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THE BLACK MUSLIMS: FROM REVOLUTION TO INSTITUTION

BY MICHAEL PARENTI

Observe the operation of the white man. He is successful. He makes no excuses for his failure. He works hard—in a collective manner. You do the same.

—ELIJAH MUHAMMAD

THROUGHOUT the late middle ages Europe's deracinated poor repeatedly fell prey to visionary anticipations of a terrestrial paradise. Adamites, Flagellants, Joachimites, Millennialists and Anabaptists were among those who awaited a final cataclysmic struggle between the hosts of the Christ and the forces of the Anti-Christ. After Armageddon, God's chosen would live eternally on earth in a state of perfection, freed from the oppression of prince and clergy, and extricated from sin, suffering and death. The historian Norman Cohn records that these various movements, with their remarkable counterparts in eschatological myth and chiliastic enthusiasm, have twentieth century counterparts in totalitarianism.¹

Similarly, Father Ronald Knox suggests that the "enthusiastic" apocalyptic sects of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries bear a

¹ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Harper Bros., 1961), 2nd ed., pp. 307-319. Other writers have noted the symptoms of messianic chiliasm from the first Christian communities and early heresies down to "the many national and international dreams of collective redemption" found in our century. See Benjamin Nelson, "The Future of Illusions," in Contemporary Civilization Staff, Columbia University, eds., *Man in Contemporary Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), Vol. 2, pp. 958-979; also, Hans Kohn, *Prophets and Peoples* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1946), and Charles Braden, *These Also Believe: A study of Modern American Cults and Minority Religious Movements* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), especially his account of the Jehovah's Witnesses sect.

resemblance to certain present day religious sects. The "enthusiast" is the man who, impatient with the compromises of institutional theology (be it Protestant or Catholic) sets out to restore the primitive purity and zeal of the early Church. He hopes not merely to qualify for heaven but to excel, to live in Christ's perfection every day on earth. "Extenuate, accommodate, interpret and he [the enthusiast] will part company with you."² He burns, sometimes noisily, sometimes in rigorous silence, with a passion for redemption.

Eric Hoffer constructs a more inclusive archetype, the "true believer," who can be found playing the main role in all mass movements, and who is noted for his fanatical devotion to an all-consuming cause, his need to submerge himself in some authoritarian body which promises collective salvation, and his intense personal frustrations and hate-filled opposition to a "devil," be it capitalist, communist, foreigner, Jew, etc. Echoing Cohn and Knox, Hoffer maintains that true believer movements have existed throughout the centuries, and that, however variagated in doctrine, myth and aspiration, they "share certain essential characteristics which give them a family likeness."³

Observers of the fantastic tenets and fanatical devotion of the much-publicized Black Muslim movement in America may be struck by the degree to which Elijah Muhammad and his followers seem to embody the combined attributes of Cohn's millenarian, Knox's enthusiast and Hoffer's true believer.⁴ The Muslim eschatology has a familiar shape; it has been produced with different trappings in millenarian ideologies throughout history. First, there is the state of original purity: the first man whom God (Allah) created was black. Then came the Fall: the black man

² Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm, a Chapter in the History of Religion* (New York: Galaxy, 1961), p. 2. Knox resurrects the seventeenth century meaning of the word, "enthusiasm," that is, absolute religious dedication, fervor and ecstasy.

³ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Mentor, 1958), p. 9.

⁴ In his study C. Eric Lincoln concludes that the Muslims are living representatives of Hoffer's true believers. See C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), (hereafter cited as *Black Muslims*) ch. 5.

was overwhelmed and enslaved by the devil incarnate, *i.e.*, the white man, who is a corrupt replica of man called into being by Yakub, the Evil Personage, universally in opposition to Allah's peace and justice. The white man, as son of the Devil Yakub, is himself a devil by nature. But there came the Message: a messiah and his followers, (the Black Muslims led by the Messenger Elijah Muhammad) who saw through the devil's machinations and who, armed with the truth of Islam, purged themselves of the white man's corruption.⁵ The Message was brought to Muhammad by Allah, Himself, in the person of one W. D. Fard, who appeared in Detroit during the 1930's. The Muslims will lead the chosen black race from its present bondage to a terrestrial paradise, a totally autonomous Muslim nation.⁶ The black man finds redemption in a nation of his own, but the blue-eyed white devil will meet his destruction at Armageddon, when the wrath of Allah is delivered upon him. From then on the black man will rule the earth.⁷

The question of what is to be the future of this "cosmic futuristic" organization has been on the minds of many observers, especially since recent racial crises have more fully revealed the angry militancy of American Negroes. Conjectures vary from reassurances that the Muslims, failing to strike a resonant chord

⁵ Muhammad writes: "We believe we are the people of God's choice, as it has been written that God would choose the rejected and the despised. We can find no other persons fitting this description in these last days more than the so-called Negroes in America." *Muhammad Speaks* (Sept. 27, 1963).

