

MINISTER DON MUHAMMAD  
TEMPLE NO. 11

Q: How did you come to join the Nation of Islam?

A: We were Baptists, and I remember my father said, "Make sure you listen very closely to the message, because even sometimes the message may not be clear to you, read the Bible and ask God to guide you." And we believed in Christianity. And to a great degree, I still do today. Sometimes my friends say that I sound like a frustrated Baptist preacher.

My blood brother invited me to attend Mosque Number 11 at 35 Intervale Street (in the Roxbury section of Boston). Minister Farrakhan was speaking. The first day that I went, I was not persuaded to join. He said that the following week he was going to talk about how God created the devil. And I came back that week, and I really wasn't interested in joining that week either. It was when he said, "Next week my subject is 'Who is God, what is He, and where is He?'" He talked that day for nearly 5 hours on the reality of God. And that message that day helped me to confirm that there is a God, that He is very interested in the affairs of human beings, and I was further a-able to see the intervention of God in establishing His kingdom. And that is why I decided to join the Nation of Islam.

Q: What do you think attracted black people to the Nation of Islam?

A: Mr. Muhammad was absolutely teaching black people how to be proud of themselves, how to respect themselves. And it worked. That kind of unity produced

all kinds of black social organizations: black police, black social workers. It encouraged people like James Brown to write songs like "I'm Black and I'm Proud." That whole era in the early sixties brought in the Afro, the daishiki wearing, where blacks were going on college campuses demanding that they had rights just like anyone else who was a citizen of this country. We can thank Elijah Muhammad for that. He even gave us an overdose of blackness. But it was needed.

At that time, black people used to bleach their skin, trying to get white. They would absolutely put [J-Bar], which is a hair straightener, on their heads (these were black men) to straighten their hair. Black women would go to bed with clothespins on their nose, trying to have their nose look keen as whites. In all this backdrop, we can see why it was important for Mr. Muhammad to teach the importance of blackness, to be proud of black.

Q: How did Elijah Muhammad bring his message to black people?

A: He brought his message by establishing temples all across this country. At that time, there were some 250 locations where Islam was being taught. And he wrote books. He wrote articles in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Los Angeles .. Dispatch*, the *Amsterdam News*. And then subsequently in 1961, he started our newspaper called *Muhammad Speaks*. And we, at the height of the Nation, were selling and distributing a million newspapers per week, carrying his message. And this was the way of distributing, getting his message out, getting people to read it.

Q: Talk about how he used the Bible.

A: The Bible was used specifically because we, as black people, had never seen the Holy Koran. We'd never heard of it. The Bible is the book of faith of so many. There's much good in the Bible, though it was referred to as a poison book by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. But penicillin too is poison. But it will help you if it's administered by a good doctor.

So there are many parables in the Bible, allegories, and there are a lot of things that the poets, in our opinion, deliberately did to try and create confusion. And it would take someone to really decipher that kind of information. It doesn't say "black people" or "Negroes," but we're in there. As a matter of fact, it has really provoked some black Christian ministers to write an African Bible. And I can't believe that-that God would leave us out. I can't believe that God would leave America out. And America's in the Bible, but it's in hidden under captions. It's hidden under a lot of things.

So the Honorable Elijah Muhammad said, "We really need to resurrect our people from the Bible." So his thorough knowledge of the Bible was tremendous. I can remember, in February of 1968, Martin Luther King had gone to see the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. They had started a relationship in 1966, after Dr. King had been abandoned by most of his colleagues, most of his fellow ministers, who did not want to take the pressure that Dr. King was receiving because he stood up against the Vietnam War. Dr. Martin Luther King was a courageous individual, and he was a minister. But after the— his difficulties around those issues, he sought and received a visit to go and see and hear and talk to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. There were a few of us in the home that day, and we were sort of

listening to what Dr. King and Mr. Muhammad were talking about. Dr. King was asking him questions about the Bible. And because the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in our eyes is the divine messenger of God, he had a thorough knowledge of the Bible. And he said to Dr. King, "Brother, you know a lot, but you don't understand very much."

