

An Apology: Heartfelt Reflections on the Passing of a Legendary Black- american Muslim leader

Azhar Usman

On September 11th, 2008, while countless American flags whipped in the wind and the television and radio waves were dominated by remembrances, recordings, and stories about the terror attacks of seven years ago, I attended the funeral of Imam W.D. Mohammed (may God be pleased with him). For me, it was a somber day, but I found myself mostly lost in thought: about African-American Muslim communities, about the challenges ahead in American Muslim institution-building, and about the future of Islam in America. If you don't know who Imam WDM was, you should look him up. The Sufis say: "The true sage belongs to his era." And of the many gifts given to Imam WDM by God, perhaps the most obvious and beneficial one was the Imam's profound understanding of the *principles* of religion, and his adeptness at *intelligently applying* those Islamic principles in a socially and culturally appropriate manner befitting the everyday lives of his North American followers. While carefully respecting sound, traditional jurisprudential methodologies of the Islamic religion, and the collective religious history and time-honored scholarship of classical Islam, he promulgated creative ideas and dynamic teachings across many domains of human endeavor, including theology, law, spirituality and even ethics and aesthetics, that together articulated a vision for a quintessentially "American Muslim" cul-

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tural identity. And he did all of this before anyone else, with quiet strength and unending humility – a true sage indeed.

So I stood before his final resting place, brokenhearted. And I suddenly began to feel the weight of the moment, realizing that when God takes back one of his dearly beloved friends, those who are left behind should cry not for the deceased, but rather for themselves. For the fact is that they are now without one of God's friends in their midst, and, in a sense, they are orphaned. And the tears began to well up, for I became acutely aware that I was standing in front of the grave of my spiritual grandfather, who was himself a spiritual descendant of Bilal al-Habashi (may God be pleased with him), the mighty and beloved companion of the Prophet himself. Bilal was the first Black African to convert to al-Islam at the hands of the Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and keep him) in the sands of Arabia nearly a thousand and a half years ago. Undoubtedly, some measure of that love, mercy, compassion, and spiritual stature that inhabited the heart of Bilal has found its way down through the ages, and I found myself begging God to transfer to my own heart some glimpse of these realities now laying before me.

Almost five years ago, my business partner, Preacher Moss (who is a member of the WDM community) founded the standup comedy tour "Allah Made Me Funny," and he invited me to be his co-founder. Needless to say, it has been nothing less than an honor to work with him on the project. But to many, it was an unusual pairing: a Black comic and an Indian comic? Both Muslims? Working together? And before we ever even announced our partnership publicly, we met privately and swore an allegiance to one another – a blood oath of sorts – which was this: No matter what happens, in good times and in bad, we have to be the brothers no one expects us to be. And built on this promise (and premise), we brought on our first collaborator, Brother Azeem (who is a member of Minister Farrakhan's NOI), with whom we toured for over two years (2004-2006) before parting ways amicably. Then we brought Mohammed Amer onto the team in the fall of 2006 (a Kuwaiti-born Palestinian refugee who grew up in a Sunni Muslim family in Houston, Texas). Mo, Preach, and I are still going strong together, and we are grateful for the unqualified support, love, and blessings that Imam WDM and the entire community have always given us.

But today, as I observed the funeral proceedings, I felt sad and heavy-hearted. Something wasn't sitting right. Something was physically pain-ing my heart, and it felt like remorse, shame perhaps, maybe even guilt. I began to realize that the tears flowing from my eyes were as much a function of these feelings as they were any lofty spiritual aspirations of mine.

You see, I attended an interfaith event a couple of years ago on 9/11. A group had assembled to commemorate the tragic event, to honor those who perished that day, and to pledge ongoing inter-community support and bridge-building to fight ignorance, hate, and intolerance. At that event, there was this short, middle-aged, sweet, extremely kindhearted, White Christian woman. When she took the microphone to speak, she was already teary-eyed, and I assumed that she was going to make some comments about the victims of 9/11, as so many others already had that night.

