

Out of Black Islam

When Marie Muhammad-Vaughn rejected Islam, her life took a turn for the worse. Yet today, the great-granddaughter of the founder of the Nation of Islam says she has no regrets.

Nine-year-old Marie and her sister Lulé were excited about their slumber party. The two were celebrating their birthdays together in 1981 at the home of the world-famous heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali.

For most kids, having a party at a celebrity athlete's home would have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. For Marie, Lulé and their siblings, it was no big deal. The children's grandfather, Herbert Muhammad, was Ali's personal manager, and he made certain the kids received special attention.

Marie's family also had religious ties with Ali. Marie's great-grandfather, the late Elijah Muhammad—who for almost 40 years was the architect and influential leader of the Nation of Islam—had bestowed the name “Muhammad Ali” upon the boxer as part of his rite of passage into the religious group. Born Cassius Clay Jr., Ali had joined the sect and become a Muslim in 1964.

But when Marie, Lulé and their siblings, Ruth and Herbert, refused to join the Nation of Islam, deciding at a young age not to become Muslims, the special parties and outings ceased—as did other privileges. They no longer were welcome to reap the benefits of being the great-grandchildren of the most revered member of the Nation of Islam.

Today, Marie Muhammad-Vaughn, 31, is a Spirit-filled believer in Jesus Christ. Choosing Christianity meant being estranged

at times from her relatives, but she has no regrets for following Christ. She is convinced that God has a call on her life.

“Elijah Muhammad named me after his mother, who was Baptist, but she eventually followed her son and converted to Islam,” Muhammad-Vaughn says. “Where she laid down the baton, God wants me to pick it up because my roots are in Him.”

When Muhammad-Vaughn considers her lineage, she knows why she is a follower of Christ. It was the truth, she says, that set her free and sustained her during moments of depression as well as through challenges of being a single mother and difficulties she has faced because of her family heritage.

“Even though I didn’t grow up in a Christian home and we didn’t go to church, my mother constantly told us that Jesus Christ is Lord,” she recalls. Those words eventually led the Chicago native to ask Christ into her life at age 17.

Married now for 3-1/2 years, the mother of three knows there are millions of people, including her close relatives, who have chosen to follow the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. She talked with Charisma recently about how Christians can win them back.

A Nation Is Born

According to USA Today, approximately 7 million Muslims live in the United States. The American Jewish Committee however, reports drastically lower numbers—possibly as low as 1.5 million and no more than 3.4 million. An even lower figure, 527,000, was published in the 2000 Statistical Abstract of the

United States, based on the 1993 National Survey of Religious Identification.

Discrepancies aside, there is no question that Muslims comprise a variety of nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, including Indonesian, Asian, Arab and African. African Americans account for 30 percent of all Muslims in the United States and include those who align themselves with the Nation of Islam, which is predominantly black.

This was not the case in 1930, when the first seeds of the Nation of Islam were being sown. Economically, the country was reeling from the stock market crash of 1929 and was entering the subsequent Great Depression. Socially, civil liberties in America were unrefined—certainly not what they are today—especially for the country's black populace.

It had been only 47 years since 1883, when the United States Supreme Court had invalidated the Civil Rights Act of 1875, stripping blacks of their right to accommodations at inns, theaters and other public places. The high court's decision had led to similar rulings that strengthened Jim Crow—a system of laws that made it legal to discriminate against blacks.

Legalized discrimination had given rise to tumultuous times. In 1913, Timothy Drew, also known as Noble Drew Ali, established the first African American Muslim sect, the Moorish Science Temple Divine and National Movement of North America. After Drew's death in 1929, Wallace D. Fard declared himself to be a reincarnation of Drew and started the Temple of Islam, now commonly known as "the Nation."

Based in Detroit, Fard started preaching a doctrine unheard of

in most communities. His message of black solidarity and allegiance to Islam caught the attention of some of the city's African American residents. Followers said his vision for change was birthed from the pain of 400 years of black slavery in America and couldn't have come at a better time for a "displaced" race.

Ironically, Fard was not black.

"Fard was a white man born in Portland, Oregon, in 1891. His message was geared to African American people," says Carl F. Ellis Jr., co-founder of Project Joseph, a Christian organization that ministers to Muslims, and co-author of *Emergence of Islam in the African-American Community*.

From the onset, Fard—also known to his converts as Master Wallace Fard Muhammad, or simply, "the Master"—believed his mission was to "restore and resurrect his lost and found people," according to the history of the Nation of Islam. Fard claimed that these people were the "original members of the tribe of Shabazz from the lost nation of Asia."

