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Nation of Islam in Civil Society: *Interview with Minister Don Muhammad**

Castellano Turner, Ph.D.

Turner: In 1969, Nation of Islam was described by the FBI as a group that "does preach hatred of the white race and racial separation."¹ Three decades later, after September 11, Minister Louis Farrakhan wrote to President Bush and offered to travel on a peace mission together with Christian leaders to meet with Muslim leaders in the Arab world. To what extent has the image of Nation of Islam evolved in the intervening period from a paramilitary structure to be seen as a legitimate spiritual organization that has something of value to contribute to public policy?

Min. Don Muhammad: The races were already separate. And, we never taught racial hatred. We taught independence. Just like as individuals we grow up and separate from our parents, so too should a community seek self-determination. There is no hatred there, a man goes off and starts his own home and family - we believe that black people need to be independent. This was the majority thinking of black people a hundred years ago in the South. Black people wanted their own land so that they could be independent. It is no different from the

* Questions for this interview were formulated by Anne Gathuo.

¹ Letter to SAC, Chicago. RE: Counterintelligence Program (Nation of Islam), January 7, 1969. Retrieved July 7, 2003. <http://www.noi.org/fbi2.html>

case of Israel. Jews fought and continue to fight hard for their own state; we do not call them separatists!

Most importantly, we could never run away from the race issue. Eventually, a solution for the races in this society is going to have to be found. Dr. Dubois [W.E.B.] was correct when he said racism was going to be the biggest problem in the 20th century. Well, it looks like it is going to be the biggest problem in the 21st century too - and indicators are all around us: consider the recent utterances of a Boston radio personality comparing Black students in the METCO program to an escaped gorilla from the zoo.² While this matter may look trivial, it touches at the very core of the racial divide that continues to define our society. This divide becomes even more apparent in poor economic times.

Nation of Islam has always pushed for economic independence for Black people. No people can achieve dignity and self-respect if it is dependent on another people for economic survival. I had a meeting today with a black politician who complained about black businesses. When the economy deteriorates, it is black businesses that suffer the most. Why? Because Black people do not control their own destiny. How can we take control of what happens to us? It should start in the schools. We believe that black children should be taught by black people until they become young adults. This is an example of the independence we have been seeking.

As far as the Nation of Islam preaching racial hatred is concerned, why was this FBI memo not made public? I have to resent someone making a statement like that. The FBI, in 1969, also said that one solution to the Nation of Islam "problem" was to wait for Elijah Muhammad to die and the organization to take a different course. Well,

² On September 29, 2003, John Dennis, a radio announcer with WEEI radio in Boston made an on-air comment to the effect that a gorilla that had escaped from the Franklin Zoo was probably going to wait for a METCO bus to take him to Lexington. METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) is a state-funded desegregation program designed to eliminate racial imbalance through the busing of children from Boston to suburban public schools.

J. Edgar Hoover was certainly not a friend of black people. Someone could almost say that that is a compliment!

But certainly the Nation of Islam has grown and evolved over time. I remember being on a radio show once and the host, Jean Burns, said to me, "Brother Don, we don't hear you in the Nation of Islam calling white folks devils anymore." I said to him, "you don't have to say anything if a people has already learned a lesson. You don't repeat it." I continued, "the lesson was learned - white folks stopped calling black people niggers, at least in public. So you move on." Certainly, there has been growth - a child eventually grows out of his diapers. And so it is with the Nation of Islam. And I have to point out that Muslims are not unique in their earlier approach. Did Jews not refer to any one who was a non-Jew as a heathen at one time? I don't have a problem with that attachment at the time. The Christians had the same approach and to a certain degree even today there are those who believe that nobody is going to heaven except Christians. So, there is a whole lot of misinformation around what it means to be a good Muslim, a good Christian, or a good Jew. These labels are really not relevant. In Islam, we say that only the righteous (not the *Muslims*) will see the hereafter. What is important is not what you call yourself. What is important is what you really are.

