Chapter 1

Introduction

This book examines a tension common within the history of religions. The tension exists between the idea, on the one hand, that a religious tradition is universally applicable to the experience of all human beings and the idea, on the other hand, that a religious tradition is applicable to the experience of one particular group of human beings. The history of African-American Islam provides an especially useful vantage point from which to view this problem, since it has been so central to both African-American religion and American Islam. More specifically, this work seeks to explore the tension between universalism and particularism by analyzing the thought of five prominent black figures, including Edward W. Blyden, Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Wallace D. Muhammad. Understanding these thinkers in their respective historical contexts, which have been characterized by the struggle for black liberation and the continuous reconstruction of black identity, I explain when and how they came to understand Islam as a tradition for all human beings, a tradition for only black human beings, and sometimes, a combination of both.

This introductory chapter outlines the theoretical assumptions that underlie my argument and specifies how this study offers new ways of viewing African-American Islam. The first section argues against the static treatment of African-American Islam as “religion” in favor of a more dynamic definition of Islam as “tradition.” Then, in order to develop a broader theoretical framework and show the relevance of this work to Islamic studies more generally, the second section examines the tension between universalism and particularism with reference to classical Islamic
history. Finally, I discuss more fully the problem of studying universalism and particularism in African-American Islam and provide an outline of my argument.

DEFINING ISLAM AS TRADITION

In order to examine African-American Islam in new ways, one must note the lasting influence of C. Eric Lincoln’s classic *The Black Muslims in America* on all scholarship related to Islam in black America. While more recent studies of African-American Islam add greatly to our knowledge of specific movements, historical events, and new sources for the study of African-American Islam, none has yet replaced Lincoln’s work as the authoritative source on either the Nation of Islam or African-American Islam more generally.¹ Now in its third edition, the book still captures the most scholarly attention, despite the fact that it discounts the “religiosity” of the movement.² Viewing the Nation of Islam from a functionalist perspective, Lincoln argued that religious elements of the movement, including its Islamic “mystique,” were incidental to its success. In his view, “religious values” had a “secondary importance.” In fact, Lincoln said, “[t]hey are not part of the movement’s basic appeal, except to the extent that they foster and strengthen the sense of group solidarity.” Focusing on the various sociological factors that “pushed” disenfranchised blacks toward the Nation of Islam, Lincoln argued that the movement’s success stemmed primarily from its ability to create an exclusionary sense of community among its members. For Lincoln, this was the essence of black nationalism.³

Lincoln’s argument is especially important for this study since he seemed to distinguish “politics” from “religion” as if the two were diametrically opposed, as if politics were this-worldly and religion were other-worldly. Lincoln’s definition of religion seemed to assume that “true” religion dealt mainly with issues of theology, salvation, and meaning, a definition seemingly shaped by Lincoln’s own Protestant Christianity. His use of religion and politics as analytical categories ultimately obscured more than they revealed since he underemphasized the legitimately religious aspects of the movement’s nationalistic activity. In reality, of course, the line between religion and politics was and is often more blurry than he indicated. Indeed, politics and religion were wedded in fascinating and methodical ways within the movement.

Lincoln, however, was not the only scholar of his generation to define religion in this way. Clifford Geertz’s famous definition of religion was, in
a similar fashion, highly reflective of “Enlightenment Christianity.” As Talal Asad has shown, however, “religion” has not always been equated with belief or conscience as it has been in the modern age. In the European Middle Ages, for instance, religion often translated into intellectual and social discipline in submission to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The more contemporary definition emerged in early modern Europe. By the time of Immanuel Kant, religion came to be defined as a kind of belief that could withstand the criticism of reason and nature. “From being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge,” Asad argued, “religion has come to be abstracted and universalized.” Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion reflected these modern biases, according to Asad, since Geertz viewed religion as a belief system designed ultimately to confront questions of meaning. As Abdulkader Tayob summarizes, Geertz’s approach meant that “[r]eligion as political practice or religion as social action could not constitute its core, essential characteristic. Any religious act that had a direct political intention was regarded as the political abuse of religion.” While this definition of “religion” as quest for meaning was not unreasonable in a modern context, said Asad, it should not be assumed to be true for all times and places.

Asad’s analysis also raises an important question about whether the word “religion” in its modern usage adequately captures what the word “Islam” has meant to various Muslims throughout the past fourteen hundred years, including African-American Muslims. Etymologically speaking, islam most strictly refers to a spiritual state coterminous with the submission of all creatures to God. At the same time, Muslims have also referred to Islam as “religion” or din, a word that encompasses the obligations imposed by God upon human beings. But the word “Islam” has been used even more broadly to refer to social, political, and economic institutions, groups, and ideas—see, for example, “Islamic banking” or “the Islamic jihad.” Modern Muslims, in particular, often speak of Islam not only as a personal creed or internal state of submission, but also as a social and political body of peoples, countries, and states. Some, like the Muslim Brothers of Egypt, have made famous the assertion that there is no separation in Islam between din and dawla, or religion and state. Islam, they argue, is both. Despite the fact that this definition ignores the historical split between din and dawla in Islamic history, it can be regarded as valid as any other definition of Islam.

