

Nation of Islam is now a shadow of the group Muhammad Ali joined

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Muhammad Ali, laid to rest in the tradition of his Muslim faith in June, introduced many Americans to Islam.

But the group that brought Islam to Ali has diminished since 1964, when Ali announced that he was a proud member of the Nation of Islam.

“Ali did more to normalize Islam in this country than perhaps any other Muslim in the history of the United States,” said religion scholar Sherman Jackson, speaking at Ali’s funeral service June 9 in Louisville, Kentucky.

But Ali did not normalize the Nation of Islam, which he was part of for a decade during a time when it attracted thousands of African Americans with its message of self-sufficiency and piety, its mistrust of the white establishment, and its call for black separatism. Though considered heretical by mainstream Muslims, it was for many at the time the face of Islam in America.

“In the 1950s and 1960s when you said you were Muslim, people immediately assumed you were a member of the Nation of Islam,” said Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, a religion professor at Reed College. “Their numbers have dwindled significantly and their influence has dwindled significantly.”

During its heyday, it claimed half a million adherents. Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a best seller after its 1965 publication, details the civil rights leader’s experience with the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm X recruited Ali to the Nation of Islam. After the boxer’s conversion from Christianity and subsequent refusal to fight in Vietnam, Ali made it clear that his conscientious objector stance emanated from his new faith. It also grounded his black pride. Muhammad Ali was his “free name,” the former Cassius Clay explained, the name of a man who did not answer to white Christian America.

Though there are no independent statistics on the Nation of Islam from the time Ali converted, a comprehensive 2011 Pew Research Center study found that less than 5

percent of Muslim Americans claim membership in the Nation of Islam.

Increased immigration of Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern Muslims in the past decades has also reduced the proportion of native-born black Americans among the nation's Muslims. And most African-American Muslims—who represent a quarter of all Muslims in the United States—identify as Sunni, the stream of the faith Ali embraced in 1975.

As the heavyweight champion, Ali could not reconcile his international stature with his status under Jim Crow laws. The Nation of Islam's message resonated: black Americans were God's chosen people who must throw off their white oppressors.

Lawrence Mamiya, professor of religion and Africana studies at Vassar College, estimates that there are now about 30,000 members of the Nation of Islam in the United States and that it has about 130 mosques.

The Nation of Islam still wields influence within some African-American communities in the Midwest and Northeast. Nation of Islam officials at its Chicago headquarters and at regional mosques did not respond to requests for comment.

While Malcolm X explicitly broke with the Nation of Islam, Ali left more quietly. After Elijah Muhammad, the group's charismatic leader, died in 1975, Warith Deen Muhammad, his son and successor, rejected the deification of the Nation of Islam's founder and led most of the group's followers toward mainstream Sunni Islam.

Ali came to embrace this more inclusive religiosity, which was reflected in his diverse friendships, including those with Christian and Jewish leaders.

This contrasts with the current Nation of Islam leader's anti-Semitic record, with Louis Farrakhan trafficking in age-old stereotypes of Jewish people as warmongers who seek world domination.

Farrakhan resurrected the Nation of Islam and led it to triumph in October 1995 with the Million Man March, an event that inspired black men from across the country—including Christians such as then Illinois state senator Barack Obama—to fill the National Mall and publicly embrace their responsibilities as fathers, brothers, and sons. Estimates of the crowd ranged from the National Park Service's low of 400,000 to 1.2 million.

In the early 1990s Farrakhan was drawing 30,000 to 40,000 people to arenas in major cities, said Mamiya, who attended several of the gatherings. Like his predecessor Elijah Muhammad, he captivated his audiences, telling black Americans that God would redeem them.

But Farrakhan also railed against gay and Jewish people and claimed that 9/11 was “an inside job.” And he has pushed a thoroughly discredited claim that vaccines cause autism, particularly in black boys. Then there are Farrakhan’s repeated assertions that he has visited a great wheel in space—which he has nicknamed “Allah’s calling card”—that hovers above the United States, poised to annihilate the nation for its evil deeds.

Organizers of the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March, headlined by Farrakhan, invited women and children to join the men. It drew a much smaller crowd than the original march—several thousand, according to reporters.

Aminah McCloud, a religious studies professor at DePaul University, noted that Farrakhan, 83, has not named a successor.

“It’s probably very scary to people in the community because no one has risen to his level of charisma,” she said. Yet memories of the Million Man March still resonate, and the Nation of Islam “has its place in the continuum of religious communities that worry about poor and disenfranchised economic classes.” —Religion News Service

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