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The Meaning of Black Nationalism

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Winter 1963

Introduction

Recent estimates of the size of the "Black Muslims," or followers of Elijah Muhammad, have varied from 3,000 to 300,000. Whatever the number may be, the significance of Muhammad's movement cannot be judged by numerical strength alone. What is important is the meaning of the black nationalists to America and to the Negro in particular. The ubiquity of nationalistic tendencies; the conditions of the northern urban Negro; and the inability of "recognized" Negro leadership to cope with the causes of nationalism are of tremendous importance.

The study of black nationalism is not easy. Little scholarly work has been done on the subject. Whites are limited in their efforts by exclusion from Muslim meetings and Temples, and Negro scholars have generally tended to ignore the significance of nationalist groups. Two important books have been written on the subject. One is E. U. Essien-Udom's, Black Nationalism. The other is C. Eric Lincoln's, The Black Muslims in America.

Definitions

Black nationalism refers to the expressed rejection by black man of "white culture" and a corresponding glorification and exaggeration of "black culture." As we use the term, it is an American phenomenon and involves the Negro's repudiation of the stereotype imposed on him by the white man. It may or may not revolve around the dream of a black state in Africa or in some other place. It is usually accompanied by a hatred of whites and will always reverse the American idea of white and black connotating purity and evil respectively.

In addition to disparaging the white man's culture, all black nationalist movements repudiate as well the Negro identity and they appropriate "Asiatic" culture symbols.

C. Eric Lincoln coined the phrase "Black Muslims." It refers to the major nationalist group today. I shall refer to this group primarily as "Muslims" or as the "Nation of Islam," or simply as the "Nation." Followers of Marcus Garvey will be referred to as "Garveyites" and those of Noble Drew Ali as "Moors."

History

The history of black nationalism goes back to the second decade of the nineteenth century. It was another hundred years, however, before this movement became a significant force. During the decade preceding the First World War, two men, Marcus Garvey and Noble Drew Ali, made an impact on the Negro community which is still felt today.

The period surrounding the First World War saw an unprecedented migration of Negroes from the South to northern urban centers. It also saw some of the most violent interracial conflicts in the history of the United States.

"In the first year after the war, seventy Negroes were lynched, many of them still in uniform. Fourteen Negroes were burned publicly by white citizens... During the 'Red Summer' of 1919, there were no fewer than twenty-five race riots across the country... in Chicago, thirty-eight people were killed..."¹

It was this setting which gave rise to Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and the Moorish-American Science Temple founded by Drew Ali in Newark, New Jersey.

Garvey, a Jamaican, arrived on the American scene in Harlem in 1916. "No other American Negro organization has ever been able to reach and stir the masses of Negroes to the same degree..." said Ralph Bunche of the Garveyites. At its height the Garvey movement claimed as many as a million members in the United States, but even sober estimates range from 20,000 in the U. S. to over a million throughout the world. Garvey formed his own church, a steamship line which was plagued with difficulties, a provisional Negro government which in fact was international and a following which looked to Liberia as their Utopia. In 1927 Garvey was deported following his imprisonment on dubious grounds of having defrauded investors through the mails. One can still find Garveyites today in Harlem, but following his deportation the movement began to decline and was soon torn with internal factionalism. He died in London in 1940.

Not as strong as the Garveyites, but the direct predecessors of the Nation of Islam were the Moors. Noble Drew Ali taught "that the people termed 'Negroes' in the United States are 'Asiatics' and, specifically, that they are Moors whose forebears inhabited Morocco before they were enslaved in America." Like Garvey, Drew Ali formed collectively owned businesses. His career ended in 1929 with his mysterious death while he himself was awaiting trial for a murder which was alleged to have arisen from an internal schism.

The nation of Islam was founded in Detroit in 1930 by one W. D. Fard. Fard was known by a number of names and his ancestry is a puzzle. It is rumored that he came from the Holy City of Mecca. Whatever his origin, he became, according to Essien-Udom, a "reincarnation" of

Ever Ali and is now the "God" of the Nation of Islam.