⁶ For accounts of the Muslim eschatology see E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism, A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 122-142; also, Elijah Muhammad, "What Muslims Believe," *Muhammad Speaks* (Nov. 22, 1963), and C. Eric Lincoln, "Extremist Attitudes in the Black Muslim Movement," *Journal of Social Issues*, 19 (Apr. 1963), pp. 80-81.

⁷ See footnote 1, also Malcolm X's correspondence with the *New York Times Magazine* (Aug. 25, 1963), in which he cites, and apparently misquotes, the Koran (20:102) to support this Judgment Day eschatology. No attempt is made here to offer a full account of Islamic belief. See Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, pp. 169-172, 210-229, and Robert Payne, "Why 400,000 Follow Muhammad," *New York Times Magazine* (Aug. 4, 1963). Muhammad, admitting that his teachings differ somewhat from those of traditional Moslems, argues that this is necessary because of the special background and problems of his people.

in the Negro masses, will wither away,⁸ to ominous warnings that a violent racial separatist movement involving millions of Negroes is in the offing.⁹ Here I shall attempt to examine the several possible alternatives open to the Muslim movement in the light of present-day evidence.

Muslim Revolution and a Black Paradise

Might Black Islam develop into a revolutionary power with enough strength to disrupt important sectors of the dominant community, to the extent that the white man must give serious attention to the Muslim's separatist demands? However bleak the racial situation in America, this alternative seems most improbable. There are doubtless few Negroes who would take issue with the Muslims' critique of white oppression, and many who applaud the Muslims' efforts at self-improvement. Yet the best evidence would indicate that American Negroes overwhelmingly reject the Muslim dream of a separate state.¹⁰ Young Southern Negroes tend to be both Christian and integrationist, and a growing Northern group of Negroes, while less dedicated to religion, are even more committed to making integrationist advances within the present social system.¹¹

⁸ Nat Hentoff predicts that Muhammad will meet the same end as Marcus Garvey. See his "Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America" (review of Es-sien-Udom's book of the same title), *Commonweal*, 76 (July 27, 1962), p. 429.

⁹ See Lincoln, "Extremist Attitudes in the Black Muslim Movement," *loc. cit.*, pp. 82-83; Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given* (New York: World, 1963). One writer conjectures that the Muslims might set off a conflagration among one-tenth of our citizenry which will make "our past racial troubles . . . seem like child's play." See A. B. Southwick, "Malcolm X: Charismatic Demagogue," *Christian Century*, 80 (June 5, 1963), p. 741.

¹⁰ The first systematic nation-wide survey of Negro opinion (conducted by professional pollster Louis Harris, in which only Negro interviewers were used) found that one out of eight Negroes is apparently sympathetic to the Muslim organization as such, but 22 out of 23 are opposed to a separate state. See "The Negro in America," *Newsweek*, 62 (July 29, 1963).

¹¹ The Harris poll concludes that "the Negro is clearly optimistic about the future he wants to share with whites." *Ibid.* See also Herbert Krosney, "America's Black Supremacists: Muslims of Elijah Muhammad," *Nation*, 192 (May 6, 1961), p. 392.

Furthermore, the realities of the power situation, showing a dominant white majority intransigently opposed to territorial concessions, probably discourage enough Negroes from seriously entertaining a separatist solution.¹² But calculations of the probabilities of success do not always dictate the actions of extremist ideologists. Might not the Muslims in desperation try to ignite a racial revolution? The Muslims' outspoken hatred of white oppression and the sheer intensity of their rhetoric have been seized upon as proof that they are preparing for violence. Yet the truth is that the movement prohibits and abhors the use of violence except in self-defense, and forbids members to use or carry weapons. All evidence indicates they practice what they preach.¹³

The Muslims are the first to realize that their thousands are no match for the most powerful military establishment in the world, that of the United States. On this question the movement's leadership has shown itself quite capable of rational assessments. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the Muslims' belief in a nation of their own "has produced absolutely no political program for the establishment of a national home."¹⁴ They seem to look more to Allah than to Washington for a final solution, perhaps secure in the belief that what their worldly power cannot bring them, their eschatological deliverance will. Unless one were to share their particular apocalyptic anticipations there seems little reason to foresee a Black Muslim nation.