Given the theoretical problems and ambiguity involved in analyzing Islam as a “religion,” I prefer to explore its history as that of a “tradition.”
Admittedly, this change poses equally daunting methodological problems. But in making the semantic shift, I hope to emphasize the changing nature of Islamic tradition, its dynamism, and the provisional character of its elements. In so doing, I borrow in part from Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of a *living* tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition." For my purposes, tradition is not an historical product so much as an historical process in which human beings, interacting with each other in discrete social contexts, invent, embrace, and inherit *something* that they care about and argue over, whether explicitly or not. I say "something" because what it is that people create and pass along is never completely clear. While a tradition may seem to contain distinguishing characteristics and constitutive elements, including certain questions, ideas, rituals, and symbols, these "things" are always subject to alteration, reinterpretation, and abandonment.

This approach, however, begs the question of whether there are any limits or boundaries that define a tradition and set it apart from another—a question that continues to haunt Islamic studies or "Orientalism," which was founded partly on the premise that certain essential elements of the tradition are to be found in Islam's elite textual discourses. In his well-known essay about unity and variety in Islam, for example, Gustave von Grunebaum depicted Islam as a "universal culture whose essential tenets and values are, consciously at least, not to be compromised." Von Grunebaum was a civilizationist who, according to Edmund Burke III, privileged the "high cultural artifacts of the major literary traditions." By examining them, he sought to discover the "timeless essences" of Islam that predetermined its fate from the "moment of [their] inception." This approach often meant that once the Islamicist had been trained in these textual traditions, he or she could then track the spread of Islam by studying the degree to which "local" cultures adopted, corrupted, and/or rejected these "essential" elements. The central plot of Islamic studies thus became the clash between "Muslim civilization" and local cultures, between the universal and the provincial. While this type of Orientalism raised a number of problematic empirical issues, it also crossed an ethical line, since it placed scholars in the position of determining the essential, and by implication, the true Islam.

If one's goal is to avoid such essentialism in Islamic studies, there is not and cannot be any *one* normative definition of Islamic tradition or its boundaries and limits. But scholars can identify competing definitions of Islam by examining the historical interpretations of Muslims themselves.
As mentioned above, the most visible tradition in the Euro-American study of Islam, which is sometimes mistakenly seen to represent all of “Islam,” has been the discourse in which the Qur’an and the Sunna are treasured as paramount sources of divine authority. For Islamicist Marshall Hodgson, the centrality of these texts and Muslim responses to them can be seen as the result of a threefold process of tradition-making. First, said Hodgson, came Muhammad’s creative action, or “an occasion of fresh awareness of something ultimate in the relation between ourselves and the cosmos.” Next, he argued, there was a group commitment to this creative action, so that Islam came to “be defined as commitment to the venture to which Muhammad’s vision was leading: which meant, concretely, allegiance to Muhammad and his Book and then to the continuing community of Muhammad.” Finally, there was “cumulative interaction, which eventually produces dispute.” In fact, he said, “within the dialogue launched by the advent of Islam, almost from the start there came to be conflicting sets of presuppositions about what Islam should involve.” These disputes, however, did not make impossible the unity of Muslims, which continued to be guaranteed by their commitment to “an initial point of departure.” This commonality, according to Hodgson, led to the “integrity of dialogue that can provide an intelligible framework for the historical study” of Islam.\textsuperscript{10} The history of Islam, then, is in part that of one “discursive tradition” that Muslims have constantly redefined and contested over time and in space through an “interaction with sacred texts and with the history of that interaction.”\textsuperscript{11} This definition of one, if not the most salient Islamic tradition also takes into account the historical reality that Muslims have supported competing and contrasting approaches to the most basic issues of authority and textual interpretation from the very beginning of their history in seventh-century Arabia.

Moreover, this definition of Islamic tradition does not establish any common norms, values, or beliefs, other than the centrality of the Qur’an and the Sunna—which is not to say that other commonalities have not existed in Islamic history. But it does suggest that any tradition which is truly universal, as the Qur’an nearly is to all self-identifying Muslims, is bound, in Ernesto Laclau’s words, to have no “necessary body and no necessary content; different groups, instead, compete among themselves to temporarily give their particularisms a function of universal representation.” In many cases, states Laclau, one group may attempt to exclude or subordinate another group by positioning itself as the only legitimate spokesperson for the “universal.” Put another way, Laclau asserts that “[t]he universal . . . does not have a concrete content of its own (which

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would close it in itself) but is the always receding horizon resulting from the expansion of an indefinite chain of equivalent demands.” These demands are the result of competition among people who attempt to define what the universal element of culture (here sacred texts) means in a given historical context; or as Laclau puts it, “[s]ociety generates a whole vocabulary of empty signifiers whose temporary signifieds are the result of political competition.”