Among Fard's earliest followers was Georgia-born Elijah Poole. Fard recruited some 8,000 followers among Negroes in Detroit in the first few years. However, he faded into the background and concurrently came to be considered God or "Allah." Some of his followers doubt^s his sent divinity, however, which led to a split that/ Elijah Poole to Chicago where he founded a branch of the Nation of Islam. Fard disappeared forever and Poole, now known as Elijah Muhammad, became the leader of the faction which deified Fard. Mr. Muhammad has continued to today as the "Messenger of Allah" chosen by Allah (Fard) to carry on the Nation.

The Chicago Temple grew under the leadership of Muhammad, but it was not until about 1945 that new Temples were established -- in Milwaukee and in Washington, D. C. Malcolm X, minister of the Harlem Temple, is credited by Lincoln for/^{being} the driving force in the growth of the Nation after his conversion in prison in 1947. Malcolm is certainly one of the Nation's ablest spokesmen and serves as "Ambassador at Large" for the Messenger. Today the Nation of Islam has between 50 and 60 Temples in all parts of the country and its influence has pervaded the entire Negro community.

C. Eric Lincoln consistently uses 100,000 as the number of Muslims in America. Nowhere can I find documentation of this estimate. I am of the opinion that Essien-Udom's estimate -- "...after checking and rechecking as carefully as possible...(that) there are at present between 5,000 and 15,000 registered followers, at least 50,000 believers, and a much larger number of sympathizers" -- is probably much more accurate. As indicated earlier the impact of the Muslims transcends their limited

numbers.

Nationalism -- the psychological overthrow of the white man -- has pervaded every area of the Negro community. As Ralph Bunche pointed out years ago, "There are, in the Negro Universities, a good many 'academic Garveyites'." Among northern, urban, lower class Negroes you may encounter guilt feelings among some because they do not belong to the "Movement!" Even an integrationist, interracial organization such as CORE is not immune. There are some CORE chapters today where whites might well feel uncomfortable and unwanted.

Meaning

For the more than 16 million American Negroes progress toward full human rights seems pitifully slow. Even in the North where rights of minorities are more protected by law the lower class Negro does not feel the tremendous advances in the field of civil rights. In fact, one may even hear complaint that things were better in the South since there one at least knew what one could and could not do.

In the ghetto, 400 years of slavery and segregation is very real and there is a sense of futility about the future. The Negro lives in a world owned and controlled by whites. He is a second-class citizen; he knows it; and, he knows that the white man knows it. The Negro sees no way by which he can change the situation one iota and hence sees no future for himself and his children. He plays no part in this white world but must accept it and try to accommodate to it. One hundred years after "freedom" there has been little change as far as he is concerned.

He has lost meaning in his life and has lost a sense of his own

identity. It is these qualities which the Nation of Islam offers. Eric Hoffer in The True Believer says, "It is not actual suffering but the taste of better things which excites people to revolt." Even the advances which are made serve to further increase the sense of frustration and emptiness!

The African brought to America was systematically shorn of his culture, tradition and history. He was placed in a condition of absolute dependence on the new white culture which left him no alternative but to adopt it as his own. While forced to accept this white culture with its white Jesus, white employers, white policemen and judges the Negro was still not admitted all the way into the society. Shorn of his own culture, not accepted in the new, the Negro was relegated to a marginal status. His only identity was that forced upon him by the whites and his self-image became one of accommodation, compromise and inferiority. Essien-Udom says:

"Negroes have acquired what appears to be an appalling sense of inferiority and even of hatred for their 'Negro-ness'... Compelled by segregation...to live and die within the sub-culture of the Negro ghettos, the Negro masses have had to disassociate themselves from the white society. At the same time, however, they are compulsively attracted to it, since power, status, security, even beauty remain white priorities...This conflict...is further disturbed by the demand of the white society that the Negroes conform to its material, cultural, and moral standards while denying them the economic and social resources for so doing."²

Faced with this loss of self-identity the Negro began to search for his true self. One result of this search has been the growth of Negro nationalism in this country. Specifically, this nationalism has taken the form of concern with his own identity and not with the destiny of black men throughout the world. Having been rejected by the only

society he knew the Negro in turn rejected that society himself. And he rejected the concept of being a Negro because even Negro-ness was a white concept that had been forced unwillingly on him.