Turner: So, in terms of an evolving movement and religion, where would you say the Nation of Islam is at this moment in terms of its relationship, lets say with, the larger society? Part of this question is about somehow, there was a time when, in fact there was kind of an attitude toward the Nation of Islam that it was a hostile group and there was a negative attitude toward it.. That attitude may be dissipating or maybe you don't see it that way? Right now would you say that the attitude toward Islam and the attitude of the Nation of Islam toward the larger society has somehow been improved or repaired - is a working alliance more possible now?

Min. Don Muhammad: Everything you say is true. The only disagreement I have is that there is a whole lot more understanding of

the Nation of Islam. When people know why you do something and they come to understand it, they have a healthier appreciation for you than when they don't understand you and what you stand for. Mr. [Elijah] Muhammad [leader of the Nation of Islam] said to me one time, "Son, I got pipelines all the way to the White House. You do the same." We have to. In the Nation of Islam, we have to make sure that people understand why we do something. We don't subscribe, as I said before, to separatism. We subscribe to independence. Some people will misunderstand us when we say we think that young boys and girls

We don't subscribe to separatism, we subscribe to independence...

ought to go to school separately. Is that separatism? No, it isn't.

Right now this country is

lagging between positions 47 and 48 in the world in some of the main subjects like English and Math. A survey of 24 developed countries done recently placed America in position 18 in education. Evidently somebody doesn't know what he is doing regarding the education of our children. Despite being a super power with immense military might, we are unable to educate our children. Our families too are gone. Sixty nine percent of all the children in Black America are in a home with only the mother. What happened to the family? According to surveys, 70% of all black men in America will be convicted of a felony before they die - that's what has happened to the family. And I will tell you one thing - that is not a statistic that is applicable to the members of the Nation of Islam. I was talking to the commissioner of the Department of Correction a few years ago and he said to me, "look Minister Don, why should I help you? There are not many of you [Muslims] in prison." I told him that that was the very reason that he should help. He pulled out his stats and told me that there was not a large Muslim population in prison - in fact, 52% of all the people in prisons were Catholics. Muslims represented only 1% of the prison population. Well, I argued, with the support of his assistant who was listening to our exchange, that Muslims don't end up in prison because we nip the trouble in the bud - that's why

we need resources, for prevention. I say all of that to say this: the Nation of Islam has had more impact on African-Americans than the sum total of all the black organizations and I don't say that arrogantly, I say it very humbly. Once a major preacher in this city [Boston] told me that the Nation of Islam has done the work of the sum total of all the churches in the entire city. We have affected the overall thinking of black people, whether it's in religion, economics, or health. You can walk into churches today and hear the spirit of Elijah Muhammad coming from the pulpit.

Turner: So, the evolution taking place is one in which you feel like the Nation of Islam has had a broad impact on social thinking?

Min. Don Muhammad: Oh, Absolutely!

Turner: People in the broader society are now looking at the Nation of Islam with very different eyes and saying that the Nation is impacting positively?

Min. Don Muhammad: Absolutely. The power brokers, the mind managers and the thinkers of this country - they all know that to be true. And it became obvious to everyone, when Minister [Louis] Farrakhan [leader of Nation of Islam] called for the Million Man March to Washington. I remember when I first heard the idea from him. We were talking about the issue of crime. He said to me, "Don, I think I am going to call a million men to Washington." I looked at him disbelievingly and said "you are going to call a million men to Washington?" To be honest, I didn't think he could do it. I did not believe he could do it until I went on a phase of the tour with him. We had 35,000 men come out in Houston, TX. It was then that it occurred to me that it was possible to bring out a million men to Washington D.C. In fact, we surpassed that figure. And even more importantly, many of the men that had gone to Washington had the support of many others back home. There were at least 500 students from Howard University who were polling the crowd. One of their main questions was "How many people back home