The essential point is that any tradition, whether religious or not, is fashioned by human beings, who operate in historical time. “What people of faith share,” Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued, “is not necessarily common definitions of what their religion means, but a common history.” Hence, no person should be understood simply as a product of his or her tradition, but rather as a participant in that tradition. Faith is not “generated and sustained and shaped” by a religious tradition, according to Smith; rather, a person’s faith is the result of his or her participation in “one historical phase” of an ongoing process. Moreover, these processes cannot be “reified” or “precisely delimited.” To take this reasoning to its logical conclusion, I would argue that the student of Islam should not even insist on using a person’s identification with the Qur’an as a kind of minimal definition of what it means to be a Muslim. Instead, wherever and whenever a person calls himself or herself Muslim, scholars should include this person’s voice in their understanding of what constitutes Islam. The mere fact that one has labeled oneself a Muslim indicates some sort of participation, however slight, in the process of Islamic history. That participation, in my view, is worthy of both scholarly attention, and in Hodgson’s words, “human respect and recognition.”

In fact, the study of African-American Islam has been too consumed with dismissing certain Muslims as cultists, heretics, and sectarians. All of these pejorative and unhelpful labels presume, by their comparison to “orthodox” Muslims, a normative Islam that in no time and in no place has ever existed. Rather, if we adopt W. C. Smith’s approach, it is more useful to ask how African Americans have participated in the historical process of being a Muslim. What has Islam meant to them? What exactly is their connection to Islamic traditions in the Old World? Some scholars and many African Americans themselves understand their Islamic faith as being rooted in premodern African Islamic traditions. My own approach, which differs from those who see larger continuities between African Islam and African-American Islam, proceeds from the assumption that most African Americans have had little historical connection to any form of premodern Islam. Though many African slaves were Muslims and
a number of them continued to practice Islam once in North America, African Muslim slaves never cohered into an American community of faith that passed on its traditions from one generation to the next.\textsuperscript{16} The result is that when African Americans began to convert to Islam during this century, their connection to the ongoing discursive traditions in Islamic lands, including traditional sources of Islamic knowledge, was extremely tenuous and limited.

In turn, this fact made it easy for the first English-speaking black theorists of Islam, especially Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad, to define Islam without facing the criticism of most fellow Muslims. As more and more Muslim immigrants and missionaries made an impact on American and African-American Islam, however, their systems of thought came under increased scrutiny. It was at this point that Elijah Muhammad, in particular, attempted to utilize sacred texts in supporting his own system of thought. As this occurred, a larger debate about the place of difference within Islam ensued between Muhammad and his critics. But this type of debate was nothing new to the history of Islam. Indeed, a tension between universalism and particularism was present from the very beginning of Islamic history, a subject to which I now turn.

\textbf{UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM IN CLASSICAL ISLAM}

This tension between universalism and particularism in classical Islam can be observed in disputes over the meaning of egalitarianism and hierarchy within early Islamic society. Muslims debated whether the egalitarian tones of the Qur’an were meant to challenge the social hierarchies so prevalent within Islamdom. For the Qur’an proclaimed in 49:13 that God “made you into shu‘ub (peoples) and qabil (tribes, ancestral groups) that you may know one another. The most noble among you in the sight of God is the most pious.” While most commentators interpreted this verse to support an egalitarian ideal of “individual salvation,” there was disagreement over whether “it also carried implications for social organisation in the here and now.” In fact, while some interpreters used Qur’an 49:13 to champion this-worldly egalitarianism, the majority of commentators like Al-Tabari mentioned only its other-worldly implications, leaving particularistic social hierarchies unchallenged.\textsuperscript{17}

This tension between the egalitarian and the hierarchical could be seen quite vividly in debates over the importance of tribal affiliation.
Because Islam began in the midst of strong tribal rivalries, much of the Prophet Muhammad's genius lay in trying to unite different Arab tribes under the banner of Islam, which was supratribal. Despite the Prophet's efforts, however, tribal conflict continued to characterize much of early Islamic history. Rivalries between Arab tribes often resulted in poetic forms of "boasting or depreciation," including forms of racial or ethnic prejudice. In addition to this tribalism, yet another manifestation of the tension between the egalitarian and the hierarchical was the friction between Arab and non-Arab Muslims in the nascent Muslim state. Because Islam also became "a badge of united Arabism, the code and discipline of a conquering elite," Arabs often claimed superior social status in the new Islamic order. This association of Islam with Arab culture had staying power and to a certain extent remained viable until the middle period, by which time other languages like Persian usurped the role of Arabic as the dominant language of political discourse. Throughout much of early Islamic history, including both the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, many claimed that "the Arabs were supreme among the nations." The reasons cited included the fact that the Prophet himself was an Arab; that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic; and even that Bedouin culture surpassed all others in its hospitality and eloquence.\(^{18}\)