He compelled blacks to practice what he called "the religion of their ancestors." His influence quickly spread, drawing numerous followers.

One convert was a young man named Elijah Poole, the son of a Baptist preacher. Poole and Fard met in 1931, and Fard spent the next 3-1/2 years discipling Poole in the "profound secret wisdom of the reality of God."

Poole eventually left Detroit and started Temple Number Two in Chicago. Fard's indoctrination of him paid off when, in 1934,

after Fard had mysteriously disappeared, Poole—who had renamed himself Elijah Muhammad—emerged as the voice and the driving force behind the fast-growing Nation of Islam.

Elijah continued in the steps of his tutor, promoting self-reliance and separation for the black race. Establishing himself as Allah's prophet, Elijah stood at the head of the Nation of Islam while the movement exponentially gained momentum.

In March 1995, Louis Farrakhan, the current leader of the Nation of Islam, rallied almost 1 million men, most of them African Americans, to Washington, D.C., for the Million Man March. Still, membership in the Nation of Islam is considerably less today than it was some four decades ago during its peak.

Its influence, however, among young African Americans is considered strong, particularly among those immersed in the hip-hop culture. Observers say that because hip-hop prides itself in "keeping it real and truth-telling" and is often seen as anti-establishment, it tends to align itself with political or religious figures who speak the language of the culture.

Farrakhan's position on racism, social change and economics has even prompted some black pastors to open their pulpits to the 70-year-old minister, but other Christian leaders caution churches not to allow a man who teaches false doctrine into their pulpits to preach.

However, the fascination with Farrakhan as a leader isn't unique, according to observers of the Nation of Islam. The

Nation has always been led by charismatic, visionary figures.

Possibly the most recognized of its leaders was Malcolm X, a young convert whose style, attitude and strong message of black identity garnered the attention of millions of Americans during the Black Power political movement of the 1960s. The Nation grew to 10,000 members during its pinnacle in the 1960s and 1970s.

Malcolm would become one of the most influential Muslims of the 20th century. Born Malcolm Little, he became intrigued with Elijah Muhammad's teachings after being introduced to the religion by his brother. A drug dealer and pimp at one time, Malcolm was drawn to the Nation of Islam while serving jail time in Boston in 1948.

Similarly, some of the Nation's followers today convert to Islam while in prison. Even those who come from godly, Spirit-filled and evangelical homes buck Christianity for a religion they say offers African Americans, especially black men, respect, dignity and self-discipline.

The Nation's historical precedent for this is Fard himself. He served jail time in Michigan and Illinois while establishing his religious work. Incarceration didn't stop him from disciplining the disenfranchised, nor did it hinder Malcolm.

One of the many seekers in the 1960s trying to find his black identity in a seemingly white economic and political world was Larry Spruill. It was during the civil rights era that Spruill became intrigued with the Black Power movement, an interest that eventually led him to convert to mainline Islam.

“Activism prompts you to look at both the political and the spiritual side of an issue,” he explains. African American baby boomers such as Spruill were captivated with the opportunity to raise the consciousness of black America.

“Seeing black men dressed in white robes and wearing dark suits with bow ties was exotic. It was exciting and dynamic,” says Spruill, who is the principal of the 3,000-student Mount Vernon High School in Mount Vernon, New York, and holds several academic degrees, including a Ph.D. in American history.

Learning to speak Arabic and studying the teachings of Islam’s founder, Muhammad, prompted him to convert. But it wasn’t long before Spruill, whose God-fearing mother prayed fervently that he would return to the Lord, realized Islam gave him a religious experience but left him wanting more. In search of something deeper, he did not join the Nation.

Reaching Islam

Many say the body of Christ must be prepared to minister to people who will look to someone for answers. The church must also ready itself for those who will leave the religion for many of the same reasons Spruill left, say ministry leaders such as Ellis.

But to be effective, Christians will have to leave the comforts of the church and take to the streets, prisons and other places if they want to compel sinners to come to Jesus. According to Marie Muhammad-Vaughn, Christians have something other religions don’t have. “People are in search of truth. There’s a lot of confusion out there, but we know what is

right," she told Charisma.

Wallace Fard, in fact, mixed verses from the Bible with teachings from the Quran, according to Emergence of Islam in the African-American Community. He taught his converts that "Christianity is a tool in the hands of the White slave masters to control the minds of Black people."

Muhammad-Vaughn says that in the end Fard did nothing more than lead her great-grandfather and thousands like him away from what Christ was calling them to do, taking them instead into darkness.

"I believe Elijah had a mighty work to do for Jesus, but he allowed the enemy, through deception, to pervert his message," she says.

