
The Nation and the Church: What the Church can Learn from the Nation of Islam Today

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This article takes an ethnographic approach to examining the present day Nation of Islam (NOI) and the implications of its history and sustained efficacy for the Church. Research centers around several devout members of the NOI living on Chicago's south side. Themes discussed in the article focus on concepts of African American identity, ultimate truth, divine judgment, and self-pride, all of which serve the purpose of elevating group and individual self-confidence and independence. In light of the rise to prominence of the NOI and its message, as well as its continued viability long after its founders have passed away, implications for the Church and its relationship with African Americans are explored and suggestions are made for the Church moving forward.

Introduction

“The power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world’s definition. So every attempt is made to cut that black man down—not only is made yesterday but is made today.” James Baldwin penned those words in his 1963 classic *The Fire Next Time* in reference to an evening he spent with the prophet and leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, and several of his followers after receiving an invitation to join the Nation. He left Muhammad’s home that evening for the most part unable to agree with their racial beliefs and unconvinced that their predictions for a future separation by Black people from America was realistic, yet sympathetic to the Muslims he encountered and their reasons for joining a movement like the Nation of Islam (henceforth referred to as the NOI) partially encapsulated in the above quote.

Much of the evidence at hand would seem to vindicate those initial impressions. Muhammad himself died in 1975, and shortly thereafter, most of what made the NOI distinct from other Islamic groups also appeared to be gone under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad’s son W.D. Muhammad. Elijah Muhammad’s Black Muslims had mostly converted to mainstream Sunni Islam under his son’s direction (still considered to be the largest mass conversion to Sunni Islam in history), and doctrines excluding Whites from joining, teaching that Allah appeared in the form of Fard Muhammad, and establishing a unique dress code for members, were abolished. Race relations in

America, while still far from just, had improved slightly and thus detracted from Elijah Muhammad’s main appeal to potential converts. Finally, the warning of God’s impending judgment on White America seemed to be growing stale in the years after Muhammad’s death, as apocalyptic prophecies are wont to do when decades go by with no visible indication of their fulfillment.

Still, many remained unsatisfied with the changes the new leader had implemented and longed to return to the old days and the old teachings. Louis Farrakhan, having been passed over for leadership the first time around, knew this and used his considerable popularity and charm to reboot the NOI under the old principles and in opposition to the orthodoxification taking place under W.D. Muhammad’s authority. While Farrakhan was working to cast himself as the legitimate leader of the NOI, and on a superficial level at least, much was changing in the plight of the African American community, there were many for whom Elijah Muhammad’s message never stopped ringing true. It is they who converged around Louis Farrakhan and who continue to see themselves as the true emissaries of Allah to his chosen people: the Black man and woman of America.

It is around them that this paper revolves. I intend for this ethnography to be primarily concerned with what these ideas and points of doctrine mean for those within the NOI community, for those on the outside but adjacent to the NOI in terms of religion and culture—i.e. African Americans who are not Muslim and Muslims who are not African American

secondarily, and only on a tertiary level what the significance of the NOI is for White American culture. My aim is to present their belief system in a way that a member of the NOI and an outside academic would both acknowledge is fair and encapsulates it in its totality, rather than as a fragmented look at isolated doctrines. At least some of the NOI's perception problem outside of their own communities has been the way that media pundits and others have decontextualized quotes, sound bites, and aspects of their theology without attempting to look at how they fit into a larger whole. When looked at as a whole, the NOI belief system is coherent and relevant in the eyes of their followers, and it is their understanding that we will attempt to grasp in this paper.

In addition to striving to present an even-handed look at the NOI's worldview through my ethnography, I will conclude by making the case that there is much to be learned for America as a whole, and for the American Church, specifically, by examining the history and belief system of the NOI. There is much that the NOI has done right, or at least successfully, and much that the Church has done wrong in engaging and advocating for the African American community. Rather than ignoring or rejecting this reclusive sect out of hand, it is worthwhile to examine why their message has resonated with so many individuals for whom Christianity has failed to meaningfully engage.

I chose to focus my research for this article on Black Muslims in Chicago for a couple of reasons. Although I had spent much time abroad and among immigrant communities whose predominant religion was Islam, I knew little of Islam among native born Americans. Similarly, although I had spent much of my adult life living and working and worshipping in African American contexts, most of my relationships in such contexts were with Christians. Though the number of Black Muslims amounts to only about 2% of the Black population in America,¹ the largest number of American Muslims are Black, and historically there has been no more visible or influential Black Muslim sect than the NOI. This knowledge, along with a few conversations that piqued my interest in the movement, inspired me to explore the intersection between these two spheres.

I would like to preface the remainder of this article by briefly discussing my research methodology. As this was an ethnography, fieldwork involving formal and informal interviews with members of this community, as well as purposeful observation taking place at relevant field sites were the most important forms of research I conducted. I maintained a few relationships with male members of the NOI for the duration of the research phase that were invaluable to the outcomes of

this project, as well as several others that only involved a conversation or two, but nevertheless made an impact on my research. The three individuals whom I will discuss the most heavily over the course of this article I have given the pseudonyms, Brother Rasheed, Brother Hafiz, and Brother Nassir.