The Theory of Inevitable Decline

That the Muslims will never realize their goal should not lead us to conclude that they will go the way of most millenarian sects

¹² The feeling that Elijah Muhammad's black nation was a "pipe dream" helped to disillusion one ex-Muslim interviewed by the writer. As he said, "The black man will always have to deal with the white man somewhere along the line. The South couldn't secede and neither can we."

¹³ See Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, pp. 289-290, 294-295, and *passim*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

and fade into oblivion. This outcome, in the foreseeable future, seems to be almost as improbable as the separatist alternative. The movement has had a discernible impact on the Negro community and shows no signs of decline. With its growing membership, its nation-wide organizational strength and youth, and its proselytizing vigor the Muslim movement cannot be written off as just another Negro store-front cult.¹⁵ Almost all Muslims are gainfully employed, and are expected to contribute a certain percentage of their earnings to the movement. All are forbidden to spend money frivolously or self-indulgently; consequently, most Muslims enjoy a healthy living standard and are able to keep the movement well-financed.¹⁶

That the movement has durability and strength is due to its being socially and psychologically functional for its members. Religion per se is not Black Islam's most important attraction. Most Muslims testify to a search for something to belong to, for dignity and self-respect, and for a means to material, moral and emotional regeneration. As one Muslim boasts: "We take the junkies and ex-cons and unemployed off the streets and make black men out of them, after the white man crippled them."¹⁷ Indeed, both sympathetic and unsympathetic observers have witnessed that the Muslims do, for addicts, alcoholics, criminals and despairing slum dwellers in general, that which psychologists, police and social workers have failed to do, namely, rehabilitate

¹⁵ An accurate count of Muslim membership is impossible to procure. Most observers make estimates somewhere between 50,000 and 250,000. See Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, pp. 21-27, 111-115; Krosney, *op. cit.*, p. 390; H. R. Isaacs, "Integration and the Negro Mood," *Commentary*, 34 (Dec. 1962), p. 490.

Rate of growth and extent of national organization can be estimated by the number and location of Muslim temples. There were 4 temples in 1945, 15 in 1955, and 50 by 1959, located in every major city and in many lesser places. Today the number of temples may be greater than 100. See Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, p. 70. On the question of the youthfulness of the members of the movement, Lincoln (*op. cit.*, pp. 22-23) states that up to 80 per cent of a typical Muslim congregation is under 35 years of age.

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, pp. 17-18, 24, 60-64.

¹⁷ In a street-corner interview with the writer, New York City, Sept. 20, 1963.

them.¹⁸ Combined with their new sense of racial pride, members develop an intense drive for self-improvement and self-help.

As long as there are millions of Negroes among the déclassés and urban poor (and the next twenty years promise amelioration but no miracles), there remains a substantial population pool from which the Muslims may draw. It is this very stratum which benefits least from integration and which is generally forgotten by middle-class civil rights organizations.

The Muslim movement, then, is neither faddist nor ephemeral; it is born of the deep-rooted malignancy of racial oppression; it has helped individuals whom society had tacitly declared beyond help; it has, in its strange way, repaired some of the irreparable, and saved some of the damned.

Longevity and Transition: From Revolution to Institution

What then becomes of a millenarian-enthusiast movement that is too weak to achieve its paradisiacal dream, yet too strong and too functional to wither away? The chiliastic sects of the middle ages were characterized by inspired upsurges that either spent themselves when prophecy failed or collapsed with the demise of the messianic leader. In some cases, the devoted shared a collective death at the hands of the established authorities. But the Muslim movement is better equipped for longevity and shows no inclination toward suicidal excesses. On this score Black Islam more closely resembles those millenarian, true believer movements, such as the early Christian Church and the early Bolsheviks, which neither burned themselves out nor withered away, but which, by achieving stability and longevity, embarked upon a process of transformation and transition that continues even today.

¹⁸ This rehabilitation function of the movement is well-documented in Essien-Udom's penetrating study (*op. cit.*), ch. 4. See also Claude Brown, "Ally Bush," *Dissent*, 10 (Summer 1963), p. 265, and the testimonies offered by Muslims themselves in "What Islam Has Done for Me," a feature now appearing in every issue of *Muhammad Speaks*.