Similarly, Elijah would target new Christians with his doctrine in an attempt to dismantle their faith. "Elijah would use the Quran to challenge newly saved believers who had not yet received the baptism in the Holy Ghost," Muhammad-Vaughn explains. "These people were eventually led astray and converted to Islam."

Today when she shares her testimony in churches and with people who are coming out of Islam, Muhammad-Vaughn stresses the need for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. She says that as a discernor the Holy Spirit divides truth from error.

"Without the truth, a person cannot grow in the knowledge and the revelation of the inspired Word of God," she states.

Woodley Auguste, a 30-year-old corporate publicist in Lake Mary, Florida, knows the importance of the Holy Spirit's dwelling in a believer's life, as well as what the Nation teaches. Auguste spent seven years in the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam. Auguste says he changed his name to Asaud and became radically committed to the Five Percenters.

"African Americans were feeling emasculated. Especially black men," Auguste explained. "That is why many of them converted to Islam and still do today."

But it wasn't long before a Christian brother came along and established a rapport with Auguste, who lived in Brooklyn, New York.

"That brother's prophetic gift attracted me to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it was the love of God apparent in his life that led me to a saving knowledge of the Lord," he added. Auguste insists it will take that same love to win others to Him.

Like most religions that differ from the Christian faith, Muslims, whether members of the Nation of Islam or orthodox adherents, reject the deity of Jesus Christ. According to the Nation of Islam's The Muslim Program, Allah is not the God of the Bible.

"We believe that Allah [God] appeared in the Person of Master W. Fard Muhammad, July 1930; the long-awaited 'Messiah' of the Christians and the 'Mahdi' of the Muslims," the literature states.

Those who are familiar with the Nation and its followers

insist that it will take a move of the Holy Spirit to reach Muslims.

Ellis Jr. of Project Joseph says his own spiritual search almost prompted him to align himself with the mainline Muslim faith, though he never converted to Islam. He adds, however, that before he became a Christian he was “in search of something more than the church.”

Notes Spruill: “This is no intellectual war we’re in. This is a spiritual battle, one that will take prayer and divine love to overcome.” Spruill is hopeful that many Muslims will come to saving faith. As a basis for this hope he points out that “in Acts 2, the Ishmaelites were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost for the outpouring of the Holy Ghost.”

With the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, Muhammad-Vaughn sees strategic opportunities opening for sharing Christ, whether with traditional Islamic believers or those who follow the teachings of the late Elijah Muhammad.

Like many others, she believes God is tearing down the walls of separation and opening doors for Christians to evangelize unbelievers. Her only concern and prayer is that the body of Christ rise to the occasion to minister the love of God to Muslims.

“God used my lineage, the rejection I encountered as a child, and even used my family name to draw people for His glory,” she says. “Every challenge I’ve encountered will be worth it if I am able to tell just one person that Jesus is Lord.”

When Christians Choose Islam

Many American converts to Islam were raised in Christian churches. Here's how you can reach them.

By Carl F. Ellis, Jr.

When sharing my faith with Muslims, I've found it helpful to evaluate why they are devoted to Islam. American converts to Islam are particularly interesting. Most of them are African American. Often, they were raised in the church and have devout Christian relatives who pray for them.

If we relate to them wisely, God's Word will affect them in more ways than they are willing to admit. Three considerations are important when discerning why a person has converted to Islam.

1. He could be moved by the standards of Islam. By standards, I mean the doctrines or teachings. Most Christians assume that the standards alone are the reason a person embraces any belief system. In my experience, the next two considerations actually can have greater weight.

2. He could be devoted to Islam because of his situation. This could stem from alienation or a need for cultural identity. The Muslim community projects itself as a brotherhood with affirmation and solidarity.

3. He could practice Islam because of his own motivations and

goals. A person often realizes that he has been alienated from God and consequently seeks to achieve God's favor. Perhaps he wants to purge himself of false values such as materialism or self-centeredness. Therefore, he might see Islam as the means to satisfy his desire for righteousness.

Instead of simply confronting a Muslim, I seek to draw him out through conversation. I've met many Muslims whose personal goals and motivations were essentially biblical. In such cases, I've learned to be sympathetic and supportive.

As a result, I've seen barriers come down. Only after establishing camaraderie will a discussion with them about the way to achieve their goals become meaningful. This is when the gospel really becomes "good news."

I have talked to dozens of Muslims who have, in the final analysis, admitted they can do nothing to earn God's favor—that their only hope of salvation is in God alone. Is not this the basis of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ?

God promises His Word will not return void (see Is. 55:11). A skillful application of God's Word to a Muslim's core issues will surely bear fruit. Here are some practical suggestions for how to do this:

Be yourself.

