But Was the Nation of Islam Really Islamic?

In arguing for the Islamic character of the movement, my account begins with a rather simple view of Muslim identity—that of self-identification.[43] If someone calls himself or herself a Muslim, I want to know what that means to them, and, as a fair-minded observer, I accept, for the purposes of both scholarly understanding and dialogue, that he or she is indeed Muslim. But this stipulation of Islamic legitimacy does not restrain me from pointing out the particular contours of an individual's or a group's Muslim identity and how that identity may differ from other Muslim orientations.

To be sure, the religious thought of Elijah Muhammad was decidedly heretical from the point of view of traditional Sunni Islamic orthodoxy. Elijah Muhammad taught that W. D. Fard, the founder of the NOI, was God in person, Allah Incarnate. God was "no spook in space," said Muhammad; He was a real man.[44] In the minds of many Muslims outside of the NOI, this idea violated a fundamental principle of Islamic faith—the declaration that there is no god but God. For his Muslim critics, Elijah Muhammad had committed the grave theological sin of *shirk*, the association of God with any other entity.[45] And this was not Elijah Muhammad's only doctrinal mistake, according to his opponents. He also declared that he was the Messenger of Allah, divinely chosen to lead black people to salvation. This notion contradicted a time-honored and authoritative Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an that Prophet Muhammad *of Arabia* was the seal of the prophets and, so, the last prophet of God to appear on earth.[46] When most Muslims witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, they are inevitably referring to Muhammad of Arabia. Elijah Muhammad, however, created his own version of what students of Islam would recognize as the first pillar of Islam, the *shahada*, or the declaration of faith. According to Elijah Muhammad, believers should declare the following: There is no god but God (that is, W. D. Fard) and Elijah Muhammad is His Messenger. For most Muslims, anyone who declared such a thing was not a true Muslim but a heretic.

It is important to note, however, that despite its distance from so-called Islamic orthodoxy, Elijah Muhammad's teaching did refer to a legitimate Islamic tradition. Elijah Muhammad's doctrine of God and His Messenger was a variation on an older Islamic formula; or at the least, it appropriated traditionally Islamic theological vocabulary into a new religious framework. It took the traditional declaration that "there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" and interpreted it to mean that God was W. D. Fard and that Elijah Muhammad was the Messenger. For believers inside the NOI, this interpretation became the fulfillment of prophecy, an expression of Allah's original intentions.

Elijah Muhammad's religious thought also included a myth of black origins and a story about the fall of man, both of which bore little resemblance to other traditions of Islamic thought. Elijah Muhammad taught that blacks were the original human beings on the earth and that blacks were self-made—that is, they were both the creators and the created. After a series of cataclysmic galactic events that occurred trillions of years ago, which included the separation of the moon from the earth, blacks came to inhabit the holy city of Mecca in Arabia. According to Elijah Muhammad, they were called the tribe of Shabazz. They spoke Arabic, practiced the religion of Islam, and lived in an Edenic civilization that continued for epochs—until around 4600 B.C. At that time, one of their own, a mad and evil scientist named Yacub, began a series of genetic experiments that produced the white man, a genetically inferior, brutish, and evil creature. The white man existed on raw meat and lived in the caves of Europe from 4000 to 2000 B.C.E., at which time he began a campaign to usurp black hegemony on the earth. Eventually, the naturally violent white man enslaved the black man, bringing him to the New World on a slave ship called John Hawkins in the 1500s. In the New World, the tribe of Shabazz forgot its language, its religion, and its traditions of civilization. It adopted the evil lifestyles and especially the horrible religion of its oppressors, Christianity.[47]

Muhammad thus offered followers a black theodicy: a story grounded in a mythological view of history that explained the fall of black civilization, the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, and the practice of Christian religion among slaves and their descendants.[48] This narrative assured African Americans that they were good by nature and had been the victims of an evil plot. While blacks may have been powerless to prevent the unfolding of this history, Elijah Muhammad said that God had not abandoned them. It was their destiny as the chosen race, the original man, to be offered salvation, to regain their former status as rulers of the earth. In 1930, God, in the person of W. D. Fard, appeared on the earth and commissioned Elijah Muhammad his Messenger to "mentally resurrect the so-called Negro." Messenger Elijah Muhammad called on African Americans to reject the slavemaster's religion and to reclaim Islam. He told them to separate from the white devils and unite with their own kind. Elijah Muhammad explained that black people had been fooled by the "tricknology" of the white man's religion; he told them that there was no heaven in the sky and argued that such pie-in-the-sky religion was meant to make them docile, to trick them into waiting for true equality and freedom, which could be theirs now. Like other practitioners of an American religious tradition called New Thought, he proclaimed that heaven and hell were states of mind and that it was high time to leave hell.[49]

