

## **The Bridge to Islam: W. D. Mohammed and the *Original* Nation of Islam**

W. D. Mohammed changed the beliefs of the *original* NOI in both political and religious ways. Politically he restored Malcolm X's legacy as a respected and prominent member of the NOI, he ended the desire for a separate state, and he honored the US Constitution. Religiously he did away with the doctrine of black racial superiority and defined Fard as a wise man and not Allah, aligning the beliefs of the NOI with more traditional orthodox Muslim beliefs.

As the NOI became more mainstream in its beliefs and practices, and as traditional Islam became more prevalent in American life, the dynamics of Islam in prison began to change.

About 2 million people are currently incarcerated today in America's prisons; this is the most per capita of any nation in the world

Nearly half of the prison population, around one million, is African American. And about one third of these people, 350,000, consider themselves affiliated with Islam. It is thought that about 30,000-40,000 inmates will become Muslim in the next year.

For reasons of convenience, I will use the terms "convert" and "conversion" when talking about inmates that, having a previous faith tradition or no religious persuasion at all, embrace Islam while they're in prison. Many will not consider their path towards Islam and their eventual taking of Shahada as "conversion" in the typical way it is used, with its sometimes negative connotations, but for reason of convenience I will use it in my presentation.

Every inmate's story about how they came to convert to Islam will be different, but through my research I have found there to be some scenarios that occur with some frequency. In prison an inmate wakes up, eats, may have some time for recreation or work, and then sits in his cell—this environment lends itself towards self-reflection and contemplation, which is ideal for someone who is looking for something to belief in. But because of our system's moving away from rehabilitation towards a system more of punishment, life in prison is not so dissimilar from life on the street that many of those in prison come from.

Violence is a very real part of an inmate's life, and groups very similar to gangs begin to form for protection. Many people I've read about and heard from first become interested in Islam when they see their fellow inmates studying the Qur'an, making their prayers, or seeing the sense of brotherhood and community that the Muslim groups in prison find. Now this is not to say that Islam in prison is a gang like all the rest—it's far from it—but many people are first attracted to it because it not only offers the protection a group affords, but it also allows for a sense of community and a group effort and struggle to become better people through self-discipline and study. In fact, I've heard all across the board that Muslims are some of the most peaceful and respected groups in prison.

After studying, prayer, and making Shahada, a Muslim in prison is connected with a culture that is very different from the Muslim prison culture we have seen in the early movement. The NOI, having aligned their beliefs with Sunni Islam, has opened themselves—and therefore the prisons—to mainstream Islam, whereas before the prisons were primarily a monopoly of the early, heretical, NOI.

This allows for orthodox Imams from outside Muslim communities to come in and:

- Lead prayer
- Offer counseling
- Maintain participation record and reports
- Visit inmates in the infirmary and the behavioral adjustment unit
- Distribute literature and tracts
- Attend religious conferences per request of the institution

Getting a chaplain is not always easy. In the state of WI there is only one official Muslim prison chaplain servicing the entire state. And of the more than 200 chaplains in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, less than a dozen of them are Muslims.

The lack of official chaplains is met by volunteers from local Islamic centers that volunteer and fulfill the same roles of professional and paid chaplains.

As Islam grows in American prisons, support is also growing from the system itself. Many prisons are now serving a pork-free alternative in the cafeterias and installing facilities near prayer space that allows for ceremonial washing.

In conclusion, the faith of Muslims in prisons—the doctrines of their belief—and their spirituality—how they practice these beliefs—has changed over the course of the Islamic prison movement. Because the Nation of Islam was the essence of the early Islamic prison movement, its change from radical to mainstream has also changed the spirit of the movement itself. It is now no longer an ideology of black supremacy, or really of skin color at all, but more of how one can be a better practicing Muslim in the context of American prisons.