Nation of Islam

African American movement and organization, founded in 1930 and known for its teachings combining elements of traditional Islam with black nationalist ideas. The Nation also promotes racial unity and self-help and maintains a strict code of discipline among members.

Islam was brought to the United States by African Muslim slaves, and it retained a real if minuscule presence in the country throughout the 19th century. It reemerged at the beginning of the 20th century as a result of the efforts of the Ahmadiyyah movement, an unorthodox sect founded in India by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (c. 1839–1908), and of Shaikh Ahmed Faisal (1891–1980), the Moroccan-born leader of an independent Black Muslim movement. Muslim teachings were tied to black nationalism by Noble Drew Ali, originally Timothy Drew (1886–1929), who founded the Moorish Science Temple of America in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913. He produced a new sacred text, The Holy Koran, that bears little resemblance to its namesake and was based on his limited knowledge of Islam and on spiritualist teachings.

Among those associated with the Moorish Science Temple was a peddler named Wallace D. Fard (or Wali Fard Muhammad). In 1930, claiming that he was Noble Drew Ali reincarnated, Fard founded the Nation of Islam in Detroit, Michigan, and designated his able assistant, Elijah Muhammad, originally Elijah Poole, to establish the Nation’ second centre in Chicago. When problems erupted in the Detroit headquarters in 1934, Elijah Muhammad stepped in and took control. While Fard retired into obscurity, Elijah taught that Fard was a Prophet (in the Muslim sense) and a Saviour (in the Christian sense) and the very presence of Allah. Muhammad provided what Fard lacked—strong leadership and a coherent theology. His teachings included many of the basic tenets of Islam, including monotheism, submission to Allah, and a strong family life, and these tenets were promoted in the Nation’ parochial schools. Elijah also borrowed from traditional Islamic behavioral practices, including the refusal to eat pork or to use tobacco, alcohol, or illicit drugs. He tied these beliefs and practices to a myth designed especially to appeal to African Americans.

Elijah Muhammad believed that the white race was created by Yakub, a black scientist, and that Allah had allowed this devilish race to hold power for 6,000 years. Their time was up in 1914, and the 20th century was to be the time for black people to assert themselves. This myth supported a program of economic self-sufficiency, the development of black-owned businesses, and a demand for the creation of a separate black nation to be carved out of the states of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Elijah also encouraged his followers to drop their “slave” names in favour of Muslim names or, in most cases, an “X,” signifying that they had lost their identities in slavery and did not know their true names.

Suppressed during World War II for advocating that its followers refuse military service, the Nation rebounded in the 1950s after a young charismatic leader, Malcolm Little, better known as Malcolm X, took over the New York Temple. Malcolm X brought many into the movement but later became an embarrassment when he asserted that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was a “case of chickens coming home to roost.” Expelled from the Nation, he accepted orthodox Islam after going on the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Before he could fully articulate his new views, however, several members of the Nation killed him in 1965.

In the remaining decade of Elijah Muhammad’ life, the movement was increasingly plagued by violence between members and former members. In 1973, for example, Nation members invaded the Hanafi Muslim Center in Washington, D.C., founded by Hammad Abdul Khaalis, a former Nation leader, and attacked his family, killing his children and leaving his wife paralyzed.

Elijah Muhammad left the movement to his son Wallace, who assumed leadership of the Nation upon Elijah’ death in 1975 and later took the name Warith Deen Mohammed. Wallace, who had been deeply influenced by Malcolm X and orthodox Islam, soon initiated a transformation of the Nation, changing its name to World Community of al-Islam in the West and again in 1978 to the American Muslim Mission and gradually dropping its racial and nationalist doctrines as well as its belief in Fard as Allah. The changes culminated in 1985 with his formal resignation as head of the American Muslim Mission and his dissolution of the organization. The majority of former members followed him into the larger Muslim community, where he remained a widely respected leader.
The move toward orthodoxy was rejected by some former members, including Elijah Muhammad’s brother, John Muhammad, and national leader Silis Muhammad. They formed two new organizations, both called the Nation of Islam, that continued the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Of even greater significance were the actions of Louis Farrakhan (originally Louis Eugene Wolcott), the successor of Malcolm X as leader of the New York Temple and the Nation’s most prominent spokesman at the time of Elijah Muhammad’s death. Although given a national post by Mohammed, Farrakhan disagreed with Mohammed’s changes, and in 1978 he left to found a third Nation of Islam.

A talented orator, Farrakhan began his organization with only a few thousand adherents but soon reestablished a national movement. He published Elijah Muhammad’s books, started a periodical, The Final Call, and eventually purchased Elijah Muhammad’s former mosque in Chicago and refurbished it as the new headquarters of the Nation of Islam. He also expanded the movement internationally, opening centres in England and Ghana. He gained notice outside the African American community in 1984 when he aligned himself with the U.S. presidential campaign of Jesse Jackson, though he was criticized for anti-Semitic remarks that included an attack on antebellum Jewish slaveholders. Farrakhan steadily gained nationwide support for his encouragement of African American business and his efforts to reduce drug abuse and poverty. By the 1990s he had emerged as a prominent African American leader, as demonstrated by the success in 1995 of the Million Man March in Washington, D.C., which he helped to organize. Farrakhan toned down his racial rhetoric and moved the group toward orthodox Islam after a bout with prostate cancer in 2000. An estimated 10,000 to 50,000 people are members of the Nation of Islam.

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Additional Reading

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