Try to understand Islamic doctrine from the perspective of Islam. Study the history of Islam's development, especially in America.

Be a good listener. Don't evaluate a Muslim only on the basis of his doctrine. Examine the other factors that fuel his devotion to Islam.

When his motivations and goals are biblical, affirm them. When they are not, lovingly challenge them. Try to use words according to his definitions, not yours.

When dealing with a Muslim's doctrine, do not use the occasion to show how much you know about his faith. Instead, deal with him on the basis of what he expresses to you about his beliefs. You'll find he is never totally consistent with the doctrine he holds.

It's always important to draw him out by asking questions in the genuine spirit of wanting to be informed. Give him a chance to express himself, and make sure he knows you understand what he's saying.

Do not be bowled over by his arguments. Stand firm, with poise and confidence. If you are familiar with his theology, you can tell when he begins to feel the pinch. Usually, he will begin to repeat himself or make up his theology on the spot.

Do not use a King James Bible. According to the teachings of some Muslim sects, King James himself translated this version and corrupted it. I recommend the New International Version.

Never use a Bible in which you have made any marks. To a Muslim, this indicates a disrespect for the Word of God.

Avoid all pictures of God, Jesus or any biblical characters.

This looks like idolatry to a Muslim.

Never use the word Trinity. Because of the Muslim teaching, this word often connotes the worship of three gods and will bog you down with issues of polytheism. The term Godhead is a good alternative.

Don't be offended by a Muslim's use of the name Allah.

In other words, remove all offenses—except the cross. And never forget the power of love. For against love, there is no defense.

Carl F. Ellis Jr. is president of Project Joseph and author of *Free at Last? The Gospel in the African-American Experience* (IVP) and co-author of *The Changing Face of Islam in America* (Christian Publications). To contact Project Joseph, write P.O. Box 16616, Chattanooga, TN 37416, or elliscarljr@.

Finding Jesus 'By Any Means Necessary'

Disillusioned with the Nation of Islam, Timothy Jones found peace when he returned to his Christian roots.

While the rest of America was grieving the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, 16-year-old Timothy Jones was being sentenced to one year in juvenile detention for committing petty crimes. While incarcerated, Jones says he faced many negative influences, the presence of which prompted him to consider the teachings of the Nation of Islam and its

leader, Elijah Muhammad.

“Elijah Muhammad was a significant leader,” Jones says, “because he stood up to the Establishment”—the reproachful nickname used to include the “white power structure” and the political and economic systems in America at the time. But it wasn’t until the 18-year-old returned to prison for committing more serious crimes such as drug dealing and auto theft that he converted to Islam.

African American leaders say racism in America produced two types of leaders, Martin Luther King Jr., who embodied a nonviolent approach to equality, and Elijah Muhammad and his protégé, Malcolm X, who both embraced retaliation as a means to gain justice.

Known for his “by any means necessary” approach to righting the social wrongs of the time, Malcolm offered a political viewpoint that endeared him to literally millions of people. He was Elijah Muhammad’s hand-picked spokesperson, and his profound knowledge of Islam drew people by the scores into the Nation.

“There is an element of Elijah Muhammad’s teaching that was needed because black people were being treated brutally and even killed during that era,” said Jones, who earned a bachelor’s degree while serving time in jail. Having pledged his allegiance to the Nation, Jones even stood guard for “the Honorable” Elijah Muhammad, as he was known, at the Nation’s Savior’s Day observance in 1972. But when deadly conflict arose between the Nation of Islam and a splinter group of the Nation, Jones left the organization.

The dispute among the two groups wasn't the first of its kind. It was Malcolm who severed ties with the Nation in 1964 after he learned Elijah Muhammad allegedly had fathered several children outside of marriage. It was the same year, according to , that Malcolm made a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and discovered fellow Muslims who were "blonde-haired, blue-eyed men."

Upon his return to the United States, Malcolm renounced Elijah Muhammad. On February 21, 1965, Malcolm was gunned down by three members of the Nation of Islam—Talmadge Hayer, Norman 3X Butler and Thomas 15X Johnson.

Today Jones is a middle school counselor and resident of Orlando, Florida. He attends New Life Church of Orlando a Church of God in Christ. He told Charisma he wasn't willing to stay in the Nation and die for the sake of an argument. Instead, he started to reconsider the roots of his faith.

"I came from a Christian background, as do many others who convert to the Nation, but I returned to what I truly believe," Jones says. "I believe that Jesus Christ is the way."

Valerie G. Lowe is an associate editor with Charisma and Ministries Today magazines. She traveled to Chicago to interview Marie Muhammad-Vaughn.