That meeting lasted for 6 hours. It was a Saturday. All of the major networks in the United States were there. Dr. King was asked upon leaving, around 3:30 in the afternoon, "What did you and Elijah talk about?" Dr. King said, "We agreed that we wouldn't say to anyone what we talked about." But if you check Dr. Martin Luther King's messages after that date in February until April 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, it was different than the "I have a dream" speech.

We believe, as Muslims, that God is into— leaning into the affairs of us in this country and all over the world. We believe that the kingdom of God is being established now. And we believe that that kingdom of God is not going to draw black or white, rich or poor, Jew or gentile. The kingdom of God is going to be people who are of like mind as far as goodness is concerned, who desire to see unity and brotherhood among all people. And we're having indications of that going on now.

Q: Who does the Nation of Islam believe W.D. Fard to be?

A: As is indicated on the back of our newspaper (today it's called *The Final Call*, and it used to be called *Muhammad Speaks*), the Honorable Elijah Muhammad said that Allah came in the person of Master Farrad Muhammad. No, Master Farrad

Muhammad is not God. But God has the ability to really put himself in anyone. The scriptures say that we would be all made gods, children of the most high God. We believe that God spoke through Jesus. There are some people who even believe that Jesus is God. We believe that God spoke through Moses, and it's in the Bible that He spoke to them from a burning bush. We believe that God spoke through Abraham. We believe that God spoke to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. And the man Master Farrad Muhammad is he who brought this message. So he is not Allah, but we feel and we believe that Allah used him to bring this message to resurrect black people, not just for the sake of black people but to really resurrect the entire world. But you have to start with whoever's on the bottom. And the scripture said that there was a bottom rail, they said that there was a last, and these people would be resurrected first. And we can find no one that fits that description better than us, who was called the rejected and the despised.

Q: Was there a connection in the late 60's between the philosophy of the Nation of Islam and the black nationalist, black power movements?

A: Yes. Some of the brothers who started the black power movement would actually attend Mosque Number 7 in New York. A lot of them came out of the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut area—the Huey Newtons, the Eldridge Cleavers. The difference is, they did not include God in their movement. And I-I once heard the Honorable Elijah Muhammad say that, "You know, if we deny God, then we don't want to be put in a position where we would do the same thing under the cover of blackness that had been done to us. What benefit would we gain, or what benefit

would we get, if we didn't do anything different than mistreat one another?" So the desire here in the Nation of Islam is to believe in God. And if you believe in God, you won't do anything to anyone who— Whether or not they even believe as you believe, you have an obligation to treat every man the way that you would like to be treated, irregardless of his color, his race, his religion. And to the best of our ability, we attempt to do that. We're not haters. Never have been. What we do hate, we hate people who mistreat us, and we would hate to mistreat anyone. We hate not getting a good education. We hate being poor. We hate those things that are negative. But no. The Nation of Islam under the leadership of Minister Louis Farrakhan is about first loving one another, loving each other, and then loving everybody else.

Q: What was your view of the civil rights movement's strategy and goals?

A: I have to be honest. I did not agree with it during those times. I did not feel that turning the other cheek was what we needed. I felt that if someone wanted to hit me on my cheek, I might turn it to take a good look at them, but the natural reaction would be to retaliate. I thought the strategy was not proper. I thought it left our people vulnerable, particularly our women. They turned fire hoses and dogs on our people in Selma, Alabama. I was— It-it brought tears to my eyes when I saw those women being turned upside down with those fire hoses. And we in the Nation of Islam just did not feel that was appropriate. We felt, as many people did now— There was a Deacons for Justice back at that time in Mississippi, and they stood up to the Bull Connors of the world, and they would not bow down.