That this arabocentrism conflicted with egalitarian views of many Muslims can be seen clearly in a story related by Louise Marlow about Bilal ibn Rabah, an Abyssinian freedman who became a companion of the Prophet and the first muadhdhin, or prayer-caller, of Islam. The story is that the caliph 'Umar invited Bilal into his presence before inviting Abu Sufyan, who was a member of the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet. When Abu Sufyan complained, an associate of the Caliph replied that "you [Quraishis] should blame yourselves, not the Commander of the Faithful. [These] people were called [to Islam], and they responded, while you, who were also invited, rejected the summons. On the Day of Resurrection, they [will be] of greater degrees and more favour." To this, Abu Sufyan answered that "[t]here is no good in a place where Bilal is [considered] noble (sharif)." The general tenor of the story is transparent: ethnic and social status theoretically counted less than individual piety in the all-important issue of access to the center of political power. In this story, however, Abu Sufyan, a member of the Prophet's own tribe, dismissed this idea as he clung to notions of Arab superiority and privilege.\(^{19}\)

One tangible political challenge to this ethnocentrism arose in the middle of the seventh century, when a group called the Kharijis protested against what they saw as the "reemergence of traditional Arab elements" in
the selection of the leader of the faithful. That person, they said, should be the Muslim believer who is most pious, regardless of his (or, in some cases, her) social status. According to Hamid Dabashi, “[t]heir famous motto that anyone, even an Abyssinian slave, could become a caliph quite emphatically attested to, among other things, their total rejection of the traditional aristocratic criterion adopted by the Muslim majority.” In justifying their arguments, Kharijis also drew on a report of the Prophet’s farewell sermon, which quoted Muhammad as saying that “God has removed from you baseless pride of the period of ignorance and its glorying in ancestors. You are all from Adam and Adam was from the dust. The Arab has no superiority to the non-Arab except by virtue of righteousness.” In fact, the Shabibiyah Kharijis took this egalitarian notion of Muslim leadership to include women in addition to men.\(^{20}\)

On the whole, however, the Kharijis stressed that the question of leadership within the Islamic community should not be colored by issues of tribal affiliation or geographic origin. Khariji egalitarianism fueled much political revolt, especially in North Africa, where Kharijism was adopted to oppose Umayyad prejudice against the local Berbers. In A.D. 869, black slaves also revolted in Iraq under the leadership of a Khariji and established a state. Ironically, they tried to enslave their former slaveholders. This phenomenon raised the question of just how deeply many of these revolts were infused with the Khariji spirit of egalitarianism. In fact, some writers argued that most African and black Muslims adopted Kharijism merely as a rallying cry, without any knowledge of Khariji fiqh, or jurisprudence. As Al-Khirrit declared, “I have become Khariji, because they stand for shura [consultation between the ruler and the ruled] among men” and not presumably for any other reason.\(^{21}\)

The radical egalitarianism of the Kharijis also had an ugly side, which was expressed in their moral absolutism. The great irony of the Kharijis is that while they insisted upon equality among believers with regard to rights of leadership, they rejected tolerance or even compassion as a virtue. Most believed that jama’a, or communal unity, must never come before din, or the obligations imposed on humans by God. In addition, most Kharijis often regarded islam and iman (faith) as one and the same, asserting that the “one who deviates from Iman, ipso facto, deviates from Islam and becomes an unbeliever.” In practice, this view led to continual war against their own leaders and much of the Muslim community. Any Khariji leader who was found out as a sinner was to be rejected immediately. From the early days of the Kharijis, then, many Kharijis “began to brand everyone infidel . . . who did not accept their point of view.”\(^{22}\)
So, while the Kharijis battled tribal and Arab particularism, they also created their own form of moral absolutism, which was yet another form of particularism. While they invested this moral particularism with the "function of universalism," which in this case was the struggle for egalitarianism, its effect seemed to be more exclusionary and less humane than the emerging Sunni (majoritarian) Islamic order. Kharijis tried to define what was universal about Islam, like the idea that any righteous man or woman could become leader of the community, but did so in a way that refused to accept any alternate means for determining who should lead the Muslim community. While attractive to several groups, Kharijism ended up being—in political terms—a relatively unsuccessful series of movements. Too much internal conflict and unrealistic expectations of human goodness made it impossible for them to have more than a modest, if important impact against the more powerful forces of the early Muslim confederacy and the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. In the meantime, some of the very ideas against which they battled, especially the arabocentrism of the political elites, continued to dominate the formation of Muslim society.

Kharijism was not, however, the only response to this phenomenon. As the Abbasid dynasty grew to incorporate much of the Persian aristocracy of Khurasan into its new state apparatus, a new movement called the *shu'ubiyya* (roughly translated, the people's movement) arose to challenge the arabocentrism so central to the classic period. In fact, the Abbasid dynasty could be seen to be a result of the alliance between Arab "colonists" and Persian aristocracy. Some of these Persian elites utilized Sasanian court literature to denigrate and mock Arabs as a way of challenging Arab dominance. But these Shu'ubiyya had very little interest in a truly egalitarian Islam, often exalting the Persian literary traditions above all else. Using sarcasm to criticize Arab traditions, some poets and men of letters also reintroduced Manicheanism as a challenge to the Qur'an itself.25

