 1999, 165). This can shape the prisoner’s perception of himself in relation to non-Muslim structures of the wider society. No longer a helpless victim or a compliant lackey of a corrupt society, the black inmate may now stand with a cause that is righteous, brave and ultimately triumphant.

Muslim prisoners also feel less subservient to their local prison’s official power structure. The penal system’s rules and procedures matter less than Allah’s sharia for the *ummah*:

Since the community ethos remains more or less impermeable to the prison administration, the sharia helps redefine and reproduce an alternative social space where the inmates' behavior can be monitored and judged according to Islamic rules... The total effect is to bolster the spirit of resistance by asserting an alternative legal space inside the prison. (Dannin 2002, 176)

Thus, many African American inmates look to Muslim leaders more than to wardens or guards for direction and security.

Besides the official power structure of the prison, the most pressing concern to many inmates is the unofficial power structure among the prisoners themselves. In prison, "the brutality and corruption of the street are magnified to gargantuan proportions... Sexual possession, domination, and submission represent forms of 'hard currency' in prison." In contrast, Islam rejects homosexuality and encourages defense of fellow Muslims. Being a Muslim thus provides a measure of protection and builds "resistance to the more overt dominance hierarchies encountered in prison life" (Dannin 2002, 175-177).

Observers less sympathetic to Islam might view a grouping of African American Muslim inmates as just one more race-based prison gang promising protection to members and harm to opponents. This contains a measure of truth, for the desire to survive is a factor in some conversions. Moreover, "loyalty to one's own race over against other groups is deemed essential" in many prisons (Elass 2004, 161). Such realities must be understood by anyone trying to explain the frequency of conversion to Islam among African American inmates. At the same time, one must also acknowledge many cases where motives are mixed, or where Islam taps into genuinely ethical-religious aspirations to be a transformed person in a transformed community.

#### *Personal Transformation*

Personal transformation has played a key role in the spread of Islam among African American prison populations and ghettos. In 1946, Elijah Muhammad finished a four-year term in a Michigan prison for resisting the military draft. He came to believe "that black religious and political organizations had not developed programs to rehabilitate the lowest of the black lower class—the pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts, and young criminals." So, he offered the Nation of Islam's blend of narrative, spiritual practices and discipline "to save these people" (Turner 2003, 182).

Elijah's foremost convert among prisoners, Malcolm X, though eager to advance black power and eventually wary of the NOI's capacity for intimidation and violence, still placed the strongest accent on transformation through submission to Allah. Social, racial and political factors (though vital) do not explain away the religious and ethical dimensions of Malcolm's experience and message. As Malcolm's case shows, various factors may facilitate conversion to Islam among African American prisoners, but one must still take seriously the many overtly religious testimonies of transformation.

Elijah's son, W. D. Muhammad, though turning from NOI heterodoxy toward Sunni orthodoxy, continued his father's legacy of mission to prisoners. W.D. Muhammad wanted prison ministries to "create a sense of responsibility in young Muslims." He emphasized doctrinal teaching, practical training for reentry into society and encouragement to "become leaders in society upon release" (J. Smith 1999, 166). This again shows that

Islam among prisoners must be seen as a religious movement, not just as a gang or political movement, for many Muslim inmates seek renewal for themselves and others.

Louis Farrakhan (1993, 115) boasts, “Muslims are relatively crime free, and our rate of recidivism is lower than in the main.” Research supports the contention that Islam reduces “the return to crime and imprisonment.” Although becoming Muslim “is not a firm guarantee that incarceration is a thing of the past,” (J. Smith 1999, 165) some drug addicts and alcoholics are better able to deal with their addiction after conversion to Islam (Lincoln 1994, 24). Muslim ex-prisoners seek to transform communities “through the teaching of responsibility, family values, and accountability... hoping to save their children from a future of violence and the drug-infested ghettos of America” (Haddad 2000, 21).

Adopting Muslim ritual practices and living by Muslim morality enables many, especially “in maximum-security facilities,” to maintain a sense of pride, worth and belonging (J. Smith 1999, 166). Many inmates echoed this theme to Dannin. As one put it, “In here the Muslims are an island in a sea of ignorance.” Dannin explains, “Islam’s attraction for prisoners lies in its power to transcend the material and often brutally inhuman conditions of prison [producing] a miracle of rebirth” (Dannin 2002, 187).

Christian prison ministries are also demonstrably effective in helping people to gain new identity, break old habits and live transformed lives. However, Christians should not be unaware of Islam’s success in personal transformation among inmates.

#### *Expanded Rights for Muslim Prisoners*

Muslim growth has challenged “the Black Church’s spiritual monopoly” (Dannin 2002, 261). This is true inside prison as well as outside. In response, Christians must address failings that make some people with a church background susceptible to Islam. Christians must also seek to win African American Muslims to the lordship of Jesus and participation in His church. Strengthening and spreading Christian faith—the key calling for Christians in the encounter with African American Muslim inmates—is addressed in later sections. The present section focuses on another issue: recognizing Muslim inmates’ rights and freedoms of religious expression.