Additionally, literary and audio/visual sources played an outsized role in my research. This was the case for a number of reasons, many of which will be clarified further over the course of this article. One primary reason I will highlight now is the singular importance of knowledge in the NOI belief system. They understand their doctrine, defined mainly as the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, to be the medicine necessary to treat a sick society, and as such, modifications and innovations are strictly forbidden. Out of both a hesitancy to speak incorrectly on behalf of their religion and a general distrust of outsiders (especially White outsiders writing about them), I would often be pointed in the direction of NOI published reading material or handed a DVD to watch when attempting to engage NOI Muslims on their beliefs. It should also be noted that consistent with their worldview is the idea that it is better for a seeker of knowledge to be pointed directly to the source of that knowledge—Elijah Muhammad's writings—rather than for them to receive it secondhand through their own fallible explanations.

In this ethnography, I will describe my findings by breaking them down into six major themes. These themes are simply the topics that I found to be recurring the most when I would converse with my interlocutors and otherwise research their belief system. I did not set out looking for these themes or any others in particular, nor did I seek to limit them to six. This project was intended as a vehicle for the members of this community to speak for themselves on what is important to them, rather than primarily as an outsider's analysis of an already often mischaracterized organization. To be clear, there are points at which most outside the NOI will find themselves starkly opposed to their worldview, but my purpose with this article is not to be another White voice adding to the cacophony of condemnation against the NOI and its present leader, Louis Farrakhan. Furthermore, I will add some of my own analysis towards the end of this article, as well as what I believe are some lessons the Church can learn from this study. But that is not where I want to begin.

The Devil

The first theme I would like to explore is that of the doctrine of the White devil. When it comes to aspects

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/black/>

of the NOI belief system outsiders might find objectionable, this one is perhaps the best example. That said, it is not one that is an example of misinformation. Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, and everyday members of the NOI like the ones I regularly met with all attested to their belief that collectively, the White man is the devil. I do not believe the best approach in discussing this doctrine is to make apologies for it or attempt to minimize it. Instead, what I hope to do is explain more of what exactly it seems to mean that the White man is the devil through the words of my interlocutors and others, as well as provide necessary historical context which precipitated the teaching of this doctrine.

First, it is difficult to overstate the degree of racial persecution that occurred in America through the first half of the last century, which is precisely the time period that the NOI was formed. Remember, Elijah Muhammad was born in 1897 in rural Georgia, solidly in the old confederacy, where persecution of Black people was at its strongest. In describing the political atmosphere of that time and place, W.E.B. DuBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Not a single Southern legislature stood ready to admit a Negro, under any conditions, to the polls; not a single Southern legislature believed free Negro labor was possible without a system of restrictions that took all its freedom away; there was scarcely a white man in the South who did not honestly regard Emancipation as a crime, and its practical nullification as a duty” (Dubois 2008, 27).

Numerous illustrations of some of the more heinous means by which Southern Whites would attempt to execute this “practical nullification” of Emancipation are easy to find. While it is well-known that there were economic motivations luring migrants north during this period of history, many have argued that the drive towards the cold, strange cities of the North was more push than pull. In the documentary *13th*, Bryan Stevenson described the migrants’ motivation for leaving the South by saying that, “very few people appreciate that the African Americans in those communities did not go there as immigrants seeking new economic opportunities. They went there as refugees from terror” (Stevenson 2016).

In her genre-crossing modern classic *The Warmth of Other Suns*, documenting the Great Migration, Isabel Wilkerson included several stories exemplifying this kind of terror. Perhaps the most memorable is the story of Claude Neal, a twenty three year old farmhand from Marianna, Florida, accused of the rape and murder of a twenty year old White woman named Lola Cannidy. His story bore the markers of many a Southern lynching: dubitable evidence attesting to his

guilt in the matter, police who offered little resistance to a vigilante mob hellbent on administering their own sense of justice, and no consequences whatsoever for those who so brazenly flouted the legal system in carrying out the torture and murder of a likely innocent Black man.

Still, the details of his torture are disturbing to read even for those acutely familiar with the context in which this story takes place. After his arrest, the police were forced to move Neal several times as a result of the lynch mob’s pursuit. Upon his whereabouts in a small town jail in Alabama being leaked, “A lynching party of some one hundred men drove several hours on Highway 231 in a thirty car caravan from Florida to Alabama. There the men managed to divert the local sheriff and overtake the deputy. They stormed the jail and took Neal, his limbs bound with a plow rope, back to Marianna.” From here, the account only grows more heinous. A ravenous crowd had gathered at the location announced as the execution site, while Neal’s kidnappers took him into the woods nearby to torture him. There, they “took knives and castrated him in the woods. Then they made him eat the severed body parts and ‘say he liked it,’ a witness said. ‘One man threw up at the site,’ wrote the historian James R. McGovern.” The torture went on for hours and involved knives, plow ropes, and hot irons, while they waited for the anxious crowd to mellow. Eventually, they decided to kill him there in the woods, to the chagrin of those waiting, particularly the dead girl’s father, who had been promised the first shot. After his prolonged death, his corpse was hung from a tree in the courthouse lawn. “Postcards of his dismembered body went for fifty cents each. When the sheriff cut down the body the next morning, a mob of as many as two thousand people demanded that it be rehanged. When the sheriff refused to return it to the tree, the crowd attacked the courthouse and rampaged through Marianna, attacking any colored person they ran into.”²

In light of accounts like this, and countless others like it from across the South and throughout the Jim Crow era, exactly the setting within which Elijah Muhammad was raised, calling White people a “race of devils” does not seem that outlandish. Yet for White Northerners in the twenty first century, it is tempting to hear stories like this and think that their own ancestors were not so depraved. After all, we tell ourselves, it was the South that fought for slavery during the Civil War and the North that fought for Emancipation. Such attitudes require a closer look at the historical facts surrounding the Great Migration, the time period stretching from the early decades of the last century up until around 1970 when Black people in staggering

²The quotes and paraphrases in the preceding account are taken entirely from Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns*. New York: Vintage Books. 2010. Kindle. Loc. 1150.

numbers moved from the rural South to the urban centers of the North, Northeast, and West. While lynch mobs were much less common, though not unheard of, outside the former Confederacy, and voting rights were not suppressed like they were in the migrants' homeland, housing segregation was much more vehemently upheld in the cities on the receiving end of the Great Migration.