But she didn't do that. Instead, she explained that she had become utterly grief-stricken by the constant barrage of news stories she witnessed about Muslims and Arabs being harassed, profiled, and mistreated after 9/11. She explained that she felt powerless to do anything about it, and that it made her sick to her stomach to hear of hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs, and especially to hear of Christian preachers denigrating Islam and its Prophet. She started to cry, and so did many others in the room, humbled by the magnanimity of this simple woman.

And then she did what I thought was a strange thing: she apologized. She prefaced her apology with all the logical disclaimers, such as "I know this may mean nothing to you," and "I know that I am not the one who did these horrible things," and "I know that you may dismiss this as empty rhetoric until you see some follow-up action on my part, but anyway," she continued, "I want to apologize on behalf of all the Christians and all non-Muslims and non-Arabs who have been attacking your communities, harassing your people, and accusing your religion of all these horrible things. I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry." I was stunned. Speech-less, in fact. Though all of her disclaimers were true, and my skeptical mind knew it, her apology melted our hearts. Here was this powerless servant of God sharing some of her most deeply felt emotional vulnerabilities, and she was apologizing to Muslims for something she didn't even do? Jesus (may God bless him and keep him) once famously remarked: "Make the world your teacher," and so I immediately took this woman as a lesson in humility. Admitting her powerlessness made her incredibly powerful.

And this brings me to the point (and title) of this essay. I would like to unburden myself of something that has been sitting like a ton of bricks on my heart for my entire life. I want to apologize to my Blackamerican brothers and sisters in Islam. I know that this apology may not mean very much; and I know that our American Muslim communities have a LONG way to go before we can have truly healthy political conciliation and de-racialized religious cooperation; and I know that I am not the one who is responsible

for so much of the historical wrongdoing of so-called “immigrant Muslims” – wrongdoings that have been so hurtful, and insulting, and degrading, and disrespectful, and dismissive, and marginalizing, and often downright dehumanizing.

But anyway, for every “Tablighi” brother who may have had “good intentions” in his own subjective mind, but behaved in an utterly insensitive and outrageous manner toward you when he suggested that you need to learn how to urinate correctly, I’m sorry.

And for every Pakistani doctor who can find money in his budget to drive a Lexus and live in a million-dollar house in suburbia, and who has the audacity to give Friday sermons about the virtues of “Brotherhood in Islam,” while the “Black mosque” can’t pay the heating bills or provide enough money to feed starving Muslim families just twenty miles away, I’m sorry.

And for every Arab speaker in America who makes it his business to raise millions and millions of dollars to provide “relief” for Muslim refugees around the world, but turns a blind eye to the plight of our very own Muslim sisters and brothers right here in our American inner cities just because, in his mind, the color black might as well be considered invisible, I’m sorry.

And for every liquor store in the “hood” with a plaque that says *Maa-shaa’ Allah* hanging on the wall behind the counter, I’m sorry.

And for every news media item or Hollywood portrayal that constantly reinforces the notion that “Muslim=foreigner” so that the consciousness of Blackamerican Muslims begins even to doubt itself (asking “Can I ever be Muslim enough?”), I’m sorry.

And for every Salafi Muslim brother (even the ones who used to be Black themselves before converting to Arab) who has rattled off a hadith or a verse from Koran in Arabic as his “daleel” to “kafirize” you and make you feel defensive about even claiming this deen as your own, I’m sorry.

And for every time you’ve been asked “So when did you convert to Islam?” even though that question should more properly have been put to your grandparents, since they became Muslims by the grace of God Almighty back in the 1950s, and raised your parents as believers, and Islam is now as much your own inheritance as it is the one’s posing that presumptuous, condescending question, I’m sorry.

And for every time some Muslim has self-righteously told you that your hijab is not quite “Shariah” enough, or your beard is not quite “sunnah” enough, or your outfit is not quite “Islamic” enough, or your Koranic recitation is not quite “Arabic” enough, or your family customs are not quite “traditional” enough, or your worldview is not quite “classical” enough, or your

ideas are not “authentic” enough, or your manner of making *wudu* is not quite “Hanafi,” “Shafi,” “Maliki,” or “Hanbali” enough, or your religious services are not quite “Masjid” enough, or your chicken is not quite “Halal” enough, I’m sorry.