Prison officials often lack understanding of Islam in its various forms. Some, especially in earlier days, tended to look favorably upon Christianity in the prison, while they viewed Islam as threatening to prison authority (McCloud 1995, 123-124). Differences between Sunni Islam, the Nation of Islam and other Muslim groups further complicated institutional efforts to accommodate religious preferences (Dannin 2002, 173; 187). Over time, however, some officials have come to view Muslim influence as an aid to order and rehabilitation, resulting in more concessions to Muslim preferences.

In situations where Muslim prisoners felt officials were limiting or suppressing Muslim practices, some often successfully, pursued litigation (C. Smith, 1993). For example, “Muslims have fought for, and in many cases won, the right to have *halal* food, to wear beards, to gather for Friday prayer, and to observe the fast of Ramadan with *iftar* meals at the end of the day” (J. Smith 1999, 167).

In other prisons, Muslim practices are still limited. Courts still allow prison administrators considerable leeway to impose policies that some inmates find restrictive to their preferred religious practices. For instance, the Supreme Court upheld a prison’s rule

that barred Muslims from Friday services. In this case, the prison did not even have to prove that there was no other less religiously-restrictive way to maintain order and security. In view of such rulings, Midgeley (2003, 293-294) complains, “The burden is now on the prisoner to show that the regulation is irrational rather than being on the prison administration to show why the regulation is reasonable.”

Still, the overall trend of court decisions and prison policies has been toward growing opportunity for Muslim prisoners to express their faith individually and communally. It is true that the state’s “obligation to promote security, order, and rehabilitation in its penal system” sometimes trumps religious rights, and it is also true that prisoners relinquish some constitutional rights because of their incarceration. However, when Muslims can show that a prison is not treating them the way it treats people of other religions, “the courts have generally been inclined to support their constitutional claims” (Moore 1991, 141).

Christians, though not eager to see Islam advance, should generally support the religious rights of Muslim inmates, on principle as well as for practical reasons. When encountering people of other faiths, the Christian principle is to use biblical persuasion, not institutional coercion. If Christians want the legal right to practice their faith, they should support that same right for people of other faiths. At a practical level, prisons that stifle Muslim worship and expression are also less likely to accommodate the religion of other inmates, including Christians. Thus, if a highly secularized prison administration allows little space for faith, Christians may be wise to partner with Muslims in efforts to expand religious opportunities for all.

#### *Recommendations for Christian Mission*

The Christian encounter with African American Muslims in prison must go beyond recognition of legal religious rights. Christians must “contend for the faith” (Jude 1:3) and witness to Jesus as the Son of God when they encounter those who deny the lordship of Christ. Nothing less than eternal life is at stake (1 John 2:22-25; 5:10-12).

African American Christology “has been a little fuzzy,” suggests Carl Ellis (2000). Though Jesus is thought of as God, His deity has not been worked out sufficiently or explained rationally. Seeing Jesus as “my friend and help” is valuable as far as it goes, but a “fuzzy” Christology leaves some black churchgoers vulnerable to Muslims who say, “Oh, we revere Jesus.” Robust belief and clear teaching of biblical Christology, always central to the church, are necessary when evangelizing in prisons.

Christians must also resist the tendency to slide into syncretistic, pluralistic notions that erode biblical authority, deny the necessity of faith in Christ crucified and posit alternate ways to be right with God. Christians must view Muslims as people precious to God but in need of salvation (Poston 2001, 14-18). Christians must clearly teach Jesus’ deity and salvation by grace through faith in His atonement. Muslims who eventually experience Islam as “a works-righteousness treadmill” (Ellis 2000) may come to embrace this good news.

While proclaiming salvation by grace, Christians ministering in prison must be wary of a pietism that is antinomian and individualistic. “Historically, Christian prison reformers envisioned conversion as cloistered reflection or silent prayer,” whereas Muslims

stress new identity, behavioral change “and social relationships” (Dannin 2002, 176). Christian prison ministry must do a superior job of teaching obedience to the Bible in the Spirit’s power and must nurture Christian community for encouragement and accountability. Unless Christians show solidarity and evidence of new life, they are unlikely to win people impressed by the Muslim *ummah* and its discipline.

In the broader church context, congregations must foster empowerment and healthy identity. Churches must avoid a feminization that ignores or repels males. They must proclaim a faith that is holistic, not limited to inner feelings. Christians must offer the whole Christ for the whole of life in a manner relevant to the specific contexts of African Americans.

It is hard to reach people’s hearts if you ignore their background. Understanding the context of African American Muslims can help us to reach them with the gospel in a way that is sensitive and penetrating. More fruitful outreach to this group “occurs when they realize that Christians have taken the time to understand them and can speak to them in ways that reflect that understanding” (Tsoukalas 2004, 459). Knowledge of teachings and practices of various Muslim groups, sensitivity to African American travails and aspirations and familiarity with realities of prison life could strengthen Christian mission in both personal encounter and strategic planning.