supported you?" The average number was 10. This means that for every person that attended physically, there were 10 others who supported the march in spirit but were not physically present. Bill Alberts wrote³ on the Million Man March and the great impact it had. Louis Farrakhan's influence is tremendous. And the impact is not just with African-Americans; it's with many other groups as well. Although our job is primarily with Black people, we help anybody who comes to us. We help folks in housing projects in South Boston, and even though this is never reported in the press, many white people do call us for help. I mean if I were to tell you how many, we would be talking for the next hour on just numbers alone! Suffice it to say that our job is to try and reflect on those things that we believe in, and try to help improve the lives of Black people and humanity in general.

Turner: What about the comparison of the Nation of Islam here and Islam internationally? What is the nature of the relationship between the Nation of Islam and the rest of the Islamic world, can you say something about the similarities?

Min. Don Muhammad: Well...

Turner: Or differences?

Min. Don Muhammad: We have locations in many cities of Europe. There are an awful lot of Muslims in London, for example. The Nation of Islam has a special ingredient in that; it deals directly with the African-Americans. But, there are many people who subscribe to the Muslim faith and they don't think that we are Muslims. Well, we believe Islam is supposed to evolve every 100 years. We have had some conversations with other Muslims and we have disagreed on some things. Just like

³ Alberts, W. E. "Mainstream Media as a Guardian of Racial Hierarchy: A Study of the Threat Posed by Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Million Man March," *Trotter Institute Research Report No. 35, June 1997.*

people rode camels at the time of Prophet Muhammad but now they ride in cars, Islam must evolve.

I think there are a lot of injustices going on in the Muslim world. The reason for this is that the religion has been allowed to stagnate.

Prophet Muhammad said women are twin halves of men. To me, that sounds like equality...

There are injustices all over the Middle East, even in Mecca. Think about the Arab who goes out and spends millions of dollars on himself and his family while the masses are not educated. That's not Islamic. Prophet Muhammad never taught that. The mistreatment of women too, that happens all too often and widely in the Muslim world. Prophet Muhammad admired women. Prophet Muhammad said women are twin halves of men. To me, that sounds like equality. There are places in the Arab world where a woman cannot drive a car! That is outrageous! And the Nigerian situation for example - sentencing a woman to death because of adultery!⁴ I mean, why not stone the man to death too? Minister Farrahkan wrote two letters about that case. He wrote a letter to the Judiciary Branch handling the case and another to the religious leaders. And I think the letters had an impact on saving her life.

Turner: As precursors of social change, religious institutions fall along a continuum ranging from a spiritual orientation in which leaders seek to change the world by changing their followers spiritually to social orientations where the leaders believe in active social engagement. Is it possible to place the Nation of Islam on this continuum or does the orientation depend on the individual.

Min. Don Muhammad: Yes, it is certainly possible to place the Nation of Islam on the social end of the continuum. Unfortunately, in this

⁴ Amina Lawal, a 32-year old Nigerian woman was sentenced to death [by stoning] by an Islamic court in Nigeria for adultery. She has since been acquitted by the appeals court.

society, religious leaders tend to take directions from political leaders. This, in my estimation, is a serious problem. If religious leaders do not establish their place, lay out their way according to the scriptures, then political leaders will continue to be the greater influence.

In the Nation of Islam, we believe that you repair society by

We need to give Black children something that can make them proud of being Black...

constantly finding and strengthening the weakest link. But this cannot, and should not be left to

individuals. It should be done collectively by the whole religious fraternity. There are so many divisions within religious groups that it becomes almost impossible to act collectively. Christianity has over a thousand denominations, Islam about six. But all religions or denominations teach the same basic thing. Helping out and active engagement in society is just as important as praying. The Bible says, "Let your light so shine upon men, that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven." You can only do this by reaching people wherever they are. Jesus went to the highways and byways. Similarly, the Nation of Islam broadcasts radio and TV programs to hundreds of thousands of people. That is our message - to empower people wherever they are. And again, Jesus said, "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless" - that was political, those were political things. You cannot run away from it as a religious leader. This is what we try to do. We do not believe that our mission is just to conduct funeral services and give comfort to someone in his/her hour of need. We believe it is our religious obligation to care and be involved all the time.