During the Civil Rights era, there was a saying that encapsulated the differences between White attitudes towards Blacks in the South versus in the North. "In the South, the White man doesn't care how close you get, as long as you don't get too high. In the North, he doesn't care how high you get, as long as you don't get too close" (Moser 2012). Chicago, where I live and where I conducted the research for this project, is probably the city that best illustrates the Northern half of this attitude. Prior to the start of the Great Migration, Black Chicagoans accounted for less than three percent of the population (Wilderson 2010, loc. 308), and were confined to a narrow longitudinal strip south of downtown called "the Black Belt." As more and more Black Southerners moved to the city over the next half century, eventually topping out at one third of the population, the Black Belt became severely overcrowded and appeared ready to burst at the seams if the surrounding White neighborhoods would not give way to residential integration. Something had to give as neither the ongoing stream of migrants from the deep South nor the nationwide push for civil rights showed any signs of decelerating.

Just as with the story of Claude Neal, it is helpful in painting the picture to include a story illustrative of the kinds of persecution Black families would face when attempting to set up residence outside of the boundaries demarcated for them. One instance of this kind of treatment for those African Americans attempting to move to a White neighborhood was that of the Clark family, who in 1951 decided they would move from the overcrowded Black Belt to the town of Cicero, just outside the city limits of Chicago. After White Cicero residents and police together managed to turn the Clarks away once, they successfully sued for the right to move in the following month. That set the stage for one of the ugliest episodes of racial hostility in Chicago's history. The Clark family managed to move their furniture into their new apartment, but as an angry crowd began to swell, they fled the scene:

A mob stormed the apartment and threw the family's furniture out of a third-floor window as the crowds cheered below. The neighbors burned the couple's marriage license and the children's baby pictures. They overturned the refrigerator and tore the stove and plumbing fixtures out of the wall. They tore up the carpet. They shattered the mirrors. They bashed

in the toilet bowl. They ripped out the radiators. They smashed the piano Clark had worked overtime to buy for his daughter. And when they were done, they set the whole pile of the family's belongings, now strewn on the ground below, on fire.

In an hour, the mob "destroyed what had taken nine years to acquire," wrote the historian Stephen Grant Meyer of what happened that night (Wilderson 2010, loc. 6822).

Wilderson also added that although the Illinois governor had to call in the National Guard and a total of 118 men were arrested during the incident, not a single one of the rioters was indicted (Wilderson 2010, loc. 6823).

As it should be clear by now, no part of America could be looked at as a safe haven for African Americans who had had enough after centuries of enslavement, disenfranchisement, discrimination, and outright terrorism in the South. Ever-present fear of being perceived as stepping out of line on one end of the Great Migration, or severely limited occupational and residential prospects made worse by steeper competition on the other end, were the choices for African Americans during the lifetime of Elijah Muhammad trying to decide whether to stay in the South or roll the dice and venture North. It should really be looked at as no surprise then, that he came to the conclusion that Whites were a race of devils and taught his followers the same.

It is, perhaps, more telling that he was able to gather a movement behind him by preaching his message of what the true identities of the White man and the Black man were. Asking whether Muhammad's teachings on this topic precipitated his followers prejudiced views towards White people or whether it was the other way around is a bit of a chicken and egg inquiry, but there seems to be little doubt that the Nation of Islam's rise would not have been possible if not for centuries of subjugation of African Americans and their consequently negative feelings towards their oppressors. This message resonated deeply with the common experiences of Black men and women of his day, and if the longevity and strength of the movement as it stands under Minister Louis Farrakhan is any indication, this day as well.

Through numerous conversations with Brother Rasheed and my other interlocutors, I have come to understand that the NOI worldview is made up of interlocking pieces that necessitate being examined as a whole, rather than as isolated doctrines. The understanding of the collective White man as the devil, for instance, is important in grasping, as Malinowski put it, "the native's point of view, his relation to life... *his* vision of *his* world" (Malinowski 1922: loc. 952) [emphasis in the original], but it is probably more

important to understand this belief's counterpart—the true identity of oneself as a Black man, as well as what end this served functionally. In stating what seems obvious to the Black perspective, that White people have been the historical enemy, and in taking it to a religious level by ascribing to him the label of “devil,” Elijah Muhammad offered a meaning and significance to the frequently overlooked and ignored struggles of his followers as a result of racism.

This often strikes White individuals with great offense, both for the obvious reason that nobody enjoys being called “the devil” when they feel they have not personally done anything wrong, and for the less obvious but still important tendency of White people to make discussions of race about them personally, even when they are not the primary subject of discussion. The true importance of the belief in Whites as devils is more in what it means for the Black people who believe in the NOI's message than in the supposed devils. If your historical enemies are the literal devil, then both by logical extension and by the explicit teaching of the NOI, you are on the side of righteousness.

