

Islam in the African-American Experience

By Richard Brent Turner, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.

African-American Islam, especially as practiced by the Nation of Islam, continues to engage the attention of many scholars. The racial separatist tendency, contrasted against the color blindness of global Islam, has been the focal point of most of these studies. The historical presence of African Americans in the midst of American racism has been explained as, among other things, the main impetus behind African-American nationalism and racial separatism. *Islam in the African-American Experience* is yet another attempt to explain this historical position. Originally the author's Ph.D. dissertation, the book spans 293 pages, including notes, select biographies, indices, and thirteen illustrations. Its two parts, "Root Sources" and "Prophets of the City," comprise six chapters;

there is also an introduction and an epilogue. The book is particularly designed for students interested in African-American Islam. The central theme of the book is the signification (naming and identifying) of the African American within the context of global Islam. The author identifies three factors that explain the racial-separatist phenomenon of African-American Islam: American racism, the Pan-African political movements of African-Americans in the early twentieth century, and the historic patterns of racial separatism in Islam. His explanations of the first two factors, though not new to the field of African-American studies, is well presented. However, his third explanation, which tries to connect the racial-separatist tendency of African-American Muslims to what he terms the "historic patterns of racial separatism" in Islam, seems both controversial and problematic.

In his introduction, the author touches on the African American's sensitivity to signification, citing the long debate in African-American circles. Islam, he argues, offered African Americans two consolations: first, a spiritual, communal, and global meaning, which disconnects them in some way from American political and public life; second, a source of political and cultural meaning in African-American popular culture. He argues that a black person in America, Muslim or otherwise, takes an Islamic name to maintain or reclaim African cultural roots or to negate the power and meaning of his European name. Thus, Islam to the black American is not just a spiritual domain, but also a cultural heritage.

Part I, "Root Sources," contains two chapters and traces the black African contact with Islam from the beginning with Bilal during the time of the Prophet, to the subsequent expansion of Islam to black Africa, particularly West Africa, by means of conversion, conquest, and trade. He also points to an important fact: the exemplary spiritual and intellectual qualities of North American Muslims were major factors behind black West Africans conversion to Islam. The author discusses the role of Arab Muslims in the enslavement of African Muslims under the banner of jihad, particularly in West Africa, a behavior the author described as Arabs' separate and radical agenda for West African black Muslims. Nonetheless, the author categorically absolves Islam, as a system of religion, from the acts of its adherents (p. 21). This notwithstanding, the author notes the role these Muslims played in the educational and professional development of African Muslims.

The author proceeds to discuss the emergence of Islam in the New World with the presence of African Muslim slaves and their contribution in exposing Islam, which hitherto was unknown to white America. He states in detail, and with authority, the stories of some of the early known slaves. These slaves, he asserts, were from various professional backgrounds, including doctors,

lawyers, translators, religious scholars, as well as military and political leaders. On the one hand, this point echoes the long-established fact that trans-Atlantic slavery robbed Africa of both its human and intellectual resources, a disaster that no amount of restitution can remedy. On the other hand, since these slaves only wrote Arabic, it indicates how black Africa benefited from Islamic expansion, both intellectually and professionally. The author vividly narrates how, through resistance to Christianity and slavery and through self-determination (inner jihad), these Muslim slaves were able to retain their religion, names, and ethnic identities. These qualities, which the Muslim slaves embodied, in addition to education, distinguished them from all other slaves. However, since the Muslim slaves were not able to develop institutions, their "old Islam" became extinct.

In this part, the author also discusses the role of Pan-Africanism and black bitterness toward Christian racism in sowing the seed of consciousness of signification in the African American and its link to what he terms the "new American Islam." Black bitterness toward Christian racism, he argues, was an opening for Islam in the African American religious discourse. The author cites the influence of Bishop McNeal Turner and his doctrine of "black God" in shaping black Muslim beliefs (p. 59). With regard to Pan-Africanism, he asserts, first and foremost, it was the ideological bridge between the "old Islam" of resistance, self-determination, and education of African slaves and the "new American Islam." He argues that Pan-African emphasis on black pride and self-determination is an important explanation for the African-American racial-separatist tendency. The author discusses in detail the effective role of Edward Wilmot Blyden in Pan-Africanism, especially the great impact of his ideas in influencing and shaping racial particularism and signification in black nationalism in general and in African-American Islam in particular. He makes particular mention, in this regard, of Blyden's positive presentation of the Islamic image throughout his career as both a scholar and Pan-Africanist.

