

5-5-2017

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Recommended Citation

Hall, Lauren (2017) "Religious Explorations of American Blackness by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Nation of Islam," *Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/relics/vol2/iss2/7>

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Abstract

Two different religious explorations of the meaning of being black in America are Martin Luther King's use of Christianity in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and the prophecy of Yacub in the Nation of Islam's doctrine. While King concludes that Christianity is part of the very fabric of America and will continue to be a source of liberation, the Nation of Islam believed that Christianity was embedded within America's colonial and white supremacist history, and that salvation will come when blacks once again rule society.

Religious Explorations of American Blackness by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Nation of Islam

In the mid-20th century, prominent African Americans engaged with their identities through religion. In Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," the jailed civil rights leader and reverend discusses the Christian source and justification of his beliefs, which he also believed was inherent in America. A very different take on blackness in America was by the classical Nation of Islam led by Elijah Muhammad (1934 to 1975), whose doctrine contended that white supremacy occurred in America because of a prophecy, and black supremacy eventually would arise. Martin Luther King and the Nation of Islam offer different visions of America as responses to being black in America.

The classical Nation of Islam believed that American white supremacy was the result of religious prophecy, the story of Yacub. This gave a religious answer to blacks' suffering at the hand of whites in American history. The sacred story says that whites were created by a scientist named Yacub to revenge God, and they lived like animals until "Moses...brought the white race

into civilization.” As with all actions of the story, “he is said to have done this according to Allah’s plan.”¹

Whites believed themselves the pinnacle of power and exploited blacks. In American history, this played out by European explorers stealing Africans from their homes, enslaving them, and taking them to America, where they were further exploited for free labor. Blacks were enslaved until the end of the Civil War, and were oppressed in other ways up through the 20th century. The prophecy predicts a great war between the whites (representing the devil) and blacks (representing God), and the war will end with victory by the blacks and will reclaim their status “on top of the civilization.”² Aminah Beverly McCloud gives a potent explanation for why such a religious doctrine would be compelling for African Americans: “the creation story sufficed to repair some of the psychological damage done from slavery, segregation, and the ensuing physical violence.”³ Slavery and oppression was not their fault, but rather prophecy. The course of American history was predetermined.

Opposing this vision of America was Martin Luther King’s, which contended that Christianity not only provided the foundation for America and its inherent morals and democracy, but also for the liberation of African Americans. King wrote that “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”⁴ He saw Christianity as a precedent for this belief and American history as proof of its application. For him,

¹ Aminah Beverly McCloud, “Blackness in the Nation of Islam,” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 108.

² Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 84-85, excerpted in Aminah Beverly McCloud, “Blackness in the Nation of Islam,” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 101.

³ McCloud, 108.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in *The Best American Essays of the Century*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 276.

Christianity and America were inexorably intertwined. King explained his belief that ancient Christianity was used to “transform the mores of society,” to bring about justice. For example, “they brought an end to ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.”⁵ Christianity was also used to bring justice to American society, for instance, through its independence from Britain in the Revolutionary War. King quotes Thomas Jefferson’s immortal line from the Declaration of Independence that “we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.”⁶ Indeed, Jefferson too used Christianity as the foundation for his belief that natural rights were God given. Another instance of Christianity bringing justice to American society, in King’s view, was through the American Civil War, which emancipated African Americans from slavery. King drew parallels between Abraham Lincoln, the President who fought for emancipation during the Civil War, and Jesus as both “extremists” for their radical beliefs.⁷ For King, America was a “great nation” of “Judeo-Christian heritage.”⁸ He wrote that “anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.”⁹ As Jesus himself was an outsider and Christianity preached to love outsiders, to King, this extends to a core value of America.

The classical Nation of Islam took a radically different view of Christianity and its relationship to America from Kings’; it contended that Christianity was in fact the source of white supremacy and colonialism embedded in American history. Many blacks arrived in America as slaves via Africa with Christianity thrust upon them by Europeans. Some were forcibly converted to Christianity, which whites justified by they were making “savage” Africans “civilized.” Malcolm X, a one-time leader of the classical Nation of Islam, wrote “the teachings

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 273.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 278-9.

⁹ Ibid., 264.

of Mr. Muhammad stressed how history had been ‘whitened’—when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out.”¹⁰ The Nation of Islam believed that American history teaching that their national heritage was Christian was another way of enforcing white supremacy. The Nation of Islam believed that all blacks from Africa who had come to America were Muslims. Their own history had been erased. Thus, by rediscovering their “true religion” through the Nation of Islam, African Americans were honoring their heritage and embracing their true identity. Elijah Muhammad wrote to “American Negroes,” “Islam is actually our religion by nature. It is the religion of Allah (God), not a European organized white man’s religion.”¹¹ By embracing the Nation of Islam, it “will put the black man of America on top of the civilization.”¹²

King also addressed the Nation of Islam and critiqued its vision of America. He wrote that the Nation of Islam “is one of bitterness and hatred and comes perilously close to advocating violence.”¹³ To him this not only rejected Christian teachings but also the true nature of America. He wrote that the Nation of Islam “is made up of people who have lost faith in America,”¹⁴ as to him America best embodied the Christian values of justice, democracy, and brotherhood, which the Nation of Islam did not advocate for by believing that white people were the devil.

Although he did not believe white people or Christianity were sources of pure evil, King too was critical of white Christians. King criticized the white Christian leadership of mid-century America, which stuck to the status quo instead of supporting him in his quest for racial integration and equality. He differentiates by writing that “I must turn my faith to the inner

¹⁰ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 201.

¹¹ Muhammad, 101.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ King, 272.

¹⁴ Ibid.

spiritual Church, the church within the Church, as the true ecclesia and the hope of the world.”¹⁵ That is, though their interpretation of Christianity is wrong, the true “inner spiritual” Christianity will help blacks achieve salvation. The reason for this is that the goal of Christianity and the goal of America is the same. King wrote, “The goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America.”¹⁶ He believed that America would fulfill its Christian destiny by achieving equality and justice for African Americans.

There are many interesting parallels between Martin Luther King’s Christian religious beliefs and the Nation of Islam. Though both occurred as mid-20th century American responses to African Americans’ oppression at the hands of white supremacy, they had different answers as to why such oppression had occurred, and how America figured into the equation. For Martin Luther King, Christianity would provide a way of liberation, as it had throughout American history since its founding as a Christian nation. For the classical Nation of Islam, its religious doctrine explained the suffering of African Americans as prophecy, which also contended that these supreme beings would rise. What is clear from both is that religion can provide very different answers to the suffering of a nation of people. While King’s Christianity provides a method to overcome such oppression, the Nation of Islam’s salvation is in the knowledge that one day black’s superiority will be recognized and they will once again rule.

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¹⁵ Ibid., 276.

¹⁶ Ibid., 277.

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