Turner: Another important role of civil society is to socialize members politically. Many members take their political cues from their religious leaders. Again, in the light of the "War on Terrorism" which is widely seen as a war on Muslims by many both in the Arab world and Muslims in this country, do you think it is possible to teach young Muslims to be both good Muslims and good Americans?

Min. Don Muhammad: It is certainly possible. But you have to serve God first. If you serve God truly in the way that He should be served, then you will automatically be a good citizen. Unfortunately, there is a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding among different religions, with each religion claiming that their God is better than that of the next religion. Consider the misinformation about the origins of Jesus for example: Jesus *was* a Black man. Yet the only image we have of him is White. How are Black children supposed to feel about that? We need to give Black children something that can make them proud of being Black, and this goes back, as I said earlier, to the type of education that we offer them. The issue of racism is so pervasive in this society that it is a real problem. And in the current situation, statements like those of Jerry Falwell⁵ do not help. As Muslims and Blacks, we have to fight against the notion that we are a threat. A lot of it stems from misunderstanding of our message. Muhammad Ali for example almost went to jail following his refusal to be drafted into the army and his subsequent conviction for draft evasion. One of the Supreme Court justices in Ali's case read Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman in America*⁶ and became convinced that Ali was within his rights to refuse to be drafted. Minister [Louis] Farrakhan is similarly misunderstood on many issues. So can one be a good American and a good Muslim? Absolutely. A

⁵ In a highly controversial interview on October 6, 2002 in CBS TV's *60 Minutes*, Christian right evangelist Rev. Jerry Falwell stated, "I think [Prophet] Muhammad was a terrorist. I read enough by both Muslims and non-Muslims to decide that he was a violent man, a man of war."

⁶ Elijah, Muhammad E. 1965. *Message to the Blackman in America*. Newport, Virginia: United Brothers Communications Systems.

good American is someone who would want to see America better, one who would like to see America improve.

Turner: So your view is that it is not at all inconsistent to be a good American and a good Muslim - that the problem is with people's perception of what Muslims stand for?

Min. Don Muhammad: Yes, there is absolutely no inconsistency. However, as I said earlier, we have to serve God first, and in this capacity, we are called to be on the frontline. If we, as religious leaders or religious people feel that as a nation we are not aligning ourselves with the prophets, then there has to be criticism. And it doesn't have to be Muslims alone. All religions have the same basic tenets. They all preach love and social justice. If we find that we are not treating the homeless properly in this country, it is our charge to say something about it. The shoddy treatment of Black soldiers who fought in the Second World War, for example, under difficult segregated conditions is a good example of why we must challenge the system. America's enemies are not outside this country. America's enemies are racism and all its resulting ills.

Turner: The Clinton administration signed into law "Charitable Choice" which allows religious organizations to apply for government funds to run welfare-to-work programs. President Bush has gone further by pushing for and signing a faith-based initiative that would allow access to federal funds by religious organizations for various social programs. What is your view on the faith-based initiative - would it enhance religious groups' social works or compromise their independence? Would your mosque apply for such funds?

Min. Don Muhammad: Whether it's religious groups or other community groups, it is important that they do not compromise their independence. A friend of mine says that Faith Based Initiative means FBI! And he is a Christian. But seriously, if the institutions could

maintain their integrity, there is always a need for social programs, and in that respect the initiative is a good idea. However, I have to be very honest because we are talking about this specific issue here. The aggressiveness with which the Bush administration has pushed this

In this country there is little understanding of what Islam stands for...