This belief in who the true enemies of both Black people and God Himself are is one leg on which the entire belief system of the Nation of Islam and its members rests. Having a common enemy unites a people, and for African Americans, the evidence was already there for someone to point to identify who that enemy was. By naming and describing who their enemy *really* was, Elijah Muhammad was able to unite a significant number of people into his movement and thus open them up to the rest of his teachings and solidify what ended up becoming the largest and most influential American-born Black religious movement to date.

Without going into detail, it should also be noted that the doctrine of the White devil is more nuanced than it might appear. While it is a vital component of their belief system and central to their proselytic appeal, this apparently rather prejudiced doctrine is mitigated by its application by both the leaders and laypeople of the NOI. I was welcomed and engaged by members of the NOI throughout my field research for this project. White people have spoken at NOI gatherings on several occasions over the years. Louis Farrakhan himself considers numerous White people, notably Catholic priest Father Michael Pfleger, among his friends. When questioned about his relationship with Farrakhan and comments he has made in the past about White people as “blue-eyed devils,” Pfleger explained that “he’s talking about those Whites ‘who choose to be participants in the oppression of others’ and are therefore ‘representatives of the devil, the source of all evil’” (McClory 2010, 138).

One of my interlocutors, Brother Hafiz, told me at the outset of our first meeting that although I had

probably heard that in the NOI they call White people devils, “we also have been taught that we got Black people that’s devils too. And what is a devil? A devil is a person who goes against the law of God . . . So not only can a White person be a devil, but a Black person can be a devil. We know that. But we have moved away from that saying because it is a different time now.” In essence, the doctrine of the White devil is more about the idea of the White man than it is about White individuals, and it is more about the catalyzing function it plays in how NOI Muslims understand themselves and their place in the world than it is about anyone or anything outside of the NOI and their desired proselytes.

The Medicine

In fact, a proper understanding of one's own identity and orientation in history is at the center of nearly all of the teachings of the NOI. While other belief systems emphasize faith, social action, or an emotional response, and to varying extents each of these are present in the NOI, the key element in the personal transformation offered by the NOI is knowledge. To be clear, this knowledge is understood as the entirety of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. It is believed to be the medicine necessary to cure a sick and needy society, which is the second theme in my findings. As one young Muslim I interviewed told me, “In order to become the sons of God, you have got to have knowledge, because knowledge is power . . . We can replace that word ‘power’ with ‘knowledge.’”

My interlocutors were emphatic about the necessity of NOI teachings as the cure for the problems in their society. This was so because of the personal transformation that they testify to in their own lives as a result of joining the NOI. Brother Hafiz shared with me details of his own upbringing: discontent with the Christianity of his family from an early age, getting involved with the Vice Lords street gang as a teenager, and eventually rising through the ranks to become the second highest ranking member of the gang. He also shared that while in the gang, he was exposed to Islam for the first time, and considered himself a member of Al-Islam, or mainstream Sunni Islam, for years before his first exposure to the NOI.

According to him, he was a believer in Al-Islam but “it never got my full attention, even though I was about it for years.” It was not until he heard Minister Louis Farrakhan that he knew what was missing. Brother Hafiz said, “he explained to me what the knowledge of self was, and who I really am, and what I really am.” He believes that if it were not for his conversion, his violent and self-destructive lifestyle would have continued and he would either have been dead or incarcerated for the rest of his life. Instead, he is barely recognizable from

the man he described himself as before first hearing Farrakhan speak. Because of the example he sees in Farrakhan, Brother Hafiz says that he tries every day to go and do something to help someone, and that now he lives in a way that is honest and respectful. From what I have witnessed of his life, this seems to be the truth, as nearly every time I have spoken with him, he is coming from or on his way to some sort of community service with the NOI.

While Brother Nassir is just as adamant as Brother Hafiz in crediting the teachings of the NOI for his current lifestyle, his background could hardly be more different. Brother Nassir's journey to the NOI was more a result of dissatisfaction with the easy answers to hard questions that other religions had given him. Then and now, he is an avid reader of the Bible and other religious texts, and in an interesting way, it was his reading of the Bible that led him to Islam. He told me that the key realization for him centered around coming to the understanding that Jesus was a Muslim. This is consistent with every other tradition of Islam. The NOI and other Muslims around the world teach that Jesus was not spreading a new religion called Christianity, but belonged to the same tradition as every other prophet, preaching a message of submission to Allah. For Nassir, this was consistent with Jesus' declaration in the garden the night before his crucifixion to God, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42, ESV).

Prior to this liminal moment on his spiritual and intellectual journey, Brother Nassir had first been a Protestant Christian, then a Jehovah's Witness. He spoke of a childhood in the mostly Black west side of Chicago neighborhood of Austin, blocks away from the predominantly White and affluent suburb of Oak Park, where he had many friends, and consequently grew up without the same degree of bitter feelings towards White people that is characteristic of many in the NOI. His home life was stable and he stayed out of trouble throughout his life. While Brother Hafiz's story of finding a home in the NOI is typical in that many Muslims find the power to change a dysfunctional and broken life through the NOI, Brother Nassir's story is also common as a result of the emphasis in this belief system placed on knowledge and truth-seeking. Unlike almost every other religious community in the world, most NOI Muslims come to their faith as adults, and the two common paths archetypically represented by Nassir and Hafiz are emblematic of this.