But as time has gone on, I think we needed both strategies. I think we needed to have the strategy of the Nation of Islam as well as the strategy of the civil rights movement. I don't think any pitcher needs to go in a game with only one pitch. And I think, to reflect now, it was beneficial. But I myself, I couldn't sit at a lunch counter and let someone put cigarette butts in my head. No. I-I could not handle that. I could not handle being abused in the manner that so many of our people did. And we have to take our hat off to those who had the courage to do that. We fought on one end, they fought on another, and we came to have great respect for one another as we met to continue the fight for justice for our people in this country, and for anyone who is being oppressed or denied their rights.

Q: During the early 60's, rumors of financial mismanagement within the upper echelons of the Nation caused controversy. Malcolm X separated from the Nation and gave interviews about the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and his relationship with his secretaries. How did your faith sustain you through this time?

A: Anyone who believes in Islam knows that God puts all of His believers through trials. And we have at least one major one a year. But the Holy Koran also says that trials purify. So a believer welcomes the opportunity to demonstrate to himself and his God that he believes. So you're better off on the other side of a trial if God blesses you to come through it. So we see this as a necessary purification.

The Nation of Islam went through a tremendous trial when it was known that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad had more than one wife. And the interesting part of this is, no one complains when Abraham had— I think he was 93 years of age, and

he took another wife. If my memory serves me correctly, he actually put her out. I think it was David that sent a captain of his into war, knowing that he would get killed, so he could have Bathsheba. In Islam, you can have another wife if your wife permits it. Sister [Claire] Muhammad never said anything about the Honorable Elijah Muhammad having more than one wife.

See, I am one of the people who was around at that time. And Malcolm, in my opinion, did this because he himself, he had been disappointed. Any time that a person is disappointed and you cannot reconcile it with your faith, then you strike out. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad never struck out against Malcolm. Yes, we did not like it. I didn't like it. Many Muslims all across this country didn't like [him]. But it didn't disturb the nucleus of the Nation. As a matter of fact, I happen to know there were only about 50 members across the entire Nation of Islam that left as a result of that. That summer, the *New York Times* carried a front page article: "Elijah Muhammad here, Malcolm where?" At the 369<sup>th</sup> Street Armory in New York City, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad had well over 10,000 in attendance. Malcolm had a rival meeting that day, that had 403. The largest crowd that Malcolm ever had after he left the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was 430.

So no. The Muslims who were able to go through that difficult period and to remain steadfast were tremendous. I give you this for information. Between the years of 1965 and 1975 was the greatest decade in the growth of the Nation of Islam in terms of people, in terms of institutions, in terms of businesses and economic development.

And I will close on this point. I'm sorry that that happened to Malcolm. But Malcolm was trying to get back into the Nation of Islam. Malcolm had written a letter asking permission to get back in the Nation of Islam. Now, I believe that the enemies of Malcolm and the Nation never wanted to see that happen. And I believe the enemies of Malcolm did everything they could to make sure that it never happened, and to try and accuse the Nation of Islam for having been responsible for Malcolm's death. I also believe that the assassination of Dr. King, four years later, was because it appeared to be a marriage about to take place between Elijah Muhammad and Martin Luther King. And we believe that the enemies of Dr. King and of the Nation of Islam had a great deal to do with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King.

There's always crisis. It-it helps an individual to mature. And the Honorable Elijah Muhammad used to say to us, "The race is not to the swift but to he who endures to the end."

The spirit of Islam is something that you really can't explain. It's something that you have to feel. And black people believe in God. We believe in God. No matter what they did to us, we always had faith in God. They would come up with songs, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home." "Swing low, sweet chariot." No matter what the slave master did to our parents, they still believed in God. They were just like the scripture: I don't care what you do to me. I'm not going to curse God.

So my faith in Islam is, to me, a reality of God establishing his kingdom on earth. And that's why I've hung in for all these years, and I'm hoping and praying to God that He will give me strength to hang on for the rest of my life.

Q: Why didn't you remain in the Nation of Islam when Wallace Muhammad ascended to leadership and began to make changes, both spiritual and economic?

