

Turning to Islam: African-American conversion stories

by [Rose-Marie Armstrong](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

"I was searching for several years before I became a Muslim," says Abdus Salaam, a marketing specialist from Birmingham, Alabama. "I was baptized during this time in the Church of Christ. But I had questions. What bothered me were the white pictures of Jesus and Mary. In Islam we have no pictures, not even of the Prophet Muhammad. As a child I wondered if black and white people had a separate God!"

Salaam's story is familiar among African-American converts to Islam. While newfound faith is central to their stories, race and personal empowerment are also key parts of the narratives. The indignity of discrimination, unfortunately mirrored in Christian churches, haunts African-Americans.

The freedom that Khalid Abdul Kareem, a native of Washington, D.C., found in Islam feels right to him. "African-Americans have been disconnected and disenfranchised," says Kareem. "At about the age of 17 I realized that Islam wasn't racist. It established the nature of who I am, why I am here, and where I am going. I am the Creator's vice-regent; I have no boundaries. I was created by a loving God who has a purpose for me. I can go wherever I choose to take my abilities." Now 48, Kareem says, "Islam contains truth that is dependent only on God. It liberates us from man."

African-Americans make up about a third of the estimated 4 to 8 million Muslims in the U.S.—conservatively, around 1.5 million, nearly 5 percent of all African-Americans. According to a poll conducted in 2001 by Muslims in the American Public Square (MAPS), 20 percent of African-American Muslims are converts while 80 percent were raised Muslim. More detailed information about Islam in the African-American community, however, is relatively scarce.

Robert Dannin has opened a new and fascinating perspective on the subject in his recently published book *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*. Using the methods of ethnographic research to collect his information, Dannin tells what he calls "conversion sagas"—rich, unvarnished stories about individual African-American's journeys into Islam. He also traces the history of Islam among African-Americans by tying together such key developments as the formation of black fraternal lodges in the 18th and 19th centuries; Noble Drew Ali's 1913 organization of the Moorish Science Temple in Newark, New Jersey; the growth of various Islamic missionary and revivalist movements beginning in the 19th and continuing throughout the 20th centuries; and the conversion to Islam of be-bop jazz musicians who helped raise the faith's profile in the African-American community.

Dannin also introduces what he admits is a "taboo" subject: that a portion of "African-American society has always been unchurched," that African-American lodges have traditionally been centers of "unchurched religious practices and beliefs," and that since the end of the civil rights era unchurched African-Americans "have been moving more rapidly toward Islam." Dannin contends that the "voice of the unchurched" has been repressed by the black church's command of African-American history.

The various movements, organizations and institutions of unchurched African-Americans, Dannin argues, constitute an alternative to and in some cases a subversion of the black church. Even in the post-Reconstruction era black fraternal lodges "clearly threatened the African-American church's monopoly of social and civic life." Similarly, Islam, in all of its forms within the black community, has offered an option for those who "thirst for

an alternative to the church.”

African-American Muslims I spoke with consistently explained Islam’s appeal in terms of four benefits: a new sense of personal empowerment; a rigorous call to discipline; an emphasis on family structure and values; and a clear standard of moral behavior. But negative comments about Christianity and its associations with slavery and discrimination regularly accompany their expressions of gratitude to Islam, suggesting that Dannin’s “alternative” hypothesis deserves consideration. Read between the lines and it’s hard not to conclude that for many African-Americans an added appeal of Islam is that it’s not Christianity.

“Humans serve their highest and best interest by serving God, which is characterized by building their own lives,” says Abdul Mallek Mohammad, a spokesman for the leader of the Muslim American Society, W. Deen Muhammad. Mohammad argues that slavery took away African-Americans’ ability to properly serve God, even though they lived in a Christian culture. God ordains “freedom, equality, justice and peace,” and so “provides a foundation for life and the stability of community,” he says. But blacks in this country have been deprived of this divinely authorized foundation. “African-Americans’ history bears out that their humanity was not valued. Even now, there are pockets of racism in America that question the humanity of black people.”

W. Deen Muhammad, one of the most eminent Muslim leaders in America, is the son of Elijah Muhammad, the longtime head of the Nation of Islam (NOI) who died in 1975. The elder Muhammad built a strong following that elevated both the emotional and material status of black men and women. Known as the Black Muslims, the members of this movement recruited from among the disadvantaged, welcoming ex-inmates as brothers wronged by a system of oppression. Malcolm X, who later converted to orthodox Islam, is the most notable example. Muhammad also established businesses and put men in black suits, white shirts and black bow ties. His organization, which began in the 1930s, was strongly antiwhite. It is now led by Louis Farrakhan—albeit with what Farrakhan says are major changes in philosophy.