In order to enter heaven, however, African Americans would have to follow his moral teachings, said the Messenger. He taught them to observe a strict code of ethics that theoretically governed every aspect of their lives. For many Americans, Elijah Muhammad's prescriptions for moral renewal were the least shocking aspects of his doctrines. Advocating Victorian notions of gender segregation and control of the body, he incorporated many American middle-class norms into his system of Islamic ethics. Some of these ethical directives paralleled elements of the *shari'a*, or Islamic law and ethics, while others did not. Believers were to practice clean living: to regulate their diets, eschew alcohol and tobacco, avoid gambling, dress modestly, control their sexual desires, practice thrift, work hard, be punctual, use proper English grammar, pray often, and treat others with respect. In addition, said the Messenger, they should use violence only to defend themselves and should observe all laws of the United States, so long as they do not contradict the laws of Islam. Believers were also encouraged to "do for self," that is, to practice economic self-sufficiency and avoid as much as possible the white-dominated economy. Instead, Elijah Muhammad told them to buy from black-owned business and especially from the many businesses that came to be created in the 1960s and 1970s under his leadership.[50]

If followers practiced these principles, the Messenger said, they could enjoy salvation in the here and now and await their restoration as the rulers of the earth. He rejected calls for blacks to return to Africa, since it was North American blacks that would lead other persons of color toward the restoration of black greatness. Instead, he demanded a separate black nation-state or territory within the United States—though he did little to advance this political agenda. Believers were often told to refrain from participating in U.S. elections, and they were discouraged from joining the armed forces. But there is no evidence to suggest that Muhammad planned or even desired the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. Rather, Muhammad assured his believers that God would redeem them at the end of times through a violent destruction of white civilization (although, in 1972, he said that white people could be saved if they, too, would convert to Islam).[51] Combining apocalyptic views with certain themes from science fiction, the Messenger said that, at the end of days, a mothership—a huge UFO—would appear in the sky and dispense bombs that would destroy whites and leave blacks unharmed. Only he and his believers would be able to see this horrible object, a deus ex machina that would bring justice down from the heavens upon the evil and immoral society of white persons.[52] In declaring that, at the end of the world, God would target whites, rather than evil human beings in general, Muhammad once again offered a teaching unacceptable in the eyes of most Muslims.

In sum, Elijah Muhammad's thought violated many fundamental precepts of what has come to be known as Sunni Islam, or the Islam that follows the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad of Arabia. But that does not mean there was no connection between Sunni Islam and the religious culture of the NOI. By exploring the ways in which members of the NOI interpreted and adapted historically Islamic traditions as part of their religious culture, this book makes the case that these believers increasingly identified, in one way or another, with the Islamic beliefs, rituals, ethics, and symbols of "mainstream" Islam. From a normative point of view, they became increasingly "Islamized" during the period under examination.

In charting their "Islamization," my approach is informed by recent scholarly developments in the anthropology and history of Islam that offer new directions for understanding the various religious, cultural, social, political, and economic processes by which human beings, in various places, have become Muslims. Rather than assuming that Islam is a fixed entity that over time spread from the Arab and Persian Middle East to the rest of the Afro-Eurasian landmass, scholars have remapped Islamization and stressed indigenous processes of identity formation and local appropriations of Islamic traditions.[53] Historian Richard Eaton explained this re-siting of Islamization thus: "Instead of adopting the perspective of one standing in Mecca, looking out upon an ever-widening, ever-expanding religious tide that is uniform and monolithic, one adopts the perspective of someone standing in a remote and dusty village, incorporating into his religious system elements considered useful or meaningful that drift in from beyond the ocean, from over the mountains, or simply from the neighboring village."[54] In addition to questioning the mapping of the Islamic world as "heartland and periphery," Islamic studies scholars have challenged assumptions about the nature of religious conversion itself.[55] Many have criticized the Protestant biases embedded in the assumption that religious conversion must be "understood as a fundamental change in *beliefs*, an act of replacement perfect and complete when all pre-Islamic beliefs disappear in favor of Islamic tenets." As one scholar of Indonesian Islam puts it, such understandings of conversion create a false dichotomy between "true" Muslims and "those who emptily perform Islamic rituals while retaining behind this façade their original beliefs."[56]

All of these charges against marginal Muslims have a familiar ring—they have also been made about members of the NOI.[57] Rather than dismissing NOI members as fake or unorthodox Muslims, I argue that religious life in the NOI can be understood and analyzed as a subtle process of Islamization in which members of the NOI debated the meaning of their religion, accepting and rejecting various elements of *other* Islamic traditions as they struggled to practice

a form of Islam that was relevant to their historical circumstances. This new approach, furthermore, looks at religious identity not only as a matter of one's theological beliefs but also of one's ritual activities, ethical imperatives, and communal affiliations. Even those readers who continue to make a stark distinction between the religion of the NOI and the religion of Islam might be surprised by the extent to which some members of the NOI incorporated various traditions from Sunni and other historically Islamic symbols, texts, and practices into their religious activities.

In the end, the quest to understand Islam in the NOI is not only a quest to complicate our understanding of a single, small religious group. It is also an attempt to take religion, and religious believers, seriously. The theological convictions, ethical impulses, and rituals of religious persons are not merely cultural accessories or veiled politics. They constitute categories of human activity worthy of our attention and respect.