Before I move on to the next theme, I wanted to include at length a quote that encapsulates the understanding of the NOI on the nature of their teachings as medicine from one of their most

prominent members. During an interview on a popular Youtube show called "VladTV," Dr. Wesley Muhammad responded to a question about the NOI's position on homosexuality as follows:

What you have to understand about the Nation of Islam is that it's a hospital, not a church. There's two things you find in a hospital: sick people and the medicine for those sick people. Being cured of the various sicknesses or illnesses that people come to the hospital with requires taking the medicine, the right dosage at the right time, and then over time you're healed of your sickness. So in the Nation of Islam today in any mosque, whether it's in Chicago or in New York, you got some of everything up in there. Everything that's in the world is in the mosque.

I'm not going to lie to you. I'm not going to romanticize, because I would be misrepresenting the very purpose of the Nation of Islam. We call the sick. We want the sick. People come to us sick. The difference between us and every other institution is that we have shown that the medicine we administer to our sick is effective. We have transformed Black life in a way that no other institution has because we have the medicine.

What is the medicine? It is the life giving teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. That is medicinal. To hell with medicinal marijuana. This is medicinal Islam. It actually heals. So there's homosexuals who have come and are struggling with that—yes, they have reached out to me, drug addicts that are still in their journey of Islam are fighting that battle, yet they're registered Muslims. Every single thing that exists in the Black community outside the Mosque, it exists in the Mosque, but what also exists inside the mosque that ain't out is the medicine to cure those things.³

For Wesley Muhammad and my interlocutors alike, all of the problems that exist in their own lives and in the Black community as a whole can be solved by accepting Islam and believing and abiding by the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

"This is our Trinity!"

These teachings include the beliefs on the true identity of the devil, described above, the true identity of God and his prophet, the cosmology and eschatology of the universe and of mankind, the nature and authority of Scripture, and on the need for self-sufficiency in the Black community. Regarding the

³ Muhammad, Wesley. "Dr. Wesley Muhammad on Gay Culture Not Being Natural to Black People (Part 5)" Youtube. Published October 6, 2017. 14:08. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiRmRVAAJQY&list=PLQhovPae0X21oFSMB-C9gisCNiiA6zN3Y&index=10>

nature and true identity of God and his prophet, the next theme I repeatedly encountered during my research, I will use the words of one of my best interlocutors, Brother Rasheed. While discussing with him the nature of God in the NOI worldview, he showed me a book. On it was a picture of “Master” Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad, and Louis Farrakhan. He then said, “This is our trinity right here!”

In NOI theology, Allah is a man rather than a spirit, and he appears to people on earth from time to time to deliver messages of great importance to those he chooses as his messengers. In 1930, Allah appeared in Detroit in the form of Fard Muhammad to Elijah Muhammad, who had moved from rural Georgia and taken a job with a railroad company. It was in Detroit that he taught the religion of Islam to Elijah and commissioned him to be his prophet and messenger to his chosen people, the Black people of North America, before mysteriously disappearing a few years later.

The idea both that God is a man and not a spirit, and that he has appeared specifically to Black people out of his sovereign choice of them as his people is essential to grasp. Elijah Muhammad wrote in his popular book *The Fall of America*:

Master Fard Muhammad, to whom praises are due forever, is a man. His teachings bring us into reality, and not into some kind of spooky, or spirit, or ghost-like teaching.

Master Fard Muhammad, to whom praises are due forever, is the all-wise and living-God. He desires that we see him as he is—a human being and not something beyond the family of human beings—spookisms.

We could never ask a formless spirit to lead us because we are not formless spirits ourselves. Man can only listen to man. Man cannot listen to other than man. (Muhammad 1973, 38).

Thus, God, meaning Fard Muhammad, is thus worshipped and identified with as a Black man like them, but it is Elijah Muhammad who is seen as his mouthpiece and representative.

Elijah Muhammad is analogous to the prophet Muhammad for NOI Muslims. He is the representative of Allah in everything he did and wrote. When in conversation with Muslims, I would generally hear doctrine presented as “the Honorable Elijah Muhammad taught . . .” rather than, “Master Fard Muhammad taught . . .” While this might at first glance appear to put them in conflict with mainstream Muslims who hold the belief that the prophet Muhammad was the seal of the prophets, and that God cannot condescend to the level of humans without compromising his holiness, they have defenses for these charges. Frequently, I would hear NOI Muslims

tell me that Muhammad himself prophesied that in the last days there would be a prophet who would rise in the West and would restore the Muslim community to a proper understanding of Islam. It was understood that this and numerous other verses from the Qur’an and Hadith were about them. This conveniently offered a ready-made explanation for why Arab Muslims usually scoff at the NOI’s claims. By placing Black Muslims in North America at center stage, it removes Arab Muslims from the position of privilege that they have enjoyed in the Islamic world since the beginning. Objections to Allah appearing as a man are met with invocations of the Islamic belief in the coming of the Mahdi, a messianic figure whom many Muslims believe will come before judgment day. Brother Nassir reported that the Mahdi and the Messiah are the same person, and the hopes of both Muslims and Christians have been fulfilled in the coming of Fard Muhammad, if they would only recognize him as such.