initiative makes me want to be cautious about the administration's intentions. I just do not think that there are

genuinely good intentions of this initiative. I think there is a price to be paid for something like this. And I would never, as an individual, apply for funds under the initiative unless I had some assurance that the administration is genuine. There is a lot of hypocrisy in this administration. And sure, we need money for pastoral care, education and all types of social programs. But does the administration act in a way that suggests that it is committed to improving the lives of Black people? I would say no. Look at all the Black people languishing in prison. It takes less money to send someone to Harvard or Yale than to keep him in jail. Yet we have all these people in jail instead of giving them a quality education to ensure that they become useful members of the society. There is very little money spent to give our citizens education - even less if you're a Black child. Most prisoners in Massachusetts do not have high school diplomas. The average Black child graduating from high school reads at the seventh grade level. We had better education in the 1940s than we do now. This does not suggest commitment to the improvement of people's lives by the government. I am not saying that we would *never* apply for funds. What I am saying is that as things stand now, I'm skeptical about the whole system. Another thing - the issues that we like to deal with are community related. You can make a lot of impact without access to large sums of money. All you need is an idea, full commitment, and a lot of hard work. This is particularly more so in Boston than larger cities such as Chicago or New York. Boston is such a small city you could almost walk around it. If

you make a connection with the people, you can make a lot of impact with very little money. We have managed to do a lot around the issues of crime, and health particularly prostate cancer - simply by immersing ourselves in the community. If we had easier access to youngsters in high school for example, we would be able to avert crime before it starts. It is ideas like these, if given support, that make an impact - money does not necessarily solve anything.

Turner: With the "War on Terrorism," a lot of scrutiny and restrictions have been placed on the international movement of people and funds. How is this likely to impact your collaboration with the rest of the Muslim world both in terms of material and spiritual resources?

Min. Don Muhammad: Yes, there are some restrictions. There are some in the Arab world, a person like [Libyan leader Muammar] Gaddafi who had wanted to support Nation of Islam in advancing what we believe in, but because of politics, this has not been possible. And there are others too. But the leadership in this country has been greatly misinformed about what we stand for and politics has interfered with collaborations with the rest of the Muslim world. With the war on terrorism, things have become even worse. Because of a small minority of people in that particular area in the Middle East, now all Muslims all over the world are under scrutiny. In this country, there are a lot of attacks on Muslims, particularly the "orthodox" Muslims - mostly foreigners. There is a lot of misinformation and misinterpretation of Islam and Muslims. Symbolism is what people ascribe to being a Muslim, but we are much more than that - just like if you're Catholic, the measure of your faith is whether someone can look at your life and your actions and identify you as a Christian, so it is with Muslims. In this country there is unfortunately little understanding of what Islam stands for and this has caused many problems. Looking at the issue from the other side, I do understand the concern of the government and the need to ensure that an attack such as the one that happened on 9/11 does not occur again. However,

measures taken must be done in such a way that the greater society is not aggravated.

Turner: Religious organizations are recognized as important players in civil society because of their large loyal membership, and their capacity to organize. In this respect churches have over the years engaged in protest politics, electoral politics, consciousness-raising etc. How important is this role for Nation of Islam compared to Black churches in the United States?

Min. Don Muhammad: There is more than one answer to that question. Religious organizations obviously have immense power. Black churches have very large congregations, and for the most part, our political leaders have been religious leaders. But the membership of the church is scattered. There is a falling away from the old spirit of the church where people stayed together and worked things out together as people with a common past and future. Now we have different religious leaders being jealous of each other and acting as divisive instead of binding forces. And this is evident even with other Black leaders and people with social standing. Think about Colin Powel for example - a very conservative Black leader with very divisive views. Black professors and other professionals too no longer go back to their communities. There are just too many divisions. You cannot have a community divided into sororities and fraternities and expect it to make any inroads into the kinds of problems that the Black community is facing today. We have children raising children, Black men with as many as six children with as many women, 69% of female-headed households, many convicted felons. The conditions that lead to this messy situation have to change - and they cannot change without the community coming together and acting as one. With the help of the media, all too often we want to look selectively at the sins or shortcomings of others - we'll say Jessie Jackson had a child out of wedlock, yet pay little attention to the same situation involving Bill Cosby; Al Sharpton has a big mouth - what has that got to do with anything? Both these men love Black people, they are men who