And for every Labor Day weekend when you’ve felt divided in your heart, wondering “When will we ever do this thing right and figure out how we can pool our collective resources to have ONE, big convention?,” I’m sorry.

And for every time a Muslim has tried to bait you with a question about the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, trying to force you to condemn him – turning it into some sort of binary litmus test of true *iman* – with reckless and irresponsible disregard for the historical fact that he was among the *first* Black men in America to ever do *anything* meaningful for the upliftment and betterment of Black people, I’m sorry.

And for every time you’ve heard of an African-American brother who tried to bring home a South Asian or Arab sister to meet his parents, only to learn that her parents would rather commit suicide than let their daughter marry a “Black Muslim” (a/k/a “Bilalian brother”), even as they cheer hypocritically at stadium style speeches by Imams Siraj Wahhaj, Zaid Shakir, Johari Abdul Malik, or others – or get in line to bring one of them to speak at their multi-million dollar fundraiser for yet another superfluous suburban mosque, I’m sorry.

I’m sorry. I’m very, very sorry. From the bottom of my heart, I want every African-American Muslim brother and sister to know that I am ashamed of this treatment that you have received and, in many cases, continue to receive, over the decades. I want you to know that I am aware of it. I am conscious of the problem. (Indeed, I am even conscious that I myself am *part* of the problem since curing hypocrisy begins by looking in the mirror.) I am not alone in this apology. There are literally thousands, if not tens of thousands of young American Muslims just like me, born to immigrant parents who originate from all over the Muslim world. We get it, and we too are sick of the putrid stench of racism within our own Muslim communities. Let us pledge to work on this problem together, honestly validating our own and one another’s insecurities, emotions, and feelings regarding these realities. Forgiveness is needed to right past wrongs, yet forgiveness is predicated on acknowledging wrongdoing and sincerely apologizing. Let us make a blood oath of sorts.

When the bulldozer came to place the final mounds of dirt over the tomb of Imam WDM, I was standing under a nearby tree, under the light drizzle

that had just begun (perhaps as a sign of mercy dropping from the heavens as the final moments of the burial were drawing to a close), and I was talking to a dear friend and sister in faith, whose family has been closely aligned with Imam WDM for decades. She shared with me a story that her father had just related to her about the passing of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in 1975 (the same year I was born, incidentally). She told me that her father described the scene in the immediate aftermath of Elijah's demise: utter confusion and chaos within the NOI and the communities surrounding it. There was much debate and discord about what direction the NOI would take, and many were still in shock and denial that the founder had actually died. Out of the midst of that confusion arose Imam WDM, and along with his strong leadership came an even more, perhaps surprisingly courageous direction: the path away from the Black nationalism, pan-Africanism, and proto-religious beliefs of his father, and instead the unequivocal charge toward mainstream Islam, the same universal and cosmopolitan faith held and practiced by over a billion adherents worldwide. In this manner, her father explained, the death of Elijah Muhammad became a definitive end to a chapter in our collective history, and the resulting re-direction by Imam WDM marked the beginning of the next, far better, chapter in that unfolding history.

Maybe I am just an idealistic fool, or maybe Pharaoh Sanders was right about the Creator's Master Plan, but I sincerely believe that all we have to do – all of us together: Black folks, South Asians (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis), Arabs from every part of the Middle East and North Africa, Southeast Asians (Indonesians and Malaysians), Persians, Turks, Latinos, assorted Muslims of all stripes, colors, and backgrounds, and yes, even our White Muslim brothers and sisters – is live up to a simple promise to one another: *No matter what happens, in good times and in bad, we have to be the brothers and sisters no one expects us to be.*

It is hoped that the passing of Imam WDM will also mark the end of a chapter in our collective American Muslim history, and perhaps now, in earnest, we can all look together toward The Third Resurrection.

May God mend our broken hearts, lift our spirits, purify our souls, heal the rifts between our communities, unify our aims, remove our obstacles, defeat our enemies, and bless and accept our humble offerings and service.