Though I will not devote as much space here to discussing his importance to today’s Muslims, Louis Farrakhan garnered more adulation from the men I spoke with than either Fard Muhammad or Elijah Muhammad. The sense I got was that while Fard Muhammad was Allah in person and Elijah Muhammad was their honored forefather and religious authority, Farrakhan was the man whom they deeply loved. Brother Hafiz described him as, “the most magnificent and beautiful man that I have ever met in my life because he is the most humble and the most compassionate person that I have ever known.” He was far from the only one that spoke in such gushing tones about the man whose official title is “National Representative of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.” Brother Rasheed argued that no one alive is a better expositor or teacher of the Bible or is more like Jesus than Minister Farrakhan.

Essential to appreciating how their followers view each of these three men is understanding what they represent to them symbolically. As I said earlier in regards to the difference between who Fard Muhammad likely was historically and who he is understood to be by the members of the NOI, appreciating who each of these members of the NOI “trinity” are to their followers is more important than who they are in reality if we hope to understand the NOI worldview. Significantly, these were and are powerful Black men who stood up to the opposition from White America and are still standing. They are viewed with both an admiration befitting of divinity and a relatability due to their common heritage with their followers. With the divine or quasi-divine status afforded the members of the NOI “trinity,” it should not be surprising that their teachings are given the highest degree of authority in relation to other sources of scripture.

The NOI and Scripture

The NOI hermeneutic is often puzzling to outsiders. Frequently when conversing with NOI Muslims, I would hear the Bible quoted in a way that my interlocutor took as being applicable to present day followers of the NOI, but that with my seminary background I recognized as having a specific historical context for the passage being quoted. Clarity came when I heard Minister Farrakhan speaking at the 2019 Saviour's Day celebration in Chicago. He told the sizable audience at the United Center, "Twenty five percent of what you read of Jesus in the Bible is actual history. Seventy five percent of what you read is prophecy. So what the enemy did is he took prophecy and made it history and took history and made it prophecy, so that you would be walking with Jesus and wouldn't know him."¹

An example of the way the NOI belief system reverses which parts of the Bible are usually considered prophecy and which parts are history is with the Exodus. Whereas the historical Black Church in America, particularly in the South, drew strength from the story of the Exodus as analogical for their own centuries of enslavement in America, the NOI teaches that the story of the Exodus as recorded in Scripture was not historical but was included as a prophecy about their own enslavement in America. While many Bible teachers in the Church encourage their students to figuratively put themselves in the story as a method of better understanding its significance, Muslims in the NOI quite literally believe that they already are in the story. With this in mind, their handling of the Bible becomes easier to follow.

Still, a belief common to all Muslims, including those in the NOI, is that the Bible is not reliable because it has been tampered with. While for other Muslims, this amounts to little more than a reason to stay away from the Bible and the teachings of Christianity, the NOI takes this claim a step further. They believe that it is possible to tell which parts have been changed and which parts are original, as well as who changed them and why. Brother Nassir told me, "If the enemy didn't ever translate the books incorrectly, a Christian would be what a Muslim would be, and a Muslim would be what a Christian would be, but they did that purposefully to confuse the people." Others indicated that it was not merely confusion that these nefarious actors sought but subjugation. With teachings in the Bible about turning the other cheek and instructing slaves to obey their masters, it became all that much easier to use Christianity to keep Black people enslaved in America. It should go without saying

that these kinds of teachings are to be found nowhere in the writings of Elijah Muhammad. Because they are in conflict with his teachings, they are therefore exposed as being later additions to the Bible and false teachings.

Agreement with Elijah Muhammad is thus the litmus test for true Scripture when it comes to the Bible, but what about the Qur'an? After all, they are the Nation of *Islam*, so where does the Qur'an fit in their belief system? The Bible is presented as I discussed above, as mostly prophecy that foretells their own emergence, whereas the Qur'an tends to be used mainly in predictable ways. The same small number of verses were brought up on many occasions with many different conversation partners, seemingly for the purpose of validating the NOI's own Islamic legitimacy while casting doubt on the legitimacy of their Arab counterparts. There are a few reasons for the relatively sparse interaction with the Qur'an for most NOI Muslims. Language is one reason. Like all Muslims, they believe that the Qur'an can only be properly engaged in the original Arabic, and it is only an exceedingly small number in the NOI that possess Arabic skills up to the task. Another reason is the lack of familiarity most NOI Muslims would have with the Qur'an prior to conversion, as most come to the faith from a Christian background. But the most significant reason for this is that neither the Qur'an nor the Bible are the foundational authority for the NOI belief system. As noted above, it is the teachings of Elijah Muhammad which are the lens through which all other information is processed, including Scripture.

Cosmology, Eschatology, and Self-Sufficiency

Assenting totally to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad is the deposit required by the NOI of its members in order to receive the promised rewards. The way that this is presented is partially *quid pro pro*, but more so as a revealing of truths already present but concealed. The other two themes I wish to highlight illustrate this in differing ways. Their beliefs regarding the origin of mankind, the universe, the White race, and where all of this history is heading help the Muslim to ascertain confidence in his identity by reiterating that he is God's chosen and that God is all-powerful and has a plan. The theme of "doing for self" or self-sufficiency is built on the idea that for Black people to continually rely on their former slave masters only keeps them weak and dependent, when the truth is that they already have the potential to break off from White America and be a strong nation on their own accord.

