

3. Reflect on the apparent reality that the African American speakers in the video seem to feel they must show how Islam is connected to and very much like Christianity. This approach may well be as much for the benefit of other African Americans as for Christians generally. How do you respond to this aspect of the DVD? Brainstorm some ways you and your congregation might learn more about dynamics in African American religious life and then contribute to enhanced mutual understanding and collaboration on social issues.

Learn more

ELCA resources

ELCA Racial Justice Ministries: www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Ministry/Multicultural-Ministries/Racial-Justice-Ministries.aspx

ELCA African Descent ministries: www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Ministry/Multicultural-Ministries/Ethnic-Ministries/African-Descent.aspx

Other resources

"African American Islam Reformed: 'Black Muslims' and the Universal Ummah"

<http://pluralism.org/resources/tradition/essays/islam8.php>

"Islam in America: From African Slaves to Malcolm X"

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/islam.htm>

"Slavery in Islam," BBC 2012

www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery_1.shtml

Malcolm X and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
Lincoln, C. Eric. *Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in the *Discover Islam* videos are those of the producers and may not necessarily reflect official positions of the Evangelical Lutheran in America or A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.



Discover Islam DVD Series Study Guide



#4 African Americans and Islam

Summary of DVD content

The DVD opens with an African American Muslim sharing the breaking of the Ramadan fast in his home. He explains that for him "Islam" means peace and giving oneself to God. He and others talk about what Islam and Christianity have in common. Islam embraces all races and nationalities; and Muslims' relationships with Africans date back to the prophet Muhammad, when Muslims were sent to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) for asylum with the cooperation of the Christian king there. Of particular interest is the African slave Bilal, who was tortured by his master for his Islamic beliefs and later freed by companions of Muhammad. Bilal eventually became the first person to chant the official call to prayer five times each day in Medina, a tradition that continues today.

From Medina, the Muslim community prospered and spread to much of the African continent. Imam Jowhari Abdelmalik, chaplain at Howard University, explains that Mansa, the Muslim king of Mali, sent ships to the New World many years before Columbus. African Muslims were brought forcibly to the Americas during the centuries of slave trade from West Africa. Some of those enslaved were Islamic scholars, and a few were freed and returned to Africa. Gradually the African slaves and their descendants were forced to adopt the slave-owners' Christian religion, but in the early 1890s some began researching their African and Muslim roots. Marcus Garvey and the Moorish Science Temple movements evolved into Elijah Poole Muhammad's Nation of Islam, which combined Islamic symbols with Black Nationalism.

Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little in 1925) became a follower of the Nation of Islam while in prison and become a leading hero and speaker for African American empowerment. In 1964 he embraced orthodox Islam, founded a mosque in New York, and made the pilgrimage to Mecca. He began preaching a universal Islam of all races, but was assassinated in 1965. W. D. Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad, rejected the exclusivist ideology of the Nation of Islam and for many years served as spiritual leader for African American Sunni Muslims. Over time

Muslim immigrants came to the United States from all continents, building an American Muslim community of all races.

Elaboration on key topics

1. According to the DVD, **30 to 70 percent of African slaves in the New World had been Muslims in Africa.** Various academic sources report a range of 10 to 20 percent; see for example, "Islam in America: From African Slaves to Malcolm X," listed below, which cites 10 percent. However, even those slaves who had practiced Christianity or African traditional religion may have been exposed to Islam before being brought to the Americas.

2. For most Americans the word "slavery" represents the centuries of involuntary African slave experience in the United States. But the practice of slavery is probably as old as human civilization. Recall, for example, that the biblical patriarch Abraham moves to Canaan accompanied by his slaves and is commanded by God to circumcise them as well as his own sons. **Until recent modern history the three monotheist traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have taken slavery as a basic fact of life.** However, it is the case that the Qur'an and the prophet Muhammad counseled humane treatment of slaves, and Islam assigned a portion of "zakah" (alms) to free the slaves long before slavery was abolished.

3. Speakers in the video might be understood to place **the arrival of non-African Muslim immigrants** in the United States after the development of an African American Muslim community. While it is true that there was an influx of new Muslim immigrants to the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, many Muslims, especially from the Middle East, came to the U. S. in earlier waves in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The earliest documented mosque and Muslim cemetery was 1929 in Ross, North Dakota. In addition, there are many recent immigrants from such African countries as Somalia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, etc. Today the top countries of origin for Muslim immigrants to the U.S. are Pakistan and Bangladesh.

[The Future of the Global Muslim Population; Projections for 2010-2030; 27 Jan 2011
www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx]

4. Although the DVD refers briefly to Elijah Poole Muhammad and the founding of the Nation of Islam, it should be noted that the Nation is still active today under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan in its home base of Chicago. **Note that the term "Black Muslims" has been used to refer both to members of the Nation of Islam and to African Americans who practice orthodox Islam.** Estimates of membership in the Nation vary from 20,000 to 50,000, and the organization may be best known to the general public as the sponsor of the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, DC, to reinforce African American solidarity and family values. On the other hand, African Americans who follow "orthodox" (i.e., Sunni) Islam may

number as many as one to two million, and may comprise 20 percent of all Muslims in the U.S.[See Pew Forum reports at www.pewforum.org/Muslim/Muslim-Americans-Middle-Class-and-Mostly-Mainstream.aspx and <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>; and <http://pluralism.org/resources/tradition/essays/islam8.php>.]

5. **The first U.S. Muslim military chaplain was an African American** who began serving as a captain in the Army in 1994. By 2008 the U.S. Department of Defense reported that the 11 Muslim chaplains represented an average of one per 500 Muslim service personnel. Some African Americans have accepted Islam in prison, others while serving in the military, especially during recent deployments to the Middle East. Providing mainstream Muslim chaplains in both prison and the military remains an important societal priority, in part to provide an orthodox alternative to radicalization by militant groups. Moreover, African American Muslim ministries in prisons and among urban youth have made significant contributions toward combating drug addiction and crime. **This heightened Muslim presence in American cities** has led to constructive collaboration and occasionally to competitive friction with African American Christian ministries.

6. **Famous African American Muslims** include Malcolm X, featured in the video, and boxer Muhammad Ali (born Cassius Clay). Other notable Muslim athletes are Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Lew Alcindor, before converting), who played for the Los Angeles Lakers in the 1980s, and Shaquille O'Neal who played for the Boston Celtics. Less well known is Dr. Amina Wadud, a scholar of the Qur'an and an Islamic feminist. Striving to expand Muslim women's leadership roles, in 2005 Dr. Wadud led mixed-gender Friday prayers in an Anglican church building in New York City, evoking both praise and condemnation. (Read more at <http://pluralism.org/reports/view/111>.) Congressman Keith Ellison is the nation's first Muslim member of Congress, representing Minnesota's Fifth District in the House and co-chairing the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

Discussion questions

1. Summarize what you learned from the DVD about the history of Islam in the African American community. List some remaining questions and consult the online resources below.

2. Share impressions and experiences you have of both African American Muslims and the Nation of Islam, a continuation of the Black Power movement initiated by Elijah Muhammad. Compare the website of the Nation of Islam (www.noi.org/) with that of the Islamic Society of North America (www.isna.net/) to discover possible differences between a Black Nationalist movement and an umbrella organization of mainstream North American Muslims.