Though embracing a title for their movement that would seem to indicate an interest in egalitarianism, a belief in social hierarchy ran deep among the movement's ideologues. "[T]he Shu'ubi poets . . . are arguing, at most, for a parity of honor among the upper classes of two distinct peoples," claimed Roy Mortahedeh. While most Shu'ubi commentators argued that God viewed righteousness as the paramount criterion in establishing a human's worth, they also agreed that beneath this lay whole sets of social and political hierarchies to be viewed as "obvious" in determining one's place in worldly life. "Although the *shu'ubiyyah* has sometimes been loosely labeled an egalitarian movement . . . we have seen that
the shu‘ubiyya controversy soon reflected rival principles of social hierarchy.” Humans may be equal before God, the argument went, but they are not equal before other humans, as Ibn ʿAbbas declared: “The nobility (karam) of this world is wealth (ghina) and of the next is righteousness (taqwa).”

In this case, as with the Kharijijis, a movement that arose to challenge certain prejudices within the new Islamic order ended up taking on the form of a particularism that was both exclusionary and hierarchical. This phenomenon also occurred much later in African-American Islam, which produced similarly particularistic calls for radical segregation and exclusion. One wonders, with Ernesto Laclau above, if such a phenomenon is not simply inevitable. If, as Laclau argues, the “universal” is usually an expression of one form of particularism that temporarily becomes dominant as a result of political competition, any brand of universalism in theory may remain a dream and in political reality may become a form of totalitarianism. Such an argument can be detected in the work of many students of imperialism, like Edward Said, who associates European hegemony with forms of “universalizing” scholarship. But the prejudice of the Kharijijis and the Shu‘ubiyya depended not only on the assertion of their viewpoint as the most universal, but on other theoretical bases as well. In the case of the Kharijijis, their total lack of any moral relativism translated into an absolutism that was devoid of compassion. The Shu‘ubiyya refusal, on the other hand, to question their own notions of hierarchy meant that egalitarianism was a mere cover for their own particularistic interests.

It is, in fact, the ambiguity of the “universal” that provides various social actors with numerous strategic opportunities. For the oppressed, universalism can become a vehicle to articulate a more truly egalitarian social order. In African-American history, for example, leaders like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., appropriated the universalism of American revolutionary ideals to fight for black liberation. Their actions show the power of employing an alternate “signified” or definition of the universal in challenging oppression and exclusion. Sometimes, the source of the “new” universalism may come from the very tradition that is seen as exclusionary. The Kharijijis relied, for example, on Qur’an and Sunnah, traditions that they both shared with their enemies and simultaneously used to oppose them. Other times, the source of the “new” universalism may be a critique that is made by using a foreign tradition, as was the case with the Persian literary challenge to arabocentrism in the Shu‘ubiyyah movement.
Both of these patterns occur in the history of African-American Islamic thought, where alternate definitions of dominant universalisms (like Christianity and American revolutionary ideals) are combined with "foreign" forms of universalism (like Islam).

**UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ISLAM**

At first glance, it might be tempting to conclude that the tension between universalism and particularism in African-American Islamic thought is, by definition, a tension between *Islamic universalism* and *black particularism*. Such a formulation might posit that because Islam, by its very essence, is a universalistic creed, African-American Muslims were bound to face problems in creating any version of Islam that was both true to the "essence" of Islam and relevant to their particular experiences as African Americans. In reality, however, that formula is far too simplistic, because as has been shown in the previous sections, it utilizes an essentialist definition of Islam that ignores the historical debates among Muslims themselves regarding whether Islam is a universalistic tradition. Because Islam can signify whatever its confessors wish, it need not be identified with all of humankind as a group. In its classical period, for example, many Muslims felt it to be inseparable from Arab culture. Likewise, in more modern times, many African-American Muslims have viewed it as synonymous with being black. Hence, one can say for these Muslims that there was not any tension whatsoever between being part of a *particular* group of human beings and being Muslim; for them, it was one and the same.

However, when Islam has been embraced by Muslims as a universalistic tradition, questions about the meaning of diversity and difference have emerged with special urgency—in classical Islam as well as in African-American Islam. These questions have involved a number of different issues, including variation in ritual practice and belief as well as social justice and politics. In North America, as Haddad and Smith point out, contemporary Muslim debate often focuses on "how not to compromise the ideal of unity in Islam while still maintaining some degree of ethnic identity and cultural affiliation." Many times, this debate becomes one over the question of what exactly constitutes "identity and culture" versus what constitutes proper Islamic belief and observance. But the root of the problem lies in the question of how much difference of any sort can be incorporated or tolerated within a tradition that is seen as universally applicable.
to all human beings, regardless of race, nation, ethnicity, or any other identifier. The same tension can be observed in African-American Christianity, which like African-American Islam has emerged in an historical context where race and racism have been central to the formation of nearly every aspect of the culture.27

It is this historical context of racism and racial difference that produced an unstable environment for the rise of a universalistic Islam within black America. Given this, it might seem unlikely that African-American Muslims would entertain any universalistic interpretations of Islam at all. And yet they have done so from the very beginning of their history as Muslim converts: African-American Islamic universalism has been a remarkably idealistic expression of the hope for human equality and dignity. It should not come as a great surprise, however, that the allure of particularistic interpretations of Islam has been stronger during certain moments in American history. Generally speaking, any fissure in human community, especially when involving a lack of equity, can lead easily to a challenge of universalism, whose ideals seem like unfulfilled promises or even propaganda to the oppressed. In this environment, a particularistic response that supports the humanity and solidarity of the oppressed can arise as an implicit challenge to the hollow universalism of the oppressors.