Black nationalists reject whiteness and revel in the glory of blackness. Hatred of the whites becomes a means of purging themselves of their own sense of inferiority. Rejection of Negro-ness and the slave heritage removes the bond of the immediate past and permits them to claim a new identity with the great traditions of the Asian-African past. Nationalists look not alone to a powerful black kingdom in the future but can look back as well to a glorious past. Looking backwards they tend to be particularly "fond of Ethiopia, Egypt, Morocco, or the Sudan. In general, they tend to disassociate themselves from sub-Saharan Africa..."⁽³⁾

The Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam is a monolithic, theocratic structure headed by Elijah Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah. Under Muhammad is a hierarchy of certain high ranking officials of the Fruit of Islam (FOI) and the Ministers of the Temples, although in theory all Muslims are equal. The FOI is an elite pseudo-military body. It serves the dual functions of guarding the Temples and the Messenger, and enforcing internal discipline. In addition to their Temples the Nation has two parochial schools (the Universities of Islam) which run through high school, and a number of small businesses.

While the Muslims consider themselves a legitimate Moslem sect, they also believe that they are, in fact, a "chosen people." Their religion teaches them that the world was originally peopled by blacks

and that the whites are "blue-eyed devils" who were created by a black scientist some 6,000 years ago who was rebelling against Allah. Allah, as part of his plan to bring all blacks into the faith, gave the devils 6,000 years in which to rule the earth. Armageddon will take place at the end of this period and Allah will destroy the devils. The exact date is given by Lincoln as 1984. Essien-Udom says it will "...definitely occur some time before the year 2,000 A. D. and the year 1970 has been suggested by the Messenger, although the 'exact day is known only to Allah'."

According to the Muslims all non-whites are blacks regardless of their color. All blacks are Muslims, but most do not yet know it and the task of the Messenger is to bring them into the Nation. The so-called Negroes are inferior beings whose main interest is in being close to and emulating the white devils. They can be saved, however, by recognizing Muhammad as the Messenger of Allah and joining the Nation of Islam.

The Nation of Islam looks forward to an independent state, but in this country, not in Africa. They believe that somehow Allah will convince the government of the United States to give them several states and subsidize them until they are economically self-sufficient. This subsidy is to be a form of retroactive pay for 400 years of enslavement.

In preparation for the political "Black Nation" the Muslims are taught sound economic principles and the value of hard work. They are encouraged to build their own businesses and to give an honest day's work even to a white employer. Point five of Muhammad's "Economic Blueprint" is: "Observe the operations of the white man. He is

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successful. He makes no excuses for his followers -- pushes hard -- in a collective manner. You do the same."

The Nation of Islam thrives on the sinner and disinherited. Many Muslims, like Minister Malcolm X, are converted while in prison. Pimps, alcoholics, prostitutes, gamblers and criminals of all sorts are now members of the almost entirely lower class Nation of Islam. The morality of the Muslims is rigidly puritanical. Registered Muslims are not permitted to consume alcohol, smoke, gamble, dance, take narcotics, use makeup, or straighten their hair. They are even fined for being overweight and generally eat only one meal a day. They cannot eat pork, collard greens or other foods connected with their slave background. For infractions of these rules they may be expelled or suspended from the Nation. Muslims obey all civil laws except those which conflict with the laws of Allah such as the draft law.

Muslims have often been criticized for advocating violence. They are also attacked for being segregationists. While Muslims do believe in total racial separation they of course do not believe in segregation imposed on them by someone else. They hate whites and everything connected with white. Muslims believe that integration is a stratagem used to keep the Negro in enslavement and under the domination of the whites. However, the hate-white image of the movement has proven a detriment in recruiting Negroes and has recently been toned down. It is also interesting to note that CORE, the most interracial of the integrationist organizations, has come under less attack than the others. This may well be due to its militant posture.