These two themes are more closely related than they might appear because they both address more fully

¹ Farrakhan, Louis. "Minister Louis Farrakhan's Saviour's Day Keynote Address," Youtube. Published February 17, 2019. 4:20:48. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSpSv-157NI&t=4773s>

the identities of and relationships between God, the Black man, also referred to as the tribe of Shabazz in their mythology, and the White man. According to the NOI, sixty six trillion years ago, the earth and the moon were one planet, until a great explosion separated the two, and the tribe of Shabazz stayed with the earth. They settled in the Nile river valley and in the holy city of Mecca, where their utopian civilization continued until just over six thousand years ago. At that point, one of their own, an evil scientist named Yakub, began selectively breeding humans in order to produce lighter and lighter skin until he eventually brought White people into existence. For a time, Whites were banished to live in the caves of Europe, going about naked and eating raw meat like savages. Yet a downturn in the civilization of the tribe of Shabazz became an opportunity for the White man to establish his reign. The manifestation of this reign in North America lasted for centuries and meant slavery for the Black man, along with a forfeiture of his language, culture, and religion, eventually taking on the customs and religion of their slave masters in the form of Christianity. Thus, the emergence of Fard Muhammad onto the scene was not a moment too soon.

As the origin story of the NOI, this forms how its members understand both who they really are and who their enemies really are. Unlike in Christianity and mainstream Islam, where all of humanity is believed to have a common ancestor, in this story, Black people and White people do not share Adam as their forefather and are different from each other on a fundamental level. Black people were the original people, created pure and good by God at the beginning, while White people were the result of a malevolent science project and are consequently evil at their core. In the eschatological vision of the NOI, God will return imminently to pour out judgment on his enemies, which explains why separation from said enemies is such a prevalent theme in NOI teaching. In Elijah Muhammad's own words, "to integrate with evil is to be destroyed with evil" (Muhammad 1973, 16), and therefore, the racial integration that was argued over through so much of America during his lifetime was something that Elijah and his followers flatly rejected.

They believed that integrating with a people that have been consistently and openly hostile to their own over the centuries was inviting both further abuse by their enemies and possible death from God's judgment simply by being in the wrong place when it happens. Thus, the frequently reiterated theme of "do for self," which is the phrase Elijah Muhammad used in his writings in discussing self-sufficiency, is not only about elevating Black self-pride but also has eschatological dimensions. The details that were encouraged in this doing-for-self involved purchasing land for agriculture, starting businesses, supporting other Black-owned

businesses, savings, and ultimately, separating from White America altogether.

"The Muslim Program," which first appeared in *Message to the Blackman* and which appears on the last page of every week's edition of *The Final Call* newspaper is a list detailing "What the Muslims Believe" and "What the Muslims Want." The fourth bullet point under the heading "What the Muslims Want" articulates this desired separation:

We want our people in America whose parents or grandparents were descendants from slaves to be allowed to establish a separate state or territory of their own—either on this continent or elsewhere. We believe that our former slave-masters are obligated to provide us with this land and that the land must be fertile and minerally rich. (Muhammad 1965, 161)

While this separation is a key concept in the NOI ideology, it is also important to note that it falls fourth on the list for a reason. NOI members are generally quick to point out that the first three points call for freedom, justice, and equality while living among their former slave masters, and that the fourth point calling for separation is only necessary because they believe the historical record is sufficient evidence that they will never receive freedom, justice, and equality while living in an integrated society.

Lest I paint too simplistic a picture regarding the NOI's racial beliefs on these last two themes, I would like to clarify that the Muslims I met in person and listened to online did not envision a total annihilation of White people from the earth when they describe their apocalyptic vision. It is more so that God will restore the earth to its rightful order, with peace, justice, and the tribe of Shabazz back to the state in which they were prior to Yakub's experiments. While this will likely necessitate the destruction of God's enemies from the earth, most of whom are White, those Whites who have proven to be on the side of freedom, justice, and equality for Black people will be permitted to live, just not to run the show. In imagining this kind of shalom-like state where paradise is restored and the devil-Whites who have tormented their people for centuries are out of the picture, it is not difficult to see why the NOI's teachings on this topic have inspired hope and transformed the outlook of so many of their followers.

Implications for the Church

By this point, the reader might be gathering that all of these themes and every point of doctrine in the ontology of the NOI contribute to the same end: the elevation of a sense of significance and self-pride in the African American members of this religion. I believe

this to be the most positive and longest-lasting legacy of the NOI in America. When considering the historical circumstances that African Americans were in at the time of Elijah Muhammad, someone coming along to inspire power, pride, and significance was sorely needed. This is why I believe the NOI was able to catch fire the way that they did during the middle of the last century, and why for many today, the NOI still meets the same needs. If we are going to object to the details of the NOI's beliefs and practices, we must first acknowledge the significance that they have held for so many in the Black community in America and the purpose they have served.

Furthermore, I believe that it is somewhat disingenuous as a White Christian (speaking for myself) if I condemn the NOI outright, while failing to acknowledge that many of the needs that the NOI has met in the Black community only existed because the Church so badly failed Black people in countless important ways from the time of America's founding. In offering this criticism of the Church, it should be clarified that within the Church, there are many churches, and that some responded more faithfully than others during this period and up to our present day. As could be expected, the Black Church in America was less silent in the face of racial injustice than the majority culture Church, and that institution did effectively serve as a pillar of hope and community for many African Americans over the centuries. Still, many of the critiques the NOI has raised against the American Church as a whole deserve consideration. The majority of Muslims in the NOI were at one point Christians and are no longer. At the very least, that fact should give us pause and cause us to reflect upon what we have done wrong and what the NOI may be doing right. In a lot of cases, the reason this is so comes down to the fact that the NOI has provided more satisfying answers to African Americans regarding relevant societal problems than has the Church. While the Church has often been perceived as being focused on the afterlife to the detriment of conditions in this life, the NOI's rallying cry has remained "freedom, justice, and equality" for their people.