Two fundamental propositions drawn from Max Weber's analysis of culture and society might guide us here. First, Weber understood that certain beliefs of a cultural system can set in motion social practices and social organization which, in turn, eventually negate the very end values of that cultural system. Thus Muslim worldly organization and practices, which are the outgrowth of an enthusiast-true believer system of beliefs, lead to interests and material conditions that eventually vitiate and undermine transcendental values.

Second, in order to do justice to their mission, Weber observed, the charismatic leader and sect "must stand outside the ties of this world." It is the fate of their charisma when coming in contact with "the permanent institutions of a community, to give way to powers of tradition or of rational socialization."¹⁹ It is my conclusion, based on the analysis to be presented below, that, contrary to the tendencies of the mass media and certain writers²⁰ to accentuate the sensationalist race rhetoric and messianic fanaticism of the movement, and contrary to our own anxious presentiments about "black extremism," the Muslims are (a) developing from what was potentially a revolutionary sect into a "conservative" Negro self-improvement group, more interested in material advances than in sacrificing the life of the movement for the sake of a black supremacist doctrine; (b) developing an organizational maturity and efficacy that extends beyond, and actually modifies, the chiliastic and charismatic impulses; (c) manifesting a growing

¹⁹ Max Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 248, 253; also, Weber, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," *loc. cit.*, pp. 302-322; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1958); Robert Merton, "Puritanism, Pietism and Science," in Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, rev. ed. (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), pp. 574-606, and Benjamin Nelson, *Dialogues Across the Centuries: Marx, Weber, Hegel and Luther* (forthcoming).

²⁰ See, for instance, Lincoln, *op. cit.*, Lomax, *op. cit.*, and Southwick, *op. cit.*; also, "Recruits behind Bias," *Time*, 77 (Mar. 31, 1961). Note Duane Lockard's comparison of Lincoln's alarmist approach to that of Essien-Udom's in his review article, "American Subculture: The Negro's Paradox," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 26 (Fall 1962), pp. 367-376.

inclination toward a *modus vivendi* with the larger community, both black and white, thereby changing from a charismatic sect to an organization committed to, or accommodated within, the ongoing social system.

Organizational Maturity and Efficacy

The Muslims have constructed a sturdy mass organization with leadership operating in a rationalized chain-of-command from Muhammad through his chief lieutenants to an aggressive and vigorous clergy. Decisions are seldom the haphazard inspirational measures one might expect from a cult of visionary chiliasts. A well-disciplined elitist security force (Fruit of Islam), with a guard in every temple, is alert to possible attacks from outside enemies and to heterodoxy within Muslim ranks.²¹ Temple "investigators" mediate and arbitrate disharmonies within families and among members, or refer disputes to the appropriate officers. There are women's auxiliaries to teach domestic skills, child-care and woman's proper role in the home; there are summer camps for Muslim children, accredited Muslim grade schools (the "University of Islam") with Muslim teachers and textbooks for educating the young in standard subjects and on the virtues of the disciplined Muslim life and the great black heritage; there are community centers for adolescents, employment, training and housing agencies for Muslim families, and prospering Muslim service and retail businesses.²²

Elijah Muhammad, in the eyes of his followers, is a messianic leader. Yet given its bureaucratic maturity and the grass-roots strength of its apparatus, the movement should not collapse like a house of cards when the leader dies. The rank and file manifest a dedication that is sustained and enduring rather than impulsive.

²¹ Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, pp. 199-203. While the Fruit of Islam has been described as a "paramilitary" group, it should be remembered that its members, like all Muslims, are unarmed.

²² See *Muhammad Speaks* (July 5, 1963), and other issues over the past year; also, Lincoln, *op. cit.*, *passim*, and Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

Membership is not something exercised in one's spare time; it is a total commitment to Black Islam. Every day is lived with the consciousness of one's Muslim identification, reinforced by activities and involvements which are almost exclusively related to the movement. The movement thus promises to outlast its leader. The problem of succession looms large, as in any authoritarian political system. It was solved once when Muhammad succeeded Fard, and it will probably be solved again and perhaps more easily if Muhammad designates a successor. Extensive interviews with followers indicate that they are not worried about succession; they believe their sense of unity is such that almost any minister could lead them.²³

The Black Puritans

For all their virulent denunciation of the white man, the Muslims are assiduously modeling themselves after certain white middle-class ideals. Besides the interdiction on alcohol, tobacco and narcotics, the Muslim must refrain from gambling, fornicating, dancing, more than one daily meal, long vacations, idleness, excessive sleeping, lying, stealing, discourtesy (especially toward women), intemperate singing, shouting or loud laughter. Devotedly domiciled women are well thought of. In addition, personal cleanliness, the fastidious care of homes, thrift, sobriety, diligent, honest work (even for a white employer), and obedience to (white) civil authorities—except on grounds of religious obligation²⁴—become moral duties, while the middle-class dress of subdued suit, tie and white collar becomes the Muslim uniform.²⁵

²³ Cf. Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–82. Lomax (*op. cit.*) is persuaded of the morality of Muslim leaders: "I am convinced that they would no more fight publicly over the question (of Muhammad's successor) than would the cardinals of the Roman Church." Essien-Udom notes that Muhammad is training his son, Minister Wallace Muhammad, to be his successor.