The charge that Muslims advocate violence seems to be largely

unfounded. Muslims as a matter of religious belief have no use for violence even though they do advocate self-defense. While there are earlier evidences of Muslims participating in violent actions, it is questionable today whether they will even retaliate when attacked. Essien-Udom points out that, "Twice in recent years, the Muslims have been assaulted physically by the police; in each instance they sought redress in court." James Farmer, National Director of CORE, reports that Malcolm X, upon returning from Los Angeles in the Spring of 1962 after the death of a Muslim at the hands of the police, indicated Malcolm's pride in the lack of violent resistance of his followers in this most provoking situation. Mohammed has issued clear injunctions to his followers not to resort to violence except when their lives are clearly in danger, and he was appalled by the thought of a follower hitting a brother. Furthermore, the Nation of Islam provides outlets for its members' aggressions which obviate the likelihood of resort to physical aggression.

Motivation

Among the Negro disinherited there are many strong motivations to join the Nation of Islam. Possibly most important is the appeal of group solidarity. Every Muslim is pledged to die for his brother. Strong bonds of fraternity are forged. The Muslim is a member of a group which is powerful -- powerful enough to throw off the yoke of the white man. He gains a feeling of belonging and strength. He is among the chosen and a member of the superior race.

The anti-Christian aspect at the same time is a repudiation

of identity and, because it is the white man's religion, an act of aggression against the "slavemaster." As opposed to Christianity in practice, the Muslims do not hold the past against you and the most degraded can find salvation in the Nation. The Nation offers middle class values while in revolt against these very values!

The Nation of Islam returns woman to her role of purity and gives her a protected status. The man in turn once again becomes the head of the family -- the protector and provider. This reversal of matriarchy alone is sufficient to lend a new sense of dignity and worth to the male individual. Sexual exploitation is not found among Muslims.

Problems

In spite of its recent growth and the strong incentive it offers to the Negro in the ghetto, the Nation of Islam faces severe problems which are impeding its growth.

Being completely monolithic the Nation might find itself in a terrible situation should something happen to the Messenger. Muhammad alone rules. It is not at all certain who would succeed him, but the organization does not appear too concerned about this. Essien-Udom holds that Muhammad has rather clearly chosen his son Wallace as his successor. Minister Malcolm X on the other hand is to all appearances the most popular, well known and most powerful person in the movement outside of Muhammad himself. In the absence of Muhammad it is apparent that Malcolm could take a large following with him should he not choose to subordinate himself to Wallace or some other successor. For the time being, however, Muhammad is clearly unchallenged and is "hand-picked by Allah."

Further growth of the Nation is also impeded by the fact that by and large Negroes are not ready to give up Christianity. It is very much a part of their culture. The Muslims have also apparently misjudged to an extent the new spirit of southern Negro youth. Far from being ripe for conversion they are creating their own new world and self-image.

Additionally, American Negroes are currently taking a more active interest in the affairs of Africa. But the Muslims are not taking cognizance of this trend. They still tend to downgrade any connection with sub-Saharan Africa..

The Muslims have found their rhetoric and lack of respectability both in the white and Negro communities a drawback and hindrance to growth. As long as the Muslims remain "unrespectable" by American standards they are going to encounter problems in recruitment since most Negroes want respectability very badly. The Nation is faced with a paradox in that their lack of respectability is both an attraction and a limiting factor. The Muslims apparently are leaning more toward respectability recently. They have toned down their attacks on Negro leadership, which has never treated them kindly. Thurgood Marshall at Princeton University is reported to have said the Nation of Islam was "run by a bunch of thugs organized from prisons and jails..." and was a vicious threat to the FBI, the NAACP and law-enforcement agencies.

Muslims would like to be considered a legitimate Moslem sect and be recognized as such by the Moslem world. This seems unlikely, however, as long as they retain their racism and other aberrations from Moslem doctrine and teaching.

While Muslims preach a Black Nation they have no political program to achieve it. In fact, they have virtually no political program at all. They will not run for office in the United States and do not vote. They offer the individual a great deal in terms of subjective and psychological values in the present, but fail in developing any program for the future.