Dr. King wrote in his famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*:

In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched White churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical

distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular. (King 1976, 266)

Just as with the White religious leaders Dr. King is addressing, we in the Church have often failed the Black community out of an unwillingness to sacrifice and make ourselves uncomfortable. If we are to make amends going forward, we must be willing to make changes from how things have always been done. The reason NOI has been able to persuade many in the Black community that Christianity is the White man's religion and that the White man is the devil is because there is a large body of evidence that those who are White and have claimed Christianity have supplied over the centuries validating these claims.

Ultimately, both the failings of the Church and the triumphs of the NOI come down to identity and value. The Church, when at its best in standing up for human dignity and justice, has been able to do so out of a clear understanding of the *imago Dei* in all people, Black or White, rich or poor, young or old. When the Church has failed in the ways outlined above, it has been because it did not see the image of God in the face of all people the way that it should have. Properly understanding the inherent value of someone as created in God's image means understanding that their worth is tied up in your own, as you are both God's children. It means that any unjust suffering inflicted on them is an offense against God. So many African Americans have resonated with the NOI in large part because their message affirms the inherent value of Black people as children of God. More than that, their message is not out of sync with their service, as they work hard to communicate this dignity affirming message to those outside the mosque. We can easily comb their methods and their messaging and find points that we do not agree with or find offensive, but are we going into the ghettos to raise up men and women like they are? Are we preaching about the value of the individual as made in God's image and then living out our sermons with our lives? Whether or not we are, the NOI is out there doing the same thing they have been doing for eighty nine years, and it is working for them. They have stepped into a vacuum that should have never existed, should the Church have been adequately obeying the commands of Jesus. Now we must take up His commands anew in our day, and try to represent Him better than we have up until this point.

In drawing this article to a close, I want to suggest two ways in which the Church might carry out this better representation of Jesus among African Americans today. As I sought to demonstrate in the preceding pages, the Nation of Islam has thrived when and where the Church has fallen short. Martin Luther King Jr. said in reference to the philosophy of Malcolm X, who at that time was the NOI's spokesman, "Just as one

condemns the philosophy, which I did constantly, one must be as vigorous in condemning the continued existence in our society of the conditions of racist injustice, depression, and man's inhumanity to man" (King 1976, loc. 4471). King rightly makes the connection between those conditions and the rise of philosophies like that of the NOI. At this point in history, it is not enough to lament the existence of injustice, poverty, and crime brought on by years of failure on the part of America and the Church. We must take action.

The first step I am advocating the Church take is to seek to minister to the material and societal needs of African Americans without compromising on ministering to spiritual needs. Right doctrine need not be sacrificed when learning from the NOI's successes. Primarily, the call for "freedom, justice, and equality" that the NOI has proclaimed for almost a century is not only a call that the Church can join, but one that is profoundly biblical and predates the NOI's incorporation of it. Freedom, justice, and equality are occasionally invoked in our churches, but typically only when their temporal meanings have been spiritualized and the risk of controversy is minimized. Again, this is an area that the Church can learn from the NOI's example. Advocating for oppressed people will invite pushback and create powerful enemies, but did Jesus not promise us that we would be "hated by all for my name's sake"? (Matt 10:22). If anything is worth risking widespread hatred, should not standing up for the oppressed, including African Americans in our own cities, and loyally following Jesus' example be towards the top of the list?

Secondly, we must recognize that there are deeply felt spiritual needs that African American men and women are finding the Church incapable or unwilling to meet. Carl Ellis, in a speech given in Memphis in April of 2018, discussed dignity, identity, and significance as the needs that the Church in the African American context has been failing to meet.⁵ Ellis, who is African American and a respected Protestant theologian, believes that the Church has done an inadequate job in ministering to these needs historically, and that this is a major reason why so many have sought home in the NOI and other new religions. While the NOI certainly speaks to dignity, identity, and significance, here again is an area in which the Church has much to say and nothing to lose. The dignity, identity, and significance of the individual, particularly among the oppressed, are issues about which the Bible has much to say. It is not our religion that is the problem in reaching individual Black men and women dissatisfied with the Church. It is our faithfulness to

Scripture and our will to do what it takes to reach all people with the love of Christ.

Insufficiently ministering to the individual and societal needs of African Americans has been a characteristic of the American Church, but it should not be. The NOI rose to prominence in large part because of the opening created by the Church's failures in the Black community. While it is necessary to acknowledge the positive impact that they have made in many areas, we must do so with a sense of grief that the Church did not take on more of a role in fighting for freedom, justice, and equality for African Americans. If we are to do a better job today than we have thus far in this regard, we must return to a faithful interpretation and application of Scripture, and a closer following of Jesus' example. After all, it is in this that we find freedom in Christ, are challenged to advocate for justice for the oppressed, and find true equality at the cross.

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⁵ Ellis, Carl. "The Gospel in the African American Context," Presentation, MLK50 Conference, Memphis, TN, April 4, 2018. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference_media/gospel-african-american-experience/



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