

**WHITE ON BLACK; A REACTION TO THE FIRST
BLACK AMERICAN MUSLIMS IN EGYPT (1932)***

by

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In 1933 there appeared in the *Catholic World* an article entitled «American Negro Mohammedans.»¹ Later in the same year it was republished in full in the *Moslem World*,² a journal of interest to Protestant missionaries working among Muslims. In it, Pierre Crabites, an American member of the Mixed Tribunals of Egypt, expressed his thoughts and apprehensions about the entry into Cairo of the first American Blacks who were Muslims. His reaction can not said to be the official American reaction. It was, however, the private reaction of an American representative. As such it will no doubt remain an important source for documenting the worse unofficial fears posed by Black American Muslims for an American representative overseas. But, as will be ultimately pointed out, his article serves another purpose as well.

In «American Negro Mohammedans,» written in 1932, Crabites described in graphic racial fashion the entry of the first Black American Muslims in the following words :

Six months ago an American Negro came to Cairo without a saxophone and with no intention of playing in a jazz band. He was black as the ace of spades, his teeth a wall of ivory and his speech the drawl of the Southern plantation. He surprised the Egyptians by announcing that he was a Muslim and that he had come to this country in order to work his way to Mecca.³

This individual is never properly named but according to Crabites he created a stir because he related that there were growing communities of Muslims in Detroit, Buffalo, Chicago, Worcester, Mass. And Gary,

(*) The author would like to thank the Fredonia College Foundation for a research grant for the summer of 1972 during the use of which he came across Crabitee's article on Black American Muslims.

Ind.⁴ This apparently led to the impression among some Egyptians «... that Islam was carrying America by storm.»⁵

That impression was only re-enforced by the entrance into Egypt within the next months of seven other adult Black Muslims. These events were not covered in the Cairo press. They were, however, reported orally in the bazaars and eventually the Cairo Governate officially brought the attention of the U.S. Consul to these Black Americans.

It is clear from Crabites' article as to the official reason for this action by the Cairo Governate. It involved acknowledgement of their being Muslims. Egypt as a Muslim state, recognized at this time fourteen non-Muslim Egyptian national groups. Each of these had its own patriarch or rabbi who served as a judge in such legal matters as those relating to marriage, divorce and guardianship. For certain non-nationals such as the Americans, the English and the French, the counterpart for the patriarch or rabbi in judging certain legal cases were their consuls. Thus it was the practice of the Egyptian government to file with these consuls any official notice of intent to change religions by their citizens in the same fashion as it would file such a matter with the patriarchs or rabbis of Egyptian non-Muslim groups. It is thus possible that these Black American Muslims received recognition by the Cairo Governate as being authentic Muslims and that this was the reason for their being brought to the attention of the American Consul and indirectly to the attention of Crabites who acted as the American member of the Mixed Tribunals.

What privately concerned Crabites in all this were the consequences which he foresaw of the conversion of these and other Black Americans to Islam. Initially he dealt with this from the perspective of Egypt and the difficulties such individuals would, in his eyes, present to the American Consul. As Black Americans were for him prone to be immoral, he wrote :

It follows from all of this that as he who is now Mohammed Ali Washington held on to his American passport he not only continues to be an American citizen, but his children, born or unborn, participate in this advantage. The corollary to this proposition is that if this Moslem American goes forth and multiplies, drinks up a fair share of the cheap whisky which abounds in these parts and then starts to shoot up the town, there will be a batch of black or near black babies added to the Cairo American community while he lingers in jail or stretches hemp and causes untold trouble for American consular and diplomatic officers.

In the same offensive racial vein, Crabites continued.

All of this is, in no sense, exaggerated. A Negro convert to Islam, loose in the Near East, with an American passport in his pocket, is like a monkey with two tails. He is bound to attract attention. And once all eyes are focused upon him, that sense of vanity which has ruined many a good man will inevitably lead him to perdition.

Crabites was also concerned, and perhaps more so, with the threat that he saw these Black American Muslims posed to the Middle East image of the superiority of American civilization.

... the very fact that they linger in the Levant after having publicly professed Mohammedanism throws out of gear the basic relationship between Orient and Occident. For generations America sold to the Near East not merchandise but ideals. Egypt exported to the United States cotton, onions and hides. Egyptians are now beginning to say that their creed is conquering the United States and that this fact is proof of their intellectual superiority over America.