A: I remained in the Nation of Islam when Wallace Deen Muhammad took over initially. I was there for about a year. And initially I thought that the changes that he was going to bring would be beneficial. But there was one night in particular that Imam Wallace Deen Muhammad said that his father was not divine, that he did not in fact believe that his father was the messenger of God. I could not take that. That would be going against what I believed. And I was not going to remain there and be hypocritical. I left the Nation of Islam under his leadership because I did not feel that it would be right for me to be there. I never talked to my friends. I never even talked to Minister Farrakhan. I didn't talk to my wife. I just left, because I could not be hypocritical, being there, knowing how I felt about his father. And of course it was about two, maybe 2½ years later, Minister Farrakhan decided to reorganize the Nation of Islam. I didn't join him. I'm waiting to see too if that ring of love for Elijah Muhammad was there. And it was two years after that, that I say yes, this man is in fact sincere, he's genuine, and he wants to rebuild the work of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. And at that time I-I told him I was ready to do what I could to help him.

Q: How does the Nation of Islam practice differ from the Islam practiced by W.D. Muhammad and the Muslim American Society?

A: There isn't much difference between the Islam that we practice and the Islam that anyone else practices, including Imam Warith Deen Muhammad. Islam is Islam.

And one thing we can say concerning the Muslim world: They have kept the Holy Koran intact, and the principles. We believe that there's no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his apostle. All Muslims believe that. All Muslims— As a matter of fact, you cannot be a Muslim unless you believe that. We make Hajj today. We make prayers today that all Muslims make. ...I would say there isn't any difference in the religion.

The difference is in our social view. We believe that we should take part and try and be helpful. We don't believe that we should just pray alone. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad said, "After prayer, go to work. Go to work and make life better for yourself and your family and your community." We get involved in those things because we believe .. a kingdom is a government. We believe that there ought to be a government, a people who believe in God and want to do the kinds of things that would make life better for them. We are actively involved in those kinds of things, and we get up every morning trying to do something to improve ourselves. I'm not saying that other Muslims don't, but this is a part of what the Honorable Elijah Muhammad taught us. He did it, we do it, and we're trying to make a mark in life so that when we leave this planet, someone can say, "He made an improvement during the time that he was here." And that is our goal and our desire.

Q: What was your reaction to the public reconciliation between Minister Farrakhan and Imam W.D. Muhammad? I believe it was last year (1998), Savior's Day.

A: Yes, the reconciliation of Imam Warith Deen Muhammad and Minister Farrakhan, I thought, was extremely good. It showed Muslims in this country who subscribe to, I

would say, both of the leadership. But it's the same kind of thing that I mentioned with Dr. Martin Luther King and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. The prophecies say that Islam must really go all over the world. Islam hasn't been taught very much down in Latin– South America. There are some 80 million of our people who were part of the slave trade in Brazil alone. So we see this as a 2-edged sword, if you will, Minister Farrakhan and the Imam coming together to help propagate Islam. We see it as an advantage. We see it as something that is needed, because we believe that Islam is the answer to the world's problems.

Q: Explain (your view) that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is still alive, that that is one of the tenets of the Nation of Islam. What does that mean?

Some people believe that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is still alive physically, and some people believe he's still alive spiritually, and some people believe he's alive in a lot of ways. Or the best way to describe some of the ways: Some people say that he's alive in us. Well, we believe in God. And we believe that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is still alive physically. We don't believe that he is gone away from here. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, on February the 24<sup>th</sup>, 1975, the authorities in the hospital said that he would be going home. He was doing fine, and all of a sudden now he died. We don't believe that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad died. We don't believe that. Those of us who really believe in him, we believe that he is away from us, and we do believe that he's going to return to us. And there are some of us who believe so strongly, they and us and we believe that he could return to us at any time.

We believe that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is a divine messenger of God. And the Holy Koran bears witness to our faith when they said that he would die in old age. And it said that this particular unique prophet from God will be around for a long time. So we believe that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is still with us. We believe, as Minister Farrakhan believes, that he has actually spoken to the Messenger in a vision. And we don't believe that he is crazy.