In many respects the program and appeal of the Muslims is reactionary and a rationalization of the status quo. They are not a revolutionary group. They are in fact defenders of things as they are. Since they cannot see an end to segregation they in effect bless and support it. Segregation or separation is thus transformed from a stigma to a source of ethnic pride. Racial purity, a fiction of the bigot and the uninformed, becomes a prime value. In their attempt to change the society, the Muslims are siding with the disease rather than with the cure, as C. Eric Lincoln has so aptly put it. Rumors can be heard that there is contact and some cooperation between the American Nazi party and the Nation of Islam. While this may be discounted it is a fact that black nationalist groups have historically received support and encouragement from the most reactionary and racist segments of American society. In a letter to the mayor of New Orleans, Garvey said, "We like your 'Jim Crow' laws..."

Evaluation

Black nationalism is a reactionary force. It is fighting the trend of the modern world. To justify segregation by making the black man responsible for it does not alter the ultimate harm which this

divided system does to both black and white. The world is getting smaller and a black nation is not only impossible in America, but even if it were possible, it would solve few problems and create many. The Nation of Islam says to Negroes that they are not Americans and not Negroes. No matter how "not-American" they may feel they cannot escape this identity. Nor can they escape the fact they are the product of 400 years of slavery and second or even third class status as Negroes in this country. To try to escape being an American and a Negro can have severe psychological consequences. The "so-called Negro" has an identity with and a role within this society. The challenge is to discover and develop this role to the betterment of the Negro and the society as a whole.

Negro nationalism is a logical and direct product of American society and as such is extremely American. It is a symptom of the weakness and sickness of our democracy. The Church segregated the Negro and subsequently the Negro Church, while providing a haven, did little to improve the lot of life here and now. It promised happiness in the bye and bye, but the Nation of Islam promises the good life here and now -- even rejecting the idea of an after-life.

While the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League and CORE have provided legal gains and changes in some discriminatory patterns they have done little to impress the lower class Negro in the streets. These organizations are essentially middle class groups that have reached into the working class only in a very limited fashion. The problem of fulfilling the needs of the urban, lower class Negro is further compounded by the fact that increasing

mobility for the Negro has increased the distance between the upper and middle class Negroes and the lower class. There is a vacuum of organization, leadership and progress for the lower class Negro. The Muslims are attempting to fill this vacuum. The Nation of Islam is providing a world in which one can be black and unashamed. Mr. Muhammad is attacking the problem of the down-and-out Negro more forcefully and more successfully than any other Negro leader or organization. He is providing a way out.

Black nationalism may well be a necessary evil. Nationalism entails a recognition of self-worth which is required before an integrated society is possible. While it is a rejection of Negro-ness it is an affirmation of a new and meaningful self-identity. As a subject nation cannot take its place among the community of nations without a nationalist revolution, so the Negro cannot claim his place in society unless this same internal revolution takes place. Essien-Udom says that, "Perhaps, the black nationalists' agitation...may well signal the beginning of the end of the Negroes' aimless and vain desire to hide their dark skins behind a white mask." In a sense the spirit of the black nationalists is not too different from the spirit of the southern sit-in demonstrators.

The message of the Nation of Islam to the civil rights organizations should be that they are not doing the job good enough, fast enough, nor in the right places. The non-white population of the United States is no longer asking for rights and dignity; it is demanding them in no uncertain terms, now. The integrationist organizations must become aware of the reality that they have been dealing primarily with symptoms and not with the disease itself. While these organizations

must make new and dramatic efforts to reach the "Negro in the mud," as Muhammad says, they must also not forget that the real patient is the society itself. In a curious way the Negro becomes the physician to the larger society. We must remember that we are faced with an American problem and that neither the Negro nor the white is totally the cause and that neither can alone provide the total solution.

Myrdal has suggested that the best hope for progress in American race relations lies with a multiplicity of organizations and approaches, and that the most effective organizations will be those which are interracial. To the extent that these interracial and integrative efforts are successful and dynamic, and reach into all segments of America's population, the racist and separative nationalist sects will have neither an audience nor a doorway through which the masses will be called to pass.

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