²⁴ Since it is against their religion to bear arms, Muslims claim the status of conscientious objectors and have gone to jail rather than serve in the army.

²⁵ Cf. Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 101, *ff.*; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1963), pp. 82–83.

If the Muslims reject the white man, they embrace his Protestant ethic. Nor should this appear as a paradox, for the very attempt to rise above the lower-class Negro subculture requires some emulation of the standards of the dominant white community. Furthermore, the target of Black Islam's most bitter denunciations is not the white man, but the "slave mentality of the lower-class so-called Negro." Muhammad exhorts his followers: "We must get away from the idea of depending on others to do for us what we can do for self. Fear, cowardice, and laziness are our greatest enemies."²⁶ The Muslim mission is to vanquish the slave mentality that has robbed the black man of his self-respect, kept him dependent on whites and prevented him from utilizing and expanding the limited opportunities available to him. Blacks are to follow the example of the Chinese, and cease their spendthrift ways, pool their resources and venture forth into black-financed enterprises.²⁷

This tireless pursuit of wealth, however, is not for the sake of self-indulgence but for the good of the Black Islamic community. The Muslims are the Black Puritans, and like the Puritans of old, their goals and their vision may be transcendental, but their methods and operations are worldly, creative, resourceful and financially profitable. Sounding much like a Calvinist, Malcolm X summed up this attitude: "No one's mind should be in the sky. In Islam everyone works. . . . Heaven demands hard work."²⁸ If anything, the result of their efforts is to make them more, not less, at home in the white man's world.

From Have-Nots to Haves

One characteristic that the millenarian, the enthusiast and the true believer share is a deprecating attitude toward the present.

²⁶ *Muhammad Speaks* (Nov. 22, 1963) (emphasis added).

²⁷ The relative inability of Negroes to create and sustain their own small businesses distinguishes them from most other ethnic groups. See Glazer and Moynihan, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

²⁸ Essien-Udom, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

The past is important in that it contains the myth of a lost identity and grandeur, a lost purity and paradise, and the future because these things shall be repossessed. Placed between the myth of the past and the illusion of the future, the present is often but a pale interregnum. This would seem true of the Muslims provided one gives exclusive attention to their arsenal of historical hallucination and futuristic fantasy. Just as the early Christian rejoiced at the prospect of Armageddon and the Second Coming, and the Bolshevik of 1919 saw his future secured only by an international chain-reaction of revolutions, so some desperate black man might find solace only in anticipating the destruction of the white world. He who has nothing can care little for stability and the incremental advance of self-interest. But what if, in the interim, this despised world grows ever more comfortable and meaningful?

As Hoffer observes, “. . . We are less ready to die for what we have or are than for what we wish to have and to be. It is a perplexing and unpleasant truth that when men already have something worth fighting for they do not feel like fighting.”²⁹ Might it not be that the Muslim is willing to risk less as he acquires more? As early as 1960 Essien-Udom discovered that “an improved economic status tends to moderate the militancy of the [Muslim] members. In fact, this interest in the acquisition of wealth appears to be one of the important internal constraints on the possibility of the movement becoming politically significant or revolutionary.”³⁰

Nor is conservation confined to material acquisitions. The Muslims are prescribing psychological goals for those who were severely deprived of such things. Equally significant is their devising a system of controls, responsibilities, and identifications, *i.e.*, the institutional means, that allow for the attainment of these goals. The consequences can be measured by the dramatic decline of anomie, despair and destructive pathology.³¹ He who is without

²⁹ Hoffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170 n.

³¹ Cf. Merton's "Social Structure and Anomie," in Merton, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-160, for a pertinent theoretical statement.

a self is the most ready to sacrifice himself, but he who is building a viable self-identification becomes in some ways wedded to this world. In sum, among the ghetto Negroes, the Muslims appear as psychological, as well as material, "haves."