In part 2, "Prophets of the City," which covers four chapters and an epilogue, the author discusses the various personalities and organizations that played important roles in the development and shaping of African-American Muslim identity. Of particular importance is their contribution to the development of the racial separatist tendency in African-American Islam. The list includes Noble Drew Ali and his Moorish Science Temple, Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Nation of Islam from W.D. Fard through Elijah Muhammad to his able lieutenant Malcolm X and (presently) Louis Farakhan and Warith Deen Muhammad who, according to the author, respectively represents Malcolm's dual identity of racial separatist of the

Nation of Islam and multiculturalist of global Islam. The Ahmadiyya Mission, however, is noted for its multiracial agenda. Also, the author notes that "jihad of words," other than physical struggle, is a common feature of these various personalities and groups.

The author concludes with an insightful prospect for the future of Muslim unity in America, as varieties of Muslim identities continue to spring up in the American landscape. Ethnic particularism, he observes, is very evident among nonblack Muslims in America. He rightly points to the fact that despite the significant progress of orthodox Islam among black Americans, true integration between black and nonblack Muslims is yet to occur. Though he acknowledges the roles of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Islamic Society of North American (ISNA) as integration mechanisms, he argues that the racial status of black Muslims, whether orthodox or otherwise, will continue to play a significant role in the social and political agenda of black America. African-American Islam, he asserts in the epilogue, has arrived at the center stage of America. African-American Islam, he asserts in the epilogue, has arrived at the center stage of America, and this is destined to continue into the 21st century, especially with what he termed the "commodification" of Islam, i.e., Islamic symbols being stylized into media-oriented cultural products.

However, some of the author's blanket statements are problematic. For instance, his statements that jihad emerged during Muhammad's time as a method of expanding Islam by military force and that Muslims divided the known world into the house of war (*dar al-harb*) and the house of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) are far from known facts (p. 14). During the time of the Prophet, military force was only resorted to, to defend Islam from the aggression of its adversaries or protect its borders from enemy infiltration. The concepts of the houses of war and Islam are later inventions of jurists and have no connection with the era of Muhammad. Nonetheless, the most controversial aspect of the author's book is his thesis on the role of Islam, as a religious system, in shaping the racial-separatist tendency of African-American Muslims. Basically, the author tries to drive home the idea that Islam is not race-blind as is generally believed. In this attempt, he analyzes Islam from a racial-separatist perspective, by positioning it in a historical context of racial, ethnic, and political divisions, which he argues, influenced the history of slavery in America. He contends that racial separatism among Muslims in America in the 20th century was not completely the result of black nationalism, nor was it a new phenomenon in Islam; it was in fact a normative pattern for black people in Islam that was established in Africa before the Atlantic slave trade (p. 5).

In fact, the author not only asserts that global Islam lacks racial blindness, he also asserts that it took Edward Belmot Blyden to construct the paradigm of

historical Islam devoid of racial prejudice (p. 55). This is a serious misconception. The racial blindness of Islam is not a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, it has been there from the beginning. No one argues that there are no Muslim racists; Muslims are not immune to racism. However, Islam as a religious system, unlike Western Christianity, has always made its position categorically clear on such issues. Black leaders like Blyden and Bishop Turner, despite their Christian background, were able to discern between Islam and Western Christianity, as the two religious systems scrambled for the black African soul.

First of all, as part of his effort to deconstruct what he calls "the myth of racially-blind Islam," the author alleges, contrary to established facts, that the immigration of the early Muslims to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to avoid persecution, contributed to the Prophet Muhammad's positive attitude toward black people. Conversely, the author seems to insinuate that had it not been for the particular circumstance of the early Muslims that earned them the hospitality of the black Christian kingdom, the Prophet's attitude toward the black race would have been different. This, however, contradicts Muhammad's mission, which besides the spiritual domain, was a social revolution. Therefore, any prejudicial view of blacks or any other race for that matter on the part of the Prophet would have contradicted the very essence of his message, according to which man is judged not by his physical appearance, but by the content of his heart. Even the assertion that Muhammad was a slaveholder prior to his prophetic mission is overly simplistic and does not actually reflect an objective and true picture of his relationship with (what I would rather term) his servants. The sordid picture that American racism has cast on the institution of slavery makes the use of the term unpalatable in the Islamic sense. The author should have gone further to explain the nature of the relationship, instead of just associating the Prophet with slavery.

The author proceeds to establish his thesis of Islam's contribution to racial separatism. The basis of his argument is that the personalities or groups that influenced the conscience of African-American Muslim leaders were influenced in one way or another by patterns of Islamic racial separatism which existed in the Muslim world, particularly in West Africa. This racial-separatist model of West African Islam was incorporated into African-American Islam through African-American Muslim leaders' contact with Pan-Africanism. The author seems to confuse cultural or racial particularism or clustering, a natural phenomenon, for racial prejudice or discrimination, especially when such clustering is geared toward self-determination, self-sustenance, and self-reliance. This might have contributed to his misconception of Edward Wilmot Blyden's positive presentation of the role of Islam in instilling self-determination,

self-esteem, and self-reliance in the black African as a pattern of racial separatism in West African Islam, which he alleges had a profound influence on Blyden's Pan-Africanist views. He cites as an example the black community development paradigm espoused by Blyden and his colleagues of Pan-Africanism and later utilized by black Muslim leaders. He argues that the paradigm was based not on a narrow black nationalism, but on a historic pattern of racial interaction among Muslims in West Africa (p. 53). Racial particularism is not necessarily negative, so long as it does not become a yardstick for racial superiority and spiritual purity.