W. Deen Muhammad broke completely with the NOI, forming his own orthodox Sunni Islamic movement. It is now the largest community of Muslim African-Americans, numbered at 200,000. The NOI doesn’t release statistics but is said to number anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000.

Dannin seeks to break the widespread sense that the NOI is the dominant form of Islam within the African-American community. It’s a mistake, Dannin says, to portray “a single, notorious example as representative of the entire religious movement,” especially when the NOI under Elijah Muhammad “resembled Islam only to the extent of its taboo against alcohol and pork.” The practice of orthodox Islam has a long history among African-Americans, Dannin argues, and deserves to be understood on its own terms.

Eric Erfan Vickers, former executive director of the American Muslim Council in Washington, D.C., says that orthodox Islam today is “irresistible to African-Americans” because “they are a deeply spiritual people.” Yet “Islam has a strong call to social justice—Malcolm personified this.”

Vickers, who has been a Muslim for more than 20 years, says, “You have African-American men seeking liberation, and many see Christianity as a white man’s religion that continues to oppress. But God in his infinite wisdom created many religions.”

Significantly, all of the African-American Muslims who shared their stories with me turned out to be from Christian homes—a few even have family members who were or are clergy. Behija Abdus Salaam, a retired Department of Corrections chaplain and a member of the Interfaith Conference of Washington, D.C., states, “My grandfather started the first Baptist church in Manassas, Virginia, in the 1880s.” Her oldest brother was also a pastor. Now in her 60s, Behija became a Muslim many years ago. Her doubts about Christianity began when, as a child, she attended services with her uncle, who was so light-skinned he could pass for white. When she

entered the church holding his hand an usher pushed himself between them and said she couldn't sit up front with her uncle.

"Many of my family members are Muslims now," says Behija. An older brother first joined the Moorish Science Temple, a small Islamic sect with Masonic roots. Later he affiliated with the Nation of Islam. Other family members soon followed, but eventually left the NOI to join the Muslim American Society.

Some students of Islam believe that many African-American's ancestral Islamic heritage is one of the reasons why they turn from Christianity to Islam. Dannin writes that 15 percent of slaves shipped to North America came from Islamic regions of Africa and were themselves Muslims. The faith, which was suppressed principally to thwart rebellion, is resurfacing in complex ways, he believes.

While this may be true, Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, co-author with Lewis V. Baldwin and Anthony P. Pinn of *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin* (University Press of Florida), says, "Historically, Islam in the United States is largely a 20th-century phenomenon, and is associated with the urban areas of the North, Midwest, and more recently the West Coast and the South." Al-Hadid chronicled the life of Malcolm X while Baldwin documented the viewpoint of Martin Luther King Jr. They suggest that it was Malcolm's militancy, not his Muslim beliefs, that made him a hero. But clearly part of Malcolm's legacy is his identification of Islam as a pathway to power.

Young black men seeking empowerment and self-determination are drawn to Islam despite the negative image projected by the extremists of 9/11. By living according to the precepts of Islam they counter white America's stereotype of black men as on drugs, out of work or in jail. A commitment to discipline and industry structures their lives; family and community become rewarding responsibilities; moral behavior is required; charity is a duty. Islam ordains, defines, clarifies and mandates. "It's a complete way of life," its followers like to point out—a way of life that bestows pride on a man and gives a woman security.

If Islam is a path not only to God but also to self-respect for young black men, what about black women? Do they feel complete in a religious institution that teaches deference to men and the priority of wifely duties, and that prescribes a dress code that may include a burka? A visit to Masjid Mohammad on Washington's New Jersey Avenue helps answer these questions. A happy camaraderie unites the women there, as it does the men. Over 125 men and some 100 women attended the Friday lunch and prayer service I attended. Visitors are welcome. Several women cuddle babies in their arms in a small anteroom at the back of the main hall, chatting and laughing softly. Others come through the back door and sit on the floor or on chairs. The men enter from another door, moving well to the front, standing, bowing, kneeling and praying. Women pray or chat in an atmosphere of community and acceptance.

A speaker gives a short talk on stress, hypertension among blacks, and the benefits of fasting. Sherifah Alaimeen Rafiq, a Sunni Muslim who works for the Muslim American Society, attends the mosque as often as possible, although women are excused to attend to family responsibilities. She arrives late, hugs babies and leaves without entering the main hall. The busy nursery and kids' school classes normally found in churches are absent here. These sisters and their children draw quietly together, enjoying their shared Muslim identity.

For women, choosing Islam means gaining new power in their communities and in their lives. They are attracted to the movement because Islam gives them clearly defined rights, respect as women and the prospect of a family unit headed by a dependable male. Most of the women I talked to believe that these ideals are not stressed enough in Christianity.