Signs of Accommodation

There are several signs of accommodation of the movement to the larger society. The most important are: (a) the relationship to attempts at integration; (b) less emphasis on the separatist aspects of the movement; (c) the appearance of conventional interest in political life; (d) the recognition that some improvement can take place within the present political structure; (e) the moderation of expressions of hostility toward white men.

(a) At one time integrationist leaders were the objects of scurrilous attacks. King ("Martin Luther Queen"), Marshall ("The Ugly American"), Bunche ("The George Washington of Israel"), and others were considered to be the white masters' sycophants.³² But more recently, Malcolm X called for "a common front" with the NAACP and other groups, an appeal that was reiterated by Muhammad, himself, in "A Call to All Black Leaders."³³ The Muslims of late seem disposed to overlook the fact that the objectives of the NAACP, CORE and SNCC are diametrically opposed to their own, and that whites play fairly prominent roles in these organizations. Integrationist leaders and white officials and professionals have been allotted full page interviews in recent Muslim publications.³⁴ In addition, Elijah Muhammad has reserved

³² See *Muhammad Speaks*, winter issues of 1961; Lincoln, "Extremist Attitudes in the Black Muslim Movement," *loc. cit.*, p. 82; "Black Supremacy Cult in the U. S.," *U. S. News and World Report*, 47 (Nov. 9, 1959), pp. 112-114.

³³ *Muhammad Speaks* (Oct. 11, 1963); also, "New Move by the Black Muslims," *U. S. News and World Report*, 54 (Mar. 11, 1963), p. 14.

³⁴ For instance, in *Muhammad Speaks* (July 1963), an interview with (white) NAACP labor director Herbert Hill; *ibid.* (Oct. 11, 1963), an interview with Cook County Welfare Director Hillard, a white man introduced as "one of the world's greatest authorities on poverty and relief"; *ibid.* (Nov. 22, 1963), an interview with "one of the world's great sociologists and criminologists," Saul Alinsky, also a white man. These interviews are, if anything, respectfully presented by the Muslim publication.

a page in every issue of *Muhammed Speaks* for "Other People's Opinions," inviting "comments and criticisms from organizations or individuals on any phase of the Muslim program or on the plight of black America." Correspondence, often critical, from other black nationalists, integrationists and whites has appeared.³⁵

(b) To be sure, Muhammad still submits his plea for "a land of our own," yet one may detect a shift in emphasis and tone if not in doctrine. The call for "separation or death" is now rarely heard. A reading of Black Islam's official organ, *Muhammad Speaks*, over the past two years would demonstrate this transition. Accounts of integrationist battles are treated sympathetically rather than disdainfully, and headlines and news reports in the 1963 issues read like those found in any militant Negro *integrationist* publication: "70,000 Negroes Battle to End Second Class Citizenship," "Jackson, Citadel of Segregationists, Under Assault from Freedom Fighters," "White Racism Runs the Army?" "Negro to Run for Mayor," "Danville Negroes Continue Struggle for Freedom," "CORE Unit Wants Change to Right of Self-Defense," "GI's Face Jim Crow—Alone."

(c) At one time Muslim leaders discouraged their followers from voting. To participate in the political system was in effect to condone the white corruption and white dominance of that system. Yet the Muslims never explicitly ruled out future electoral participation.³⁶ And recently Muhammad has called for "a full-scale struggle on the political front in 1964 to elect, particularly in areas where Negroes predominate, black representatives dedicated to the struggle for the advancement and welfare of their people and the weeding out of black political puppets used to maintain white supremacy."³⁷ While not exactly like the Urban League in tone, the proposal sounds not unlike that made by any interest group attempting to mobilize its strength to back favored candidates and oppose those who have not been responsive to its

³⁵ See issues from August 1963 to the present.

³⁶ Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, pp. 18-19.

³⁷ "Call to All Black Leaders," *Muhammad Speaks* (Oct. 11, 1963).

interests. No mention is made of separatist goals, here, only a call for unity at the polls with the NAACP. This is a not insignificant step toward integrating Muslims into American political life.

(d) Unlike some Marxist revolutionaries who anticipated a worsening of working-class conditions as the necessary prelude to revolution, and who considered reform to be a sop designed to weaken proletariat militancy, the Muslims seem to favor incremental gains for Negroes within white society. The recently promulgated "Muslim Program" penned by Muhammad, himself, reads in part:

"We believe that the Federal government should intercede to see that black men and women tried in white courts receive justice in accordance with the laws of the land—or allow us to build a new nation for ourselves, dedicated to justice, freedom and liberty.

