Movements Of African-American Essay, Research Paper

The Black Muslim movement in America, which started in the early 1900 s, stems from a backlash against centuries of oppression by white Americans. By the 1920 s, at the movement s beginning, slavery had been over for sixty years. Still, the status of African-Americans was still below the level of equality that they demanded, and also deserved. Beginning with Timothy Drew, (who later changed his name to Noble Drew Ali) in the 1920 s, and Wallace D. Fard Muhammad in 1930, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans converted to Islam, many under the guidance of Fard s successor, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.

The term Black Muslim is the original term for members of the Nation of Islam. The members got this name because up until the formation of the group, Muslims in America were all immigrants from the Middle East and Southeast Asia. African-Americans did not begin to convert until Drew, Fard, and Elijah Muhammad began to preach. The founding beliefs of the Nation of Islam were that African-Americans had been oppressed for too long, and that the White, Christian-dominated American society was to blame. In Fard s eyes, Islam was the religion of the Black Man (Esposito, 209). Elijah Muhammad furthered this idea by preaching black independence from America under the guidance of the Nation of Islam, and also by claiming that Fard was actually Allah incarnate, and that he himself was the final prophet, not Muhammad. By this rationale, both God and his prophet would both be Black, and for that reason, the Black Muslims were supreme.

Elijah Muhammad took control of the Nation of Islam and began preaching these ideas after Fard disappeared in 1934. His ideas were very radical, as he spoke of an apocalyptic, millenarian message whose promise was the ultimate Fall of the oppressor, white, racist America (Esposito, 210). His idea of black racial supremacy (Esposito, 210), however controversial it may have been, gained him a good deal of followers. This racism was one of the main reasons why Elijah Muhammad s most prominent follower, Malcolm X, joined the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, was born in the extremely anti-Black south, and had a terrible upbringing. His father was murdered, his mother was institutionalized after a mental breakdown, and he and his eight siblings were separated into various foster homes. All of this, he believed, was due to oppression by White America, and for that, he held strong anti-White feelings. Malcolm X grew up to lead a life of crime, and was jailed from 1946 1952. During this time, he decided to educate himself by constant reading in a variety of subjects. What interested him the most, though, were the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, and the Nation of Islam. The two men began correspondence, and upon his release from prison, Malcolm X was placed into a high rank in the Nation of Islam. Quickly he moved up, and became the most nationally and internationally prominent figure in the group, and was positioned directly under Elijah Muhammad in the group s ranking (Esposito, 211).

The Nation of Islam, from the beginning, was never a true mirror of Islamic orthodoxy. The idea of Black separation and empowerment, core beliefs of the movement, were opposite to the original teachings of the Qur an and Muhammad, which taught brotherhood and equality for all of God s people. The Nation also did not follow the five Pillars of Islam. Malcolm X, for example, spent his years in the group not even knowing the daily prayers required for all Muslims. Those years ended in 1964, as Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, and brought many of its members with him. A main reason for him leaving was that he felt that the separatist movement of the group was not going anywhere. He called for more action, as did many other members of the group (Esposito, 212).

This all changed, just a month later, as Malcolm X made a pilgrimage to Mecca. There, he realized that there was no need for Blacks and Whites to be separated. All believers in Allah were brothers, no matter what race they may have been. He learned the traditional ideas of the Five Pillars, and began calling himself a Sunni. Malcolm X went so far as to change his name again, this time to a more traditional Islamic one: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He returned to America to preach to Muslims who wished to leave the Nation of Islam. He began a movement towards traditional Sunni Islam, which virtually eliminated the Nation of Islam s power and existence. Less than a year later, though, two remaining members of the Nation of Islam assassinated him. For the next decade, Islam was without a prominent leader. The majority of the Black Muslims left the Nation of Islam, reducing Elijah Muhammad to a figure of much less importance than he had been in the 1950 s and early 1960 s. The new population of Sunnis could never replace Malcolm X (Esposito, 212-213).

In 1975, Elijah Muhammad died, and his son, Wallace D. Muhammad took his place. Wallace D. Muhammad, like Malcolm X, had been in years of conflict with his father and the Nation of Islam. When he took control, he immediately began to move the group into a more strictly Qur anic position. He replaced the name Nation of Islam with The World Community of Islam in the West, or WCIW. He integrated the group into traditional Sunni culture in America, and ended the racism that had been so central to the group since its inception. This lasted briefly, until in 1978, Louis Farrakhan, a member of the WITC, broke away, and instated himself as Minister of the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan had long been an opponent of reform to the Nation, and decided that it was his duty to return it to the original beliefs. Although he could never bring the Nation of Islam to the power it once had, he did bring many followers back, and continues to lead to this day.

The Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan can be seen as a militant, racist, non-Islamic group of angry African-Americans. It is true that these two men share a feeling of resentment to White Americans. Farrakhan will often speak out on this, as well as his special resentment for Jews. Still, the group, over time, has accomplished some valuable goals. It has done some good things for the community, like reducing crime in Black neighborhoods and helping prisoners straighten out their lives. Many inmates turn to Islam as a distraction from the boredom of prison, and up to a third of those men continue to follow the religion upon leaving jail, becoming safe, even beneficial members of society. The Nation of Islam may have some ideas that are scary to the majority of Whites, but for the most part, it is a harmless group, mostly concerned with the improvement of the lives of African-Americans.

Works Cited

Esposito, John L. Islam The Straight Path. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1998