

FORUM

Church or Mosque? Battle for the Souls of Black Men

Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, Professor Emeritus of Religion and African American Culture at Duke University, told us so, a long time ago. Three decades ago, he "warned" Black Christian leaders of the budding interest black folk were showing towards Islam. As his dear friend Alex Haley was penning *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Lincoln was finishing *The Black Muslims in America*. Handwriting in books. What manner of surprise!

Christianity: The way of the Cross.

Islam: The Crescent and the Star.

In just the past five years alone, the numbers of African Americans



Photo taken at Million Man March, by Dr. William H. Turner

LIFT EVERY VOICE

By Dr. WILLIAM H. TURNER

converting to Islam has reached in excess of the 1 million or so persons who attended last week's Million Man March, organized by the Nation of Islam. Orthodox Islam—not the Nation of Islam—is proving to be a vital option to black Christian churches, especially to black males. And when the National and Progressive Baptists conventions—through their leadership—came out against The March, they may have strengthened the hand of this most powerful and serious competitor for the souls of black folk.

Needless to say, that is serious stuff, no longer a question of when and whether, but that, in face of the facts, to what effect is our witness that Muslims now constitute the second largest religion in America. Behind Protestant and Catholic Christianity, Islam counts at least 6 million members in America, of whom 90 percent of new converts are black.

This Islamic challenge to Christianity is a worldwide phenomenon, according to Lincoln, and black Christian churches are chiefly taxed since most Americans who have become Muslims in the recent past are from the black community. Going back to Haley's major work, *Roots*, it must be remembered that African Muslims made up at least 25 percent of the slave population. In our times, of course, we cannot discount lightly the racist-encoded messages of white Christian fundamentalism, on the one hand, and the "pie-in-the-sky" bend of black Christianity, on the other, among the reasons why many blacks—especially males—are turning towards The Crescent and away from the Cross.

Little wonder why the message of Minister Louis Farrakhan appeals to many African Americans. Lincoln noted in his 1961 edition of *Black Muslims*, and in his 1990 publication, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, that "Islam is attractive to those blacks who have experienced difficulty with normative social and economic adjustments." Muslim masjids or mosques have become magnets to the very people (young black men) which black churches have had great difficulty recruiting.

One can only suspect about how this plays out in two important and opposing themes between Christianity and Islam, one that Dr. Martin Luther King spoke to in a slightly different context: the Koran encourages self-defense and self-reliance while the Christian Bible instructs its followers to turn the other cheek. In the swerve from "the Reverend to the Imam," is it not possible that many young black men are indeed, coupling the messenger to the message.

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There are thousands of baby-boomer era Christian black families, like ours, who gave their children African and Muslim names. This is a clear statement of fellowship with African traditions and against conventional thinking of the West and independence from white American expectations.

Lincoln's works prompt us to remember that it was the black Muslims, not Christians like King, who popularized "Black Power," "Black Pride," and Black Consciousness. Not insignificant is the evangelizing done by Islam in that place where one finds many young African American males—prisons—and through young street brothers, the most despised of America's so-called underclass. When was the last time you saw a nattily-dressed, bow-tied young black man on the corners in every major city, calling you to buy a newspaper headlining issues which should be of importance to black Christians?

Can those of us who sing the Songs of Zion on Sunday accept any religious group that speaks to the souls of our downtrodden brethren and sisters, one that causes them to treat themselves and others in the manner taught by prophets of all major religions? Will Cross or Crescent, by any name, work for the common good? Who's to say?

Amen! A Salaam A-Lakium! A struggle for the Souls of Black Folk.

(Dr. William H. Turner is a freelance columnist for the Chronicle).

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March Brought Together Men of All Religions

Those of us who are clergy and attended the One Million Man March were deeply moved by the many events which transpired on this Holy Day of Atonement. It was a day of empowerment, unity, bonding, renewal, rededication and reaffirmation of black manhood. As a black and Christian clergyman, I was especially impressed by the rich religious diversity that existed as Muslim and Christian ministers prayed to the same God, shared the same spirit and participated

GUEST COLUMN

By Dr. REV JOHN MENDEZ

in a common worship experience that transcended all religious and denominational differences and traditions. Standing before God, we were all one. We were overwhelmed by a sense of presence and awe. The atmosphere throughout the day was one of quietude and mystery which I could not explain. I had never experienced such a feeling on such a mass scale in my life.

I share this awe-stricken experience with some of my Christian brothers who refused to attend the march because they did not want to associate or worship with Muslims. While there may be other legitimate reasons for not attending the march, religion should not be one of them. To believe that God can only be encountered through the narrow structures of Christian traditions is to make God too small. I teach a course at Shaw University in world religions and for years after studying and sharing in many of the experiences of the sacred as it relates to other religious traditions, I can assure them God is bigger than that. Christians do not have a monopoly on the holy or the sacred. Other people who have different religious traditions, whether it be Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Lakota, Santerica or Apache, have authentic, genuine, religious experiences

with the sacred just as Christians. It is through their religious experiences and ours we learn more about the nature of God. Religious bigotry, arrogance and exclusionism is just as bad as racial bigotry. It has historically divided the world, causing wars and human suffering. To advocate one religion is superior while the other is inferior, or to absolutize one's own beliefs? and feel threatened by the existence of parallels elsewhere can only create fear, distortion, error and conflict. Religion transcends such differences.

Also, Muslim and Christian traditions go way back. Both traditions claim Abraham as their founding patriarch. Furthermore, when persecution of the new religion in Mecca became intense, Mohammed took refuge in the Christian kingdom of Obyssinia in Ethiopia. Thus, Abyssinia became one of the cherished symbols of Islam in its formative years, just as Ethiopia had become a Christian symbol due to the story that the apostle Philip converted the Candace's treasurer. I believe God is big enough for all of us. God is all inclusive, all comprehending, and in a profound sense universal. As Howard Thurman reminds us, "God is not merely the Creator of creatures, of all objects animate and inanimate, but also, God is the Creator of life itself" and that means all of us. Standing before God there is no race, color, sex, class, religion or denomination, only creatures standing in need of the Holy.

Finally, there is a need for us to build unity in our communities and not add more divisiveness and schisms. The spirit of God is one of unity. As African Americans, we are not oppressed because we are Baptists, Catholics, Charismatic or Muslims - we are oppressed because we are black. We cannot afford to let our separate traditions keep us from uniting. Whether we were at the march or not is immaterial.

A spirit of unity, however, is blowing in the wind from that march. It is to all of advantage to get into the way of the wind rather than oppose it.

(John Mendez is a founder of Citizens United for Justice and is pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church).

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