"As long as we are not allowed to establish a state or territory of our own, we demand not only equal justice under the laws of the United States, but equal employment opportunities—now!"³⁸

The Muslim teaching that there could be no real justice and no real equality without separation is significantly modified by this new demand for justice and equality in white society to compensate for the absence of separation. "White Justice" is no longer necessarily a contradiction in terms.

Nor do the Muslims seem unaware of the integrationist effects of their efforts. Malcolm X, in a very revealing statement, is quoted as saying: "Some whites are listening more these days to some of the so-called Negro leaders who are working for integration. They're listening to the moderates. But the white man wouldn't listen to a moderate if there were not an extremist behind him. Tom Mboya wouldn't have gotten that far if there hadn't been the shadow of Jomo Kenyatta."³⁹ Acting as an integration catalyst apparently does not fill Muslim leaders with the dismay one might have been led to expect.

³⁸ *Ibid.* (Aug. 16, 1963).

³⁹ Nat Hentoff, "Elijah in the Wilderness," *Reporter*, 23 (Aug. 4, 1960), p. 40.

(e) Since 1960 Muhammed has toned down much of his polemics, thereby revealing his sensitivity to the charge that he “preaches hate.” Little or no reference is made to white people as “devils,” and emphasis is on “black pride,” rather than “black supremacy.” Malcolm X has argued in televised interviews that condemnations of the white race can be justified by a look at the past and present, and are not motivated by race supremacy or race hatred. C. Eric Lincoln attributes this moderation to the Muslims’ new appreciation of the weight of the forces against them and to a desire not “to antagonize the opposition so that the movement will be destroyed.”⁴⁰

In December 1963 Muhammad silenced and suspended his most articulate lieutenant, Malcolm X, for his public remark that the assassination of President Kennedy was a case of “chickens coming home to roost.” The Leader then issued a brief but significant statement: “With the rest of the world, we are very shocked at the assassination of *our President*” (emphasis added).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hentoff quoting Lincoln, *ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴¹ *The New York Times* (Dec. 5, 1963). Despite his suspension and his subsequent decision to organize a “Black Nationalism” movement of his own, Malcolm X still considers himself a practicing Muslim and Elijah Muhammad his teacher. His economic and social program remains identical with the Muslim policy of self-help, self-sufficiency and self-pride. One difference rests in Malcolm’s desire to see Negroes arm and defend themselves “when the government is unable and unwilling to provide for their protection.” For this he has been criticized by Muhammad, who declares: “I have been teaching for the past years . . . that we carry no arms and we do not seek to win victory with arms.” See Gertrude Samuels, “Feud Within the Black Muslims,” *New York Times Magazine* (Mar. 22, 1964), pp. 17, 104–107.

Malcolm has opened his organization to all Negroes, non-believers as well as believers of Islam; and even welcomes white financial support, although he refuses whites as members because “they take over any organization they join.” He has called for close cooperation with interracial civil rights organizations. He is also advocating an all-out drive to get Negroes registered, voting and involved in present-day American politics. See *New York Post* (Mar. 30, 1964). Malcolm’s break with Muhammad hardly presages a new extremism and fanaticism as some of the press fear (e.g., *New York Times*, editorial, Mar. 14, 1964; Max Lerner, “White Devils?,” *New York Post*, (Mar. 9, 1964). Observe his recent statement: “I will preach the gospel of Black Nationalism to Negroes without asking them to join my organization, but rather urging them to join any existing civil rights organization” (*New York Times*, Apr. 3, 1964). If anything, Malcolm X’s “Black Nationalism” seems to gravitate toward the center at an even greater velocity than Muhammad’s Islam.

To dismiss such expressions and actions as merely "tactical" is to imply that they are not a measure of the movement's real behavior. But what leaders do as "tactics" is, after all, what they do; it is how they behave, and is much of what they are. A group's unwillingness to maneuver, compromise and retreat is usually taken as evidence of its extremism. Surely the presence of a willingness to compromise, retreat and come to terms with reality may be indicative of the converse. It tells us that Muhammad gives priority to the movement's survival as opposed to the movement's racial chiasm. Nothing corrodes the apocalyptic vision like *realpolitik*.

We might return to Father Knox's description of the enthusiast: "Extenuate, accommodate, interpret and he will part company with you." What an uneasy white society, abetted by mass media not noted for eschewing the sensational, has tended to overlook is that the Muslims have constantly extenuated, accommodated and interpreted. When the Muslims' utterances are moderate, we discount these as mere words and point to their seemingly hostile behavior. When their behavior is conciliatory and constructive, we prefer to believe their hostile utterances. Such a predisposition makes any measured evaluation of the movement impossible.