For many Muslim women, the benefits of Islam overshadow what many American women would view as Islam's privileging of males. According to the Qur'an, a man is entitled to four wives if he can treat them all

equally, and he may in certain circumstances administer corporal punishment. Some of the women I spoke with acknowledged these practices, but one woman said they are mischaracterized. “In the Hadith, which tells us how Muhammad himself lived—and he is our example—we see that he treated his wives gently and respectfully. He may have corrected them, but he would not harm them.”

Harm may be suffered in other ways, however, as Dannin reports. Some of his conversion stories detail the emotional struggles faced by African-American Muslim women and broach the issue of polygamy, which Dannin concedes is one of “the most controversial topics” among African-American Muslims. Dannin tells of Naima Saif’ullah, for example, who “found her experiment in Islamic plural marriage had become a nightmare.” A former drug addict who married five times as a Muslim—once into a polygamous arrangement—Naima blames her mosque’s religious leaders for not being more vigilant in overseeing her choice of a mate. Despite her “unsuccessful marriages and her failure at polygamy,” Dannin observes, Naima Saif’ullah has not lost her faith in Islam “precisely because she sees herself not as a convert to some monolithic patriarchal Islam but as a serious professional woman who has chosen to accept Islam as a moral compass for her life.”

Dannin also writes of Aminah Ali, who converted to Islam in order to marry a Muslim. In her case, the marriage was called off because she learned that “being a Muslim wife implied a particular status that excluded her from camaraderie with her husband and his friends.” Aminah eventually left the faith. Dannin says that Aminah was adamantly opposed to “the popular assertion that polygamy is truly a viable solution for the dearth of marriageable men among African-Americans.”

Who would expect well-educated 25-year-old Sherifah, whom I met at the Masjid Mohammad and who speaks Mandarin Chinese and Arabic, to permit her husband to have another wife? Yet in a conversation with me she upheld plural marriage in principle. “In our community we say it’s best to marry one, but we don’t want to see another sister struggling [without resources],” she told me. “Some groups say you can put in the marriage contract that the husband cannot take a second wife. But, actually, a lot of men marry a second wife.” Speaking of her own upcoming marriage, Sherifah confides that she thinks it will be monogamous, since her fiancé was not born Muslim and is not, therefore, culturally attached to polygamy.

Dannin offers a nuanced and revealing discussion of polygamy that underscores how perplexing the issue is for Muslims themselves. Most orthodox Muslims believe in interpreting scripture along very strict lines, and the Qur’an does indeed permit polygamy. To forbid what scripture teaches is considered blasphemous. Yet Dannin points out that most Muslim leaders who “are concerned with propagating their faith in 20th-century America have minimized the importance of polygamy to Islam. Historically, this strategy amounts to accommodation with the dominant form of monogamy in a society where polygamy itself transgresses the definition of marriage. The general view of polygamy is that it is an institution alien to American culture and generally incompatible with modern society. If Muslim men are reluctant to admit this publicly, it is also because they avoid this very controversial issue among themselves.”

Abdul Malek Muhammad, speaking for the Muslim American Society, told me that the society strongly disapproves of plural marriages.

For Dannin, patriarchy, which in his view troubles all major world religions, is the deeper problem beneath polygamy. Fatima Mernissi, he observes, is one of the few scholars who has “waded boldly into the question of feminism and Islam” with books like *Beyond the Veil*.

None of the Muslim women I spoke with, however, were interested in feminist analysis. They enjoy the respect they receive from Muslim men, and many like the rules on modest dress and chastity. A younger crowd praised chaperoned and group dating.

Women also like the fact that no matter how much money they earn, they have no monetary responsibilities in the marriage. “That’s because, should the man divorce a wife, she needs her own money,” one member of the mosque told me. The clarity with which Islam defines the economic rights and responsibilities of women is appealing to African-American Muslim women, in contrast to what they see as the ambiguities of American society. How well it works in practice is another matter. Dannin cites numerous cases in which men failed to live up to their responsibilities. As in any community, individual abuses cannot be blamed on the religion. The security and personal empowerment marriage promises Muslim women are only as dependable as the individual who makes the promise.

While Muslims are highly visible members of black communities, and non-Muslim African-Americans are growing more and more comfortable with their Muslim neighbors, the tensions that have historically characterized relations between Islam and the black church still exist. Some African-American pastors consider Islam a rival for the souls of black folks. But there are also plenty of mediating voices.

The possibility of strained relationships has moved Vance Ross, pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Hyattsville, Maryland, both to defend the inclusive and egalitarian nature of Christianity against charges that Christianity is a “white man’s religion” and to insist that the members of his congregation have an accurate understanding of Islam.

Ross cannot imagine what could be more egalitarian than “that sacrificial act of Jesus in giving his life for the salvation of humankind. Everyone is equal at the foot of the cross. Discrimination doesn’t live there. We need to be certain [that] people have a complete picture—that they know it was the influence of Christianity that made it possible to free the slaves,” he says. “They also need to know the entire history of Islam. Islam shouldn’t be equated just with the Nation of Islam, or Osama bin Laden or Muslims who are selling slaves today.”