As mentioned above, C. Eric Lincoln understood the particularistic response advocated by the Nation of Islam as a form of black nationalism. He used that term rather broadly, emphasizing the elements of black nationalism that fostered a sense of group solidarity among African Americans in a hostile environment. In the latter 1960s and throughout the 1970s, some scholars of the black experience seemed to take Lincoln's definition of nationalism even further, equating black nationalism with nearly any “form of group behavior or expression of group sentiment.” One scholar, for example, defined black nationalism as “the feeling on the part of black individuals that they are responsible for the welfare of other black individuals . . . because of a shared racial heritage and destiny.” While this trend continued into the 1980s, more recent scholarship in black studies has problematized the use of nationalism as an intellectual category, paying more attention to the historically specific and contested meanings of “nation” to persons of African descent.28 Likewise, this study attempts to employ ideas of nation and nationalism with the same historical precision.

But “nation” and “nationalism” are not the only problematic categories in the study of African-American Islam. Similarly, “race” and
"racialism" can raise equally important methodological concerns. Most scholars no longer assume that race is a biological phenomenon. In fact, historians, sociologists, and other scholars of the American experience have asserted more and more that race is most properly understood as a social construction. Simply put, these scholars usually assert that "race is socially constructed insofar as selected physical characteristics [like the color of one's skin] have social meaning." Moreover, the social meaning of race is often tied to the structure of status and power among individuals and groups more generally. Of course, scholars still argue about how exactly race is related to issues of class, gender, and other sociological categories. But at the present moment, race is increasingly seen as the product of racialization, a social process which can affect nearly every aspect of one's life—where a person lives, the person whom one marries, and where one goes to school, among other factors. Like "nation," race is seen as a social construct whose most basic meanings can shift, depending on the historical contexts in which the term is being used.  

Rather than uncritically labeling certain varieties of African-American Islam as either nationalist or racialist, I have more generically labeled them particularistic. In my view, this term allows for the theoretical ambiguity necessary in describing the diverse and ultimately disputed meanings of blackness espoused by the subjects of this study. In employing this label, I mean to indicate only that these figures, like many other black persons in the modern world, have held in common a sense that they are part of a distinct group—they have shared, in other words, a sense of their own particularity. But what this particular identity actually means or signifies is never completely clear or stable, because the historical actors themselves constantly debate and contest the ideological bonds that hold them together. The category of particularism is methodologically useful because it can incorporate the various and ultimately ambiguous meanings of blackness that arise in this common historical universe.

These debates over the meaning of black identity have revolved around a large number of issues, including ongoing disputes about what name or label should be applied to African Americans as a group. In the past two hundred years, a number of candidates have vied for recognition, including Anglo-African, colored, free African, Black, Negro, Afro-American, African-American, African American, and so on. Moreover, for over two centuries African Americans have disagreed about other aspects of black identity, including the issue of whether the meaning of blackness is primarily biological, historical, and/or theological in nature. Being "black" has also been seen as invoking shared language, symbols,
memories, myths, and lifeways. As will be shown in the following chapters, these contests over the meaning of black identity were central to the unfolding of African-American Islamic thought.

A second and related theme in the history of African-American Islamic thought is the struggle for black liberation.31 All of the figures covered in this study, like many other modern black persons, have sought to liberate themselves and their fellows from some form of oppression. But their understandings of this oppression and their strategies for liberation from it have been incredibly diverse and complex. Here I refer not only to formal political involvement, but to all acts of liberation, including those that might be seen by some as apolitical. For example, I view the nineteenth-century African-American tradition of Ethiopianism as a form of black liberation. Founded upon the prophecy in Psalm 68:31 that “princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hand unto God,” Ethiopianism often focused on black suffering as a sign of divine favor. Its advocates also utilized biblical themes of exile and redemption to posit the imminent arrival of a personal savior or prophet and sometimes argued for a belief in the redemptive mission of the black race as a whole.32

By situating African-American Islamic thought amidst major historical themes of the modern black experience, this study proceeds along the assumption that any comprehensive understanding of the topic must analyze the relationships between the historical actors and the larger contexts in which they wrote and spoke. Moreover, my use of categories like universalism and particularism has emerged from an historical reading of the data. Put another way, the main methodological assumption of this book is that the tension between various forms of particularism and universalism in African-American Islamic thought is a historical phenomenon. It is a tension created, sustained, and sometimes dismissed by African Americans themselves. This is not to say that the historical actors explicitly refer to these terms. But as categories of analysis, universalism and particularism become real when subjected to historical scrutiny. In my view, phenomenological categories, if used at all, should always be tempered by such historical inquiry.