Conclusion

The Black Muslim official credo, a compendium of fantastic racial myths, is in the tradition of millenarianism, both ancient and recent. While the Muslim appeal is viable, there is little evidence that the movement will reach its separatist goal, neither does it promise to fade into oblivion in the foreseeable future. But this investigation, it is hoped, has been more than an exercise in prognostication; in noting the relationship of Muslim doctrine to practice, the author has attempted to call attention to the directions and causes of present transitions, and to the possible distortion and lag in our perceptions.

Visionary doctrine can operate as an instrument of revolution. There are ideas that "change the world," and crystallize and

mobilize sentiments. No one knows better than the visionary how vision can inflame life. The chiliastic impulse has infused whole populations with a thirst for paradise and a willingness to risk all to win all. But eschatological doctrine may serve other roles. It remained for Weber to demonstrate that ideas may generate consequences that create the very conditions which negate the ideas. By working in a calling for the glory of God, maximizing and rationalizing all effort to cultivate God's vineyard for God's majesty, the Puritan unleashed secular forces in industry, commerce and science that eventually undermined the very values he sought to propagate.

Weber's thesis, in all its paradoxical nature, seems to find confirmation in the Muslim movement. Black Islam's fantastic eschatology does not serve as a battle plan directing blacks toward some cataclysmic confrontation with whites—although too many observers have hastened to that conclusion. The real effect of doctrinal belief is simple and powerful: blackness is given a superior, majestic and even magical status, and the black man is thereby rescued from the condition of suffering from a missing heritage and lost identity. In being thus doctrinally infused with a zeal, a confidence and a sense of means and goals, the Muslims fabricate the wherewithal to overcome racial defeat, despair and self-destroying self-hate. This accomplishment, impelled as it is by fantastic tenets, leads the Muslims away from the separatist myth and closer to the ongoing social system. "The impossible," as Mannheim suggests in his discussion of chiliasm, "gives birth to the possible."⁴²

Rather than being possessed by the ecstatic and the revolutionary impulses, the Muslims have set about, in response to their new found race pride, to uplift and transform themselves from *lumpen-proletariat* Negroes into practitioners of a law-abiding, middle-class Protestant ethic, from have-nots into haves interested in

⁴² Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., Harvest Paperback, no date), p. 213.

securing a better communal, material and psychological existence for themselves and for other Negroes. Hence, the actions born of the beliefs of racial disparadoes produce racial reformers. Signs of rapprochement and accommodation with the wider Negro, and even the white, population have become evident to those who are willing to look. Demands for justice and equality for the Negro in this society play a more prominent role in the Muslim program than cries of "separation or death."

Closely related to this is Weber's postulate that the charismatic inspirational sect, coming into contact with the permanent institutions of this world, must eventually become of this world. Here, again, is a paradox. The achievement of organizational stability and longevity, designed in part to strengthen and solidify the inspirational message, can only be secured at the expense of the impulsive and charismatic. Thus the messianic zeal and magic which give rise to the institution become modified by the exigencies and structure of institutional life. The necessities of *realpolitik*, the desire for a wider appeal, and the sheer experience of longevity and organization, commit the Muslim leadership to the growth and survival of the movement, and of all its meaningful functions, in a manner that far outweighs any fixation on separatism or black cosmic futurism. It would seem that the purity of the millenarian movement is endangered by only two things: destruction and survival.

What then becomes of the apocalyptic force that is too weak to achieve its dream, yet too functional to wither away, and we might add, too resourceful and realistic to invite disaster by a collision with vastly superior forces? The answer would seem to be that this force goes the way of the early Church, the Bolshevik party and many European socialist movements, from revolution to institution, from sect to establishment, from fervent inspiration to patient organization. The movement reaches an accomodation with a less than paradisiacal world even as it continues rhetorically to

oppose that world. In thus coming to terms, the movement begins to develop a greater interest in maintaining itself than in risking everything for the ecstatic deliverance.

This, perhaps, is what Mannheim meant when he observed that chiliastic forces "tend to become detached from their origins and to go their own way independently of the motives that prompted them."⁴³ Despite their loftiest visions, prophets become bishops, reformers become bureaucrats, and conspirators become commissars; vitality gives way to order, fire turns to form, and blood is replaced with wine. The evidence would indicate that this is the road left open for the Black Muslims and that indeed they may already be traveling upon it.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 214.