Black Christian academics and pastors are well aware of the attraction of Islam for African-Americans, but many reject the idea that it represents a threat to Christianity. “The African-American Christian community does not need to be concerned about losing people to Islam,” says Calvin O. Butts III, senior pastor of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church and president of the College of Old Westbury in Long Island. “It will not happen. Christianity is without question the strongest religion in our community. Remember, the first nation to be fully Christianized was Ethiopia.”

Eugene F. Rivers III, pastor of Azusa Christian Community Church in Boston, sees things differently. “We are losing young black men to Islam, and we need to research why this is happening.” Rivers lays the responsibility on black churches. He wants to see them do five things: “Initiate a focused approach to the claims of Islam; make a political and cultural analysis of the unique impact of the Islamic evangelization of black males; approach Islam on theological and evangelical levels; assess the geopolitical and strategic implications of Islam in Africa and South Asia, since the fortunes of black people in the U.S. are informed by what happens to blacks elsewhere in the world; and, mount a major effort to investigate the success of Islam in prisons.

In a telephone conversation Dannin acknowledged the strain between the faiths, but he considers it manageable. He points out that African-American Christians vastly outnumber their Muslim brothers and sisters. According to a survey conducted by the Barna Research Group, over 19 million African-Americans identify themselves as “born-again Christians,” a statistic that doesn’t include those who identify with Christianity in other terms. Compare that figure to the number of African-American Muslims—estimated at 1.5 million—and the demographic “threat” seems remote at best.

Nevertheless, Dannin criticizes the black church for not living up to its call to moral leadership within the black community. “There is in the Christian churches a tolerance for the status quo,” he states. “Christian groups fail to emphasize and defend what is right. People will follow whoever leads if [leaders] are doing what is right.”

Islam is doing something right. Muslims are accepted, visible members of black communities. The man or woman on the street is unlikely to blame these neighbors for 9/11, or to associate them with last summer's sniper attacks in Maryland and Virginia. For their part, Muslims, at least publicly, shower compliments on Christianity, acknowledging the importance of Jesus as a prophet but denying his deity. Still, Baldwin claims the calm is only on the surface. "Christians tolerate Muslims, but there is an underlying tension because of the theological differences." There has always been dialogue between the two groups, Baldwin states. "Interfaith dialogue is one of the main themes of *Between Cross and Crescent*. Martin and Malcolm believed in building bridges of understanding instead of building barriers." Yet the tension between leaders of the two religions remains.

Butts also emphasizes cooperation. He believes the African-American church should "embrace our Muslim brothers and sisters, first, because they are seeking God, and second, because we have problems in our community that we both have a major interest in solving. Remember what Malcolm said? 'We don't catch hell in America because we are Democrats or Republicans, or Christians or Muslims; we catch hell in America because we're black.' When we have concerns we must come together."

Some black church leaders believe that the black church should not only cooperate with Muslims but learn from them as well, especially when it comes to reaching black men. "Black churches challenge you emotionally, and maybe intellectually," Rivers said, "but Islam challenges a man spiritually, physically and intellectually." Like Islam, Rivers observes, the Church of God in Christ enjoys a large male membership because "it cultivates the image of manhood." Rivers maintains that "black churches will have to take a page out of Islam's playbook if they are going to engage young people." A former gang member, Rivers confesses to studying the strategies used by the NOI in its heyday. "My entire outlook was influenced by the Muslims," he admits. Rivers is now heavily involved in promoting church leadership in inner-city neighborhoods.

Robert Franklin, president emeritus of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, thinks the church should pay close attention to what he sees as the three distinctive marks of Islam's appeal to African-Americans. "The political theology of Islam appeals to African-American activism; the well-ordered spiritual life provides specific guidelines for prayer and for relationships to others; and the promotion of family values emphasizes male leadership. African-Americans feel the family is fragmented, mainly because black men are not fulfilling their role. In Islam the man is the provider," Franklin remarks. When Malcolm X presented Islam as an alternative, Franklin notes, black men responded because "Christianity failed to understand and satisfy what they were feeling but didn't say."

Butts acknowledges the empowerment, stability and privileges Islam brings to African-Americans and their communities. "I see men who are redeemed from prison and drugs, who are off the streets and running their own businesses, who are neat and clean. They even have a new name!" he exclaims.

Hafis Mahbub, a Pakistani Muslim missionary to "new" black Muslims in Brooklyn during the 1960s, offered an even more radical account of Islam's appeal to black Americans. In Dannin's words, Mahbub taught that in Islam "the struggle to achieve personal transformation was synonymous with the struggle for total social reform."