From the beginning of African-American Islam, I argue, there existed both universalistic and particularistic impulses, first expressed in the paradoxical and ambiguous thought of both Edward W. Blyden and Noble Drew Ali. Elijah Muhammad then attempted to rid African-American Islam of any paradox or ambiguity, eventually advancing an entirely par-
ticularistic interpretation of Islam. Malcolm X, however, rejected Elijah Muhammad’s absolutism, and in so doing, once again faced the tension between universalism and particularism. But he was assassinated before he could explore fully his own approach to these issues. In the 1970s, Wallace D. Muhammad, the son of Elijah, sought to transform this intellectual legacy by suggesting a new approach to the question of unity and diversity within Islam. By viewing Islam through the lens of its various historical contexts, Wallace Muhammad suggested a new model that incorporated racial, ethnic, and national difference under an umbrella of Islamic unity.

It should be noted that my focus on five black thinkers—all obviously male—has its limitations. While this work hopes to offer new directions for the study of African-American Islam, it is by no means a comprehensive history of the various Islamic movements in black America. I have focused on these figures both because of their crucial role in the formation of African-American Islam and because of the irreplaceable quality and originality of their thought. In addition, these men have produced the primary source material necessary to any textual study. In fact, most have been quite prolific, excepting Noble Drew Ali who left us only the Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple. All others have published numerous works, making it possible to explain how their thought both changed and stayed the same usually over a period of decades. To reconstruct the contexts in which they wrote, spoke, and published, I have also relied on a number of other sources, including African-American Muslim newspapers, FBI documents, mainstream press accounts, secondary sources, and oral histories.

My study begins with an examination of Liberian nationalist Edward Wilmot Blyden, a Caribbean émigré who became a leading intellectual and political figure in the black Atlantic world of the late nineteenth century. Blyden, who never converted to Islam himself, was exposed to Islam through his travels in the Middle East and his interaction with Muslim “natives” in the West African interior. As a result, he appropriated Islam in a largely polemical way both to criticize white Protestant missionaries and to encourage the development of black nationalism. Blyden argued that Islam, rather than Christianity, would lead to African self-determination, racial equality, and black greatness. Sometimes, Blyden explained the salutary effects of Islam on blacks by arguing that blacks were by nature better suited to Islam. Other times, however, he stressed the universalistic qualities of Islam, implying that Islam’s message of human equality and justice applied to black people as well as everyone else. The contradictions that these definitions of Islam produced are explored in chapter 2.
While Blyden’s promotion of Islam made him a rogue figure in the eyes of most black Christians, his use of Ethiopianism showed just how much he was part of the same modern black culture. In fact, across the Atlantic in black America, Ethiopianist themes had already become central to the theological discourse of the post-Reconstruction African-American Church, especially the Black Baptist and Methodist denominations. There, these ideas found a large audience not only among black intellectuals, but also among the literally millions of African Americans whose lives revolved around the Black Church during the nadir in race relations from 1880 to 1920. During this period, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has demonstrated, the Black Church provided an alternate public sphere where black economic, political, and social life could find shelter from Jim Crow, disenfranchisement, and despair. In these years, the Black Church reigned as the popular cultural institution in black America.33

During the great migration of African Americans to the urban North between World War I and World War II, however, modern black advocates of Islam and others challenged the ubiquity of the Black Church by providing alternative discourses and social spaces. African-American Muslims reinterpreted many black Christian themes within a new Islamic matrix. Noble Drew Ali, the subject of chapter 3, was the first African American to appropriate Islam in such a way. Ali’s religious system, however, owed nothing to the Islamic textual traditions of Qur’an and Sunnah. Rather, Ali combined themes from black messianism and Islamic symbols from the black Shriners with the teachings of several modern esoteric traditions, including both Theosophy and Rosicrucianism, to construct what he called “Moorish Science.” Rejecting the existence of a specifically African racial heritage, he argued that African Americans were Moorish nationals who drew their biological lineage from a more generic Asiatic race. Though Moors possessed a unique national heritage, according to Noble Drew, they shared a common religion, Islam, with all nations of Asiatic descent. Drew Ali, too, was interested in world harmony, although his version of Islam also entertained particularistic notions that contradicted his universalism.

