

## **Sects and Cults**

### **Black Muslims**

Since the American civil war, Negroes have yearned for equality, dignity and freedom from oppression. But they have been disappointed many times. For many, white means oppression and evil. Black stands for the poor and the enslaved.

Racial turmoil has introduced some strange religious movements. The Afro-American cults shed light on the actualities of race in America. They are tokens of alienation from main-stream society. Not only sects and cults but also one major religion has rapidly grown in reaction to decades of white racism.

Islam has made strong inroads in the U.S. and Canada. But even an approximate number of adherents is hard to come by. Gottesman, in *Islam in America*, presents this summary of the varied estimates of the total Muslim population: "Estimates vary widely: the U.S. government and the National Council of Churches (including the Task Force) claim that there are 2,000,000 in the country; *Islamic Horizons*, a publication of the Muslim Student's Association, claim three million (March, 1978); *Muslim World*, published in Pakistan, says there are five million Muslims in all of North America."

Enthusiastic missionaries for Islam have zealously worked among desperate members of the Black communities in the U.S., who continue to suffer the ravages of second rate education and high unemployment, especially among youths.

#### **1. Ahmadiyya Movement**

This movement originated in India in the latter half of the 19th century. It became aggressively missionary and sent missionaries to many parts of the world. The first missionary to the U.S. settled in Chicago in 1921. Many converts were won among the Black people. The movement's U.S. headquarters are in Chicago. It adheres to the basic teachings of traditional Islam in most respects, but stresses strongly the belief not only in the prophet Muhammad, but also in all the prophets.

They believe that Jesus Christ didn't die on the cross, but swooned, and was released from the tomb by his friends. He travelled to India where he spent some forty years teaching and preaching. His alleged tomb in Srinagar, in Kashmir, is a centre for pilgrimage. Followers of the Ahmadiyya movement have recently been denied access to Islam's holy cities on the grounds that "they allegedly claim a later prophet following Muhammad and revelations or interpretations which militate against the teachings of the Quran."

#### **2. The Moorish Science Temple of America**

In the early twentieth century Islam was used as a counter-culture vehicle against the white man's Christian faith. In 1913 Timothy Drew founded the Moorish Science Temple. He took the name Noble Drew Eli, to help advance his cause. He

believed that Islam could unite the Black people. Drew became convinced that American "Negroes" should declare their "Asiatic" origins as Moors or Moorish Americans. His followers were promised salvation and self-respect. American negroes' self-defeating lifestyle must be abandoned. Drew's movement became successful, but with it came factionalism and violence. The leader met a violent death in 1929.

### **3. The Nation of Islam**

After Drew's death a struggle for succession raged. Among the claimants to leadership was Wallace D. Fard who was said to be the reincarnation of Drew and a sometime visitor to Mecca. He founded a Temple of Islam in Detroit with a possible eight thousand members, and then a second in Chicago. Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934.

In the midst of the dispute for the leadership position Robert Poole (1897-1975), the son of a Baptist minister in Georgia, became dominant. He took the name Elijah Muhammad. Elijah's followers have been referred to as Black Muslims, though the official name is the Nation of Islam. The movement was seen as heretical by the orthodox, immigrant Muslims. Elijah Muhammad's authority centred on the claim that Allah had personally communicated with him. According to Muhammad's teaching Caucasian people are an inferior, latter day offshoot of the Black Asiatic Nation. The U.S. would be destroyed in 1970. The Black Nation would emerge as the sole ruler of the world under Allah's guidance.

His speeches were racist, pouring oil on the fires of discontent. A typical speech said: "I am here to teach you how to be free. Free of the white man's yoke! Every white man knows his time is up. We will unite all the darker people of the earth. Then we will be masters of the United States - and we are going to treat the white men the way they should be treated." This radical approach appealed to frustrated blacks who never had the chance to dream the American dream and had lost faith in the white man's promises.

During World War II the Nation of Islam fell on hard times. When Elijah Muhammad told his membership that Allah forbade them to bear arms or to do violence to anyone whom he had not ordered to be killed, he was arrested and convicted. He stayed in federal prison until 1946. After his release he rebuilt the membership. His prison experience also opened a new door for recruits - the prison door. Penal evangelism and reform have been great sources of membership gain. Eric Lincoln, in his study, *The Black Muslims in America*, wrote: "The prisons are made to order for Muhammad. Nine times out of ten, the potential convert was arrested by a white policeman, sentenced by a white judge, directed by a white prison guard under a white warden. The prison chaplain was white, and he knew when he got out that he could not go to a white church for help. The Negro church was not interested, but there was Elijah waiting."

The most effective years for the movement occurred when Malcolm X (1925-65), the son of a Baptist preacher became one of its most dynamic and prophetic voices. The appeal of the Nation of Islam was not so much its doctrine, but its way of life, rigorous

standard of behaviour, family responsibilities and self-esteem. Someone wrote about the Nation of Islam: "So long as the movement had meaning to the ghetto poor in terms of their own experiences, and provided psychological and material therapy against the ravages of a white-dominated hell called America, the religion could have been Black Buddhism or Black Brahmanism or Black Anything with equal effect." By 1961 the Nation of Islam had nearly seventy temples (now they call them mosques) in the U.S. and at least 100,000 disciplined and relatively young followers. Cassius Clay, who became Muhammad Ali, became the movement's most famous convert.

The Nation of Islam was a reaction to racial oppression. It made little attempt to reform society. Louis Lomax remarked: "Instead of working to improve conditions within the framework of American society, as do other Negro leadership organizations, the Black Muslims react by turning their backs on that society entirely. Their one positive aspect is that they work to make Negroes proud of being Negro."

When the founder of the Nation of Islam died, his son, Wallace D. Muhammad, assumed leadership, renounced the extreme racist views of his father and brought the movement into orthodox Islam. He is now trying to teach his membership in the knowledge of Arabic and current Islamic practice. For his projects and the training of community leaders, he receives assistance from Libya, Egypt and Arabia. The formal name of Nation of Islam has been changed to The World Community of Islam in the West, and its followers are now called Balalian Muslims. The WCIW owns the *Bilalian News*, the U.S.A.'s largest Black newspaper. It has a successful drug and alcohol addict rehabilitation program, and maintains a high missionary profile in the Black community.

The future growth of Black cults, sects and Islamic movements will depend on the progress of integration in the U.S. and the readiness of the Christian Church to be engaged prayerfully and with conviction in a ministry among the black Muslim communities. Overseas ministries among the Muslims have always caught our imagination. And this work must go on. But the time has come that we must also make a concerted effort in North America.

Johan D. Tangleder  
January, 1983