The author takes the issue of Islamic slavery further. He accuses Blyden and his colleagues of unwillingness to forgive Islamic racism in its slave trade, in an attempt to find a monotheistic alternative to Christianity (p. 55). He cites the spread of Islam by means of the sword in a series of jihads that swept West Africa, which he states were intended to destroy local religious dispensations. Though he credits these jihads with some positive economic, political, and cultural changes in West Africa, he argues that they tended to denigrate African traditional practices. Besides, they also accelerated what he termed the "Islamic slave trade." The author quotes Mudimbe's criticism of Blyden's lack of insight and naivety of the evils of Islamic slavery on the black African. According to Mudimbe:

the historical facts badly contradict Blyden's belief in the positive capabilities of Islam. Throughout the nineteenth century in Central Africa, Islamic factions represented an objective evil and practiced a shameful slave-trade. And here, again, we face an unbelievable inconsistency in Blyden's thought: his naive admiration for Islam led him to accept the enslavement of non-Muslim peoples! (p. 55)

First of all, the author, like most Western scholars, fails to differentiate between Islam and Muslims. There has never occurred something called Islamic slave trade; that is both historically and academically unfounded. Maybe the phrase "Muslim or Arab slave trade" may suffice in this context. Also, his presentation of the series of jihads that swept West Africa was, as usual, overly simplistic. Though no sound-minded person would deny that these jihads had their negative implications—but as he himself noted, in the case of the economic, political, and cultural progress that these jihads engineered—there is more to these jihads than the "Muslim sword" that Western oriental scholarship is so interested in.

The fact that Islam adapts to the culture of its host is a long established tradition. Therefore, the mere intent of destroying the "local interpretation of faith" does not sufficiently explain the rationale behind the jihad movements.

Like the old saying, “Just call the dog bad so as to hang it,” Western scholars have been so obsessed with the so-called “Muslim sword” that they stop at nothing to sensationalize the spread of Islam by armed struggle. I do not think Blyden absolves the Muslim contribution to commodifying the human being, especially when his own race was the major victim of this inhumane act. What the author and Mudimbe fail to realize in Blyden’s view of Muslim slave trade is that the mosques did not play a part in its activities. Muslims did not invoke Islam to warrant their evil acts, nor did Arabs perpetrate their perceived superiority to the black race based on the teaching of Islam. This was not the case in the Christian slave trade, in which the pulpits were used to spiritually support and advance it. Arab Muslims never hinted to a white Arab God either. Personally, I think the author has manipulated the facts.

Contrary to his own experience as a Christian clergyman of what European Christianity had caused the black African, Blyden was only trying to present a true picture of what he saw with his naked eyes about Islam in Africa. According to him:

their local institutions were not destroyed by the Arab influence introduced. They only assumed new forms, and adapted themselves to the new teachings. (p. 51)

He is echoing an old fact about Islam. Even within the Arab society itself, Islam did not throw Arab institutions overboard when it emerged in Arabia, it only reformed and adapted to it. That was not the case with Western Christianity, which saw nothing good in anything other than the European. He continues:

it may be noticed that the Arab superstructure has been superimposed on a permanent indigenous substructure; so that what really took place, when the Arab met the Negro in his home, was a healthy amalgamation, and not an absorption or an undue repression. (p. 51)

You see, it was not that he was ignorant of Muslim slavery; rather, he had the knowledge to distinguish between the Islamic agenda as a system and what the Muslim Arabs were actually pursuing, a distinction which was not possible in the case of European Christianity. Blyden saw that Islam was totally different from Arabism, unlike Christianity, which is synonymous with Europeanism. He writes the following:

while Mohammedanism and learning to the Muslim Negro were coeval . . . the Christian Negro came in contact with mental and physical proscription and the religion of Christ, contemporaneously. (pp. 51–52)

Last but not least, the author erroneously classifies W.D. Fard as an Islamic modernist (p. 170). Such a view does not pass scholarly examination. W.D. Fard's conception of Islam does not measure up to the standards of Islamic modernism, at least not from the general Muslim point of view. Nonetheless, I strongly believe the author has provoked sober reflection about Islam. I think Muslims need to boldly come out and address this issue of slavery in their history once and for all. Western scholarship has been using slavery to throw punches at Islam for a long time.

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