In studying Noble Drew Ali, I initially hoped to show some continuity between his thought and that of Edward Blyden. In this regard, I examined the role of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as a potential conduit in spreading Blyden’s pro-Islamic polemic throughout black America during the 1920s. Alas, I could find little direct connection between Blyden and Ali. Furthermore, while the UNIA became one place where African Americans discussed Islam,
Garvey himself only adopted Blyden's ideas regarding race, even though he was intimately familiar with the African sage's advocacy of Islam. Indeed, there was much more than geographical distance that separated Drew Ali from Blyden. Blyden was a member of the elite black Atlantic intelligentsia of the latter half of the 1800s, whereas Drew Ali was a part of the urban black working class to have emerged during the Great Migration. Blyden had easy access to educational and cultural resources, including the Old World traditions of Islamic education, while Drew Ali seemed to have learned what he knew mostly from American popular culture. In part, Drew Ali's importance for this study is not that he disseminated traditional Islamic ideas in black America but that he launched "Islam" as a black particularistic tradition in the United States. At the same time, how he came to define Islam had reverberations throughout African-American Islamic history. For Ali, Islam was synonymous with the identity of people of color, who could ignore their "natural" religion only at their own peril. This became an important precedent that found a powerful spokesperson in Elijah Muhammad.

In fact, the expansion of Ali's black separatist Islamic tradition owes much to Muhammad, who led the most popular black Islamic movement in the history of African-American Islam. Chapter 4 explores the thought of this seminal figure by examining the development of his unique version of Islam within several historical contexts. I demonstrate, for example, how Muhammad combined the Christian dispensationalism of his youth with elements of Islam, a belief in "clean living," and even a post-World War II fascination with UFOs to create a new African-American Islamic tradition. I also show the pivotal role played by non-movement black converts to Islam, immigrant Muslims, and foreign Muslims in the genealogy of Muhammad's thought. In the late 1950s, these Muslims publicly questioned the Islamic legitimacy of Muhammad's teachings. They directed their criticism at the movement's claims of divinity for Nation of Islam ( NOI) founder W. D. Fard, at Elijah Muhammad's own status as Messenger, and at the racist aspects of his Islamic thought, all of which they said contradicted the universal message of Islam. As a result, Muhammad's chief lieutenant, Malcolm X, sought to legitimate the movement's teachings by both questioning the motives and credentials of the critics and by mining proof texts from the Qur'an.

I argue that this latter act, the authentication of Muhammad and his movement through the use of Qur'anic scriptures, had monumental implications for the intellectual future of the movement. Once this occurred, it immediately elevated the status of traditional Sunni Islamic discourse,
especially its sacred texts, within African-American Islamic thought more generally. Ironically, though English-speaking black thinkers had launched Islam as a tradition whose meaning would be determined exclusively within the black community, their vessel became more and more mired in the texts and traditions of Old World Sunni Islam. Moreover, the use of Islamic texts by Malcolm X ceded important methodological ground to Muhammad's critics, who were far better acquainted with the textual traditions of Islam than was he.

By 1964 Malcolm X, the subject of chapter 5, had publicly embraced the nonracial vision of Islam that was being actively advanced by Muhammad's Muslim critics, especially Muslim missionaries funded largely by petrodollars from Saudi Arabia. As a new convert, Malcolm faced an intellectual dilemma even more complex than that of Elijah Muhammad. After he separated from the NOI, Malcolm embraced a dual identity as both a Sunni Muslim missionary who stressed the need for transracial brotherhood and a pan-Africanist revolutionary who struggled for an explicitly black liberation. In so doing, however, Malcolm separated his “politics” from his “religion,” creating a tension that remained unresolved before his assassination in 1965. Because Malcolm could not reconcile his race-less Islam to his racial struggle, he seemed unable to imagine a strategy of black liberation that would achieve his revolutionary ends through an Islamic means.

Wallace Muhammad, the subject of chapter 6, inherited Malcolm's dilemma after rising to the leadership of the Nation of Islam in 1975. During the first few years of his tenure, this son of Elijah Muhammad attempted to synthesize themes from the black consciousness movement with Islam in an effort to provide followers with an identity that was both “authentically” Muslim and African American. Certain immigrant and foreign Muslims closely aligned with Muhammad, however, asked him to abandon his attention toward blackness, which he initially agreed to do. But in the 1980s, Wallace Muhammad again took up his efforts to forge an approach to Islam that accounted both for the unity of humankind and the struggle for black liberation. In doing so, he stressed the historical contingency of any application of Islam. In creating his own program for black uplift, he hailed the value of the individual and personal responsibility in Islam while simultaneously calling on blacks to find a collective solution to the race problem in America. Whether he reconciled these collective and individualistic approaches to social change is a question for debate, although his approach in attempting to do so suggested new directions for African-American Islam.
Finally, in the conclusion, I explore the teachings of Louis Farrakhan, emphasizing how his thought is in many ways a recapitulation of earlier themes in African-American Islam. Though Farrakhan may have begun his career as an avowed Muslim particularist, he now celebrates Islamic universalism just as vociferously. In so doing, his thought recalls the paradoxical formulations of early African-American Islam. I then argue that Minister Farrakhan’s thought is also indicative of the “essentialist style” in African-American Islamic thought—a style that has been challenged at least implicitly by the thought of Wallace Muhammad. In fact, I submit that in its historical understanding of Islam, Wallace Muhammad’s methodology suggests that the tension between universalism and particularism might become a source for a dynamic interpretation of Islam that consciously balances views of the human community as one and many.