want to see this community advance, that is what we should be concerned about. When Minister Louis Farrakhan called the million-man march, Black people from all walks of life went to Washington. He told the men to go back to their communities and join an organization - join a church, any place where you can make yourself part of the solution to the community's problems. Where you are housed is not of importance; it is what you do while there. In the Nation of Islam we involve ourselves in every aspect of the community and interact with individuals at every juncture of their lives. We go to the schools before they get into trouble, and we go to prison after they get into trouble. Our goal is to try and help individuals to become productive people in their society, for their own good and that of the community; our goal is not to make them join the Nation of Islam. Anyone who understands what our work is about appreciates what we do. I have had very good relations with Boston mayors including Mayor [Thomas] Menino because they have recognized the work we have been doing in this city.

Turner: Thank you...

Currently the interim director of the Trotter Institute, Castellano Turner is professor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston. After serving on the faculty at UMass Amherst, 1968-89, he came to the Boston campus to be the director of the new doctoral program in Clinic Psychology, 1989-96.

Minister Don Muhammad: Biography

Minister Don Muhammad, a native of Fayetteville, West Virginia, originally traveled to Boston as a teenager in the early 1950s during summer school vacations to visit his older brother and to savor the Boston experience. Upon graduation he made Boston his permanent residence. Always recognized as an industrious and studious individual then Don Straughter, who had played semi-pro baseball and had an undying love for football, became an entrepreneur, establishing his own cleaners business at a very young age.

Building a business and family would have seemed to be a handful for this young man and his wife, Sister Shirley; now married for 48 years. Though in 1957, he heard the word of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad delivered by a young minister named Louis X, and later had the opportunity to hear directly from The Honorable Elijah Muhammad during one of his visits to Boston, Bro. Don accepted Islam as taught by The Honorable Elijah Muhammad and committed himself to the elevation of self, family, and community. Bro. Don worked closely with the young Minister Louis X, now known as The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan; Minister Malcom X; and was blessed to have received direct personal instructions from The Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

Bro. Don assisted in the establishment of the then Muhammad's Temple No. 11, which was located on Intervale Street in Dorchester. With steadfast commitment and perseverance he served in many capacities, which included but were not limited to salesman, truck driver, teacher, administrator, lieutenant, captain, minister, and all-round taskmaster. He had the uncanny ability to balance his duties with his other obligations of building his business and family, which includes five children and ten grandchildren.

In 1980, Bro. Don was commissioned by The Honorable

Minister Farrakhan to aid in the rebuilding of the Nation of Islam in Boston. Minister Don quickly went about the work of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad in going after those that were "lost in the wilderness." There was the establishment of a new mosque, prison programs, community outreach, the developing of ecumenical relations, coalition building, economic development and so much more. In 1985, the Honorable Minister Farrakhan appointed Minister Don the Eastern Regional Representative of the Nation of Islam. In 1998, Minister Don was assigned to the post of National Consultant to the seven Regional Representatives; a position he continues to hold.

Under Minister Don's watch Muhammad's Mosque No. 11 has become one of the most progressive mosques in the Nation of Islam and a beacon of light in the Greater Boston area. Minister Don is always found continuously ministering to individuals of various faiths or denominations, always willing to answer a call for assistance or a cry for help. Minister Don has received numerous proclamations, citations, awards and recognitions. He is sought after for general counsel, workshops and panel discussions dealing with various topics of concern within and outside of the community. Minister Don explains that the greatest honor he could ever receive is being seen as a brother to others and knowing he has assisted through the Grace of Almighty Allah in the upward and onward advancement of the human race in general and the Black nation in particular.
