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AMERICA'S BLACK MUSLIMS



IN the last three years there has been some anxiety expressed in the American press and radio about a new politico-religious movement among Negroes called the Nation of Islam. What light does it throw on the nature and origin of religion?

To have an identity and a will to live, a man or a social group must have a past and a future, as well as an adequate present. If the past is humiliating and the future precarious, a new past and future may be imagined, to give meaning and purpose to the present. In this way a new religion may be born, with its own myth of origin and its own millennium. This is what seems to have happened to a considerable number of American Negroes, according to an account given by E. U. Essien-Udom, a Harvard sociologist of West African origin, in *Black nationalism: a search for an identity in America* (University of Chicago Press, 56s.). His story is detailed, and told with perceptive sympathy.

"A century after Emancipation," he writes, "nineteen million black Americans, robbed of their traditions and of a pride in their past, are still seeking acceptance by the white majority, but are continuing to live in semibondage on the fringes of American society." A few escape into the middle class, and seek for non-racial acceptance; in so doing, most of them leave the Negro masses behind—unlike the racially-conscious Negro leaders of the 19th century. The masses must seek their own identity and deliverance.

One method is through the socio-religious movement called the Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, believed by his followers to be divinely appointed to unite all American Negroes under the crescent of Islam. It began in a small way during the Depression, under the leadership of Prophet W. D. Fard, or "Allah in the Person of Master Wallace Fard Muhammad". He disappeared in 1933, and was succeeded by Elijah Muhammad, whose followers, only a handful twenty years ago, now number a quarter of a million, in cities all over America. There are fifty "Temples of Islam", with appointed ministers owing obedience to Elijah Muhammad. It has become, in the author's opinion, the most important black nationalist movement in the United States.

Instead of the indignity of a past of slavery and poverty, these Negroes claim spiritual descent from "Arabian-Egyptian civilisation", even though authentic Islam repudiates them. As to the future, they say they reject participation in modern politics, and, adopting the imagery of biblical prophecy, they look for a speedy world-cataclysm, which will establish "the Black Nation".

Mr Essien-Udom says, however, that this is only the mythical framework and

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vocabulary of the movement: its real vitality is in the social and personal ideals it asserts now. Its answer to segregation, discrimination, poverty and ignorance, which is the tragic lot of the Negro masses, is to practice a puritan moral discipline, within a group which deliberately cuts itself off from the rest of society (an astonishing feature is that all who attend its services are searched before being allowed to enter). It has centralised authority, under the personal leadership of Elijah Muhammad, with a ritual, dietary laws and a code of conduct. The result is a rather hard self-reliance and obedience, and a definite rise in economic status and personal morality. It is like a tightly-organised fraternal benefit society (like the Freemasons and their many imitators), with a militant nationalist, religious and messianic colouring.

The movement is opposed to assimilation of the Negro into white society, and repudiates "integration", which it sees as loss of identity, even if it were possible. It is opposed to Negro Christianity, which it regards as surrender to the oppressors' religion: "Christianity is the Negroes' grave". It looks forward, though very vaguely, to some sort of territorial separation of black and white; in the meantime it tries to make itself economically and culturally separate, by establishing its own commercial enterprises (shops, restaurants, dry-cleaning establishments, etc.) and schools—even a "university". It holds great rallies of its supporters.

The Moslem element in the movement may not go very deep, though it undoubtedly means much to the members. Efforts have been made to get into contact with Egypt and other Moslem powers in Africa, but without much success. Elementary Arabic is taught. Puritan Moslem ideals of conduct are advocated. Arab robes are worn on occasion. Partly what is intended is a repudiation of Christianity, partly an appeal to Oriental mystery, a root, sometimes deep and sometimes superficial, of many sectarian movements. To be Muslim is to be "different", to establish an identity which distinguishes a man from his shapeless neighbours. But it should also be remembered that, after all, nearly every religion in the world, including Christianity in all "Christian" countries, is an importation from abroad to its present believers.

There have been fears that the Nation of Islam is the beginning of violent revolution. The author thinks these fears are exaggerated, in spite of the racial and messianic imagery and the regimentation of the movement. They are symptoms of the Negroes' tragic alienation, and "aimed at purging lower-class Negroes of their inferiority complex". Mere political freedom is not enough; what is needed is a way of life in which a man can take pride, and into which he can put his efforts. This is the real meaning of Elijah Muhammad's moral and economic reforms, with their Moslem colouring. "Disregarding but not condoning the excesses of Muhammad's ideological concoctions or racial mysticism, it is clear that his is a unique effort to reconstruct the Negro soul, by providing a "world" (a mystique) in which one could be black and unashamed, and by regenerating the Negro's moral and social values". But this is true of almost every religion at some stage in its history.