Some people are more naturally positioned than others to reach people of a particular demographic group. For example, Christians converted from Islam understand Muslims better than those who have never been part of Islam or are unfamiliar with its teachings. Similarly, Christian blacks tend to understand their fellow African Americans better than whites do, and Christian prisoners and ex-prisoners tend to identify with inmates more than people who have never been incarcerated.

Thus, an ex-Muslim African American Christian who has served prison time would be most naturally positioned for mission to African American Muslim inmates. To be black, ex-Muslim or a prison inmate/alumnus—or two of the three—gives advantages for such mission work over someone who is none of the three (such as myself). Churches and prison ministries should seek to encourage and train such people wherever possible.

This does not mean, however, that no one else qualifies for mission work among incarcerated African-American Muslims. Non-black Christians can reach out to African Americans. Those outside prison can minister to those inside. Those who have never been Muslim can witness to those who are. Moreover, missions is not just the task of individuals, but of the church body, and a key part of the church’s witness is its diversity and partnership among varying members.

I am a director at Crossroad Bible Institute, a prison ministry connecting thousands of volunteers outside prison with thousands of people inside. CBI offers biblical training and encouragement to prisoners and their families, as well as opportunities for mentoring after release from prison. Many volunteers’ backgrounds differ from the inmates, but their ministry is still effective and appreciated. One branch of Crossroad, The Center for Advanced Studies, focuses specifically on training several hundred of the most gifted inmates for theological and spiritual leadership within the body of believers in prison. In this way, CBI tries to balance a commitment to indigenous ministry with commitment to the unity and mutual edification of the entire body of Christ.

*Learning to Love*

Winning African American Muslim prisoners to Christ and His church involves praying for them, loving them and applying the Bible to their core issues. Carl Ellis, a veteran of outreach to African American Muslims, says, “Every Muslim that I’ve met who came to Christ always came to Christ for one or more of those reasons, and the one that I hear mentioned mostly is the love” (Ellis 2000).

Fear is a major barrier to love, and African American Muslim inmates may seem frightening at three levels. (1) They are black, and that alone can cause fear or contempt in some whites. (2) They are Muslim, and that alone can scare non-Muslim Americans. (3) They are convicted criminals, and that alone is enough to mark them as dangerous persons to be locked away from interaction with the public. The triple combination of black, Muslim and convict magnifies the sense of menace, making it all the harder for many Christians to lay aside preconceptions and to reach out in loving witness. But love must prevail.

Love is especially crucial for winning those who have been alienated by hate. Racist hate, political and economic oppression and exploitation by the church comprised the soil in which Islam first began to grow among African Americans (Elass 2004, 161). Much has changed in recent decades; legal structures have improved, economic and educational opportunities have increased and the black middle class has grown considerably. This somewhat diminishes the appeal that Black Nationalism had in its heyday (Poston 2001, 12), but major pockets of poverty and despair still remain, along with high rates of crime and incarceration (Jones 2003, 61; Turner 2003, xxvi). Those in such situations remain especially vulnerable to Islam in its various forms (Lincoln 1994, 23).

Most churches now preach love among all races, and attitudes about racial diversity have improved among evangelicals. However, many churches and communities remain separated along racial lines, while many white evangelicals remain naïve about the structural dimensions of a racialized society (Emerson and Smith, 2000; Hays, 2003). To prevent defections to Islam and to win Muslims to Christ and His church, Christians must live and worship together in a love that unites believers of all races and reaches out to unbelievers of every ethnic background.

As love overcomes racial hostility and division, it must also melt fears and negative attitudes toward Muslims and prison inmates. Negative Western stereotypes of Muslims may help to prevent many Americans from considering conversion to Islam (Poston 2001, 11), but such stereotypes also inhibit evangelism and conversion *from* Islam. Love and understanding, not paranoia and stereotyping, must govern Christian relations to Muslims (Ramachandra 1999, 43).

Aggressive argument seldom wins hearts to Christ. When Muslims (of any ethnic background) become Christians, the conversion frequently occurs in response to “Christ-like love” which they did not find in Islam (AbDat-Isa 2001, 38). Rather than regard Muslims only as adversaries to oppose, Christians must see them as persons loved by God and sought by Christ. While remaining realistic about Islam as a religion opposing the Christian faith, Christians must witness with love.

In a similar way, love must govern Christian attitudes and actions toward prisoners. Rather than viewing prisoners as outcasts and threats to society, Christians must

demonstrate the Lord's own love for prisoners (Ps. 107:10-16, 146:7; 1 Chron. 33:1-20; Matt. 25:36,43; Luke 4:18, 23:43; Heb. 13:3).

While more conversions to Islam occur in prison than anywhere else in America, very little Christian prison ministry specifically targets Islamic influence (Bailey 2001a, 73; 2001b, 204). As Christians concerned with the spread of the Gospel to the incarcerated, let us urgently unite a strategic mind with a loving heart to counter Islam with the life-transforming message of the Christian faith.

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