But his deepest fears were for white Americans if Islam spread among Blacks in the United States. Thus Crabites wrote : «This foreign consequence of the possible Islamization of the American Negro is but of minor importance. What counts is the fact that Mohammedanism has begun to germinate in the United States.»¹⁰

With the spread of Islam among Blacks, he foresaw a grave danger to America's social structure. This was due to what he perceived as an Islamic tenet of social equality and the right of Muslims to have more than one wife. In the latter case he was probably attempting to enlist America's traditional distaste for polygamy. But there is no doubt in his words as to what part of the country he most feared for with the spread of the conception of social equality among Blacks. In his last paragraph, he wrote :

And now here are these American Negroes in the Near East, getting into their blood this conception of a triumphant faith which stands for social equality and which countenances polygamy. If these blacks remain in the Levant and grow in numbers their presence foreshadows, sooner or later, first petty annoyances, and then disconcerting trouble for American diplomatic and Consular officers. If these converts return to the United States, the ardent spirit of the neophyte and the sermons which they will preach make me shudder at the consequences which I see in store for America and particularly for the Southern States, not that I do not have the highest respect for the many Mohammedan friends whom I have

made during these last twenty years, but because I am convinced that principles which are so admirably suited to the Levant would work incalculable mischief in my country.¹¹

Crabites' concern for the South was an inbred one. Born a Catholic in New Orleans in 1877, he graduated from the College of the Immaculate Conception in 1895 with an A.M., from Tulane University in 1898 with a Bachelor of Laws degree and later received his Doctor of Laws degree in 1918 from Loyola University in New Orleans. He practiced law in Louisiana from 1900 to 1911. In that latter year he was made an American judge on the Mixed Tribunals of Egypt, a position which he held until 1936. After that there were special presidential assignments. In 1939 he was appointed by President F. D. Roosevelt to be an American Commissioner in accordance with the Egyptian American Arbitration Treaty of 1929. From April, 1942 to April, 1943 he acted as the special assistant U.S. minister in Cairo. Later in 1943 he held a similar position in Baghdad, Iraq and died in October while serving in that capacity.¹²

Beyond his works as a U.S. representative overseas, he wrote extensively on foreign matters for various publications including the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Foreign Affairs* and *Current History*. In addition he authored ten history books which generally ranged in quality from average to superior. His work on Gordon was reissued in 1922 by the Negro Universities Press.¹³

All of this indicates a literate background and an educated audience for his views. His article on «American Negro Mohammedans,» however, was printed and then reprinted in publications indicating a more selective audience. In addressing himself to people of the Christian faith, his objective was to encourage Christian faith, his objective was to encourage Christian religions and particularly the Catholic Church, to put a greater effort into working for converts among Black Americans.

The promulgation of Crabites' article, with its blatant racial tones, in religious publications of interest to Catholic and Protestant clergy in the early 1930's clearly underscores the ambiguous stand in practice that Christianity has taken on matters of race. Black Muslims have claimed that Christianity is not a religion for all men but for white men as it has built into it the white men's prejudices against Blacks.¹⁴ There are, nonetheless, pros and cons to that position. But it would seem that Crabites' article serves a dual purpose. It not only reveals deep unofficial apprehensions of an American overseas representative, but it also clearly points to the type of accommodation American Christianity has often made to the racism of its white majority.

FOOTNOTES

1. Pierre Crabites, «American Negro Mohammedans,» *Catholic World* (Feb., 1933) 136 : 559-566.
2. Pierre Crabites, «American Negro Mohammedans,» *Moslem World* (July, 1933) 23 : 272-284.
3. *Ibid.*, 273.
4. If these Black Americans were early day Black Muslims, they would not have been members of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam but followers of Wallace F. Fard Muhammad, the founder of the Black Nation, who prepared Elijah Muhammad to be his successor. [When Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934, a split took place in the Black Nation with Elijah Muhammad emerging as the leader of one faction, known initially as the Temple People. See C. Eric Lincoln, *Black Muslim in America* (Boston : Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 180-183.
5. Crabites, *Moslem World* (July, 1933), p. 273.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 273-281 and Pierre Crabites, «Mixed Courts of Egypt,» *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Oct., 1928), 4 (4) : pp. 546-553. When Malcolm X attempted to enter Mecca, he was at first prohibited from doing so since he was viewed as a non-authentic convert to Islam. This centered around his inability to perform the orthodox prayer rituals in Arabic. This may have been the crux of the issue for these Black American Muslims being accepted as authentic Muslims. For the details of Malcolm X's Hajj, see Malcolm X (with Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York : Grove Press, 1966), pp. 318-342. For a description of elements in the relationship of the Nation of Islam to orthodox Muslim, see Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, pp. 218-216.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
12. *Who Was Who in America* (Chicago : A.N. Marquis Company, 1950), Vol II : 1943-1950, p. 132. In the course of the Democratic race for the 1928 presidential nomination, Crabites gained national attention in the United States by an article which he wrote for *The Outlook*. In it he spoke as a Southern Catholic against the possibility of the Democratic Party choosing Alfred E. Smith. He asked Governor Smith to withdraw himself from the

race, for the Democratic nomination, in view of the fact that he would have an especially difficult time in the South where Catholics were viewed as foreigners. Crabites' article was widely circulated and some Democrats found it necessary to publicly dispute Judge Crabites' position. For the original article see Judge Pierre Crabites, «Is it time for a Catholic President ?», » *Outlook* (Aug. 17, 1927), 146 (6), pp. 504-508. For reactions to it, see *The New York Times*, August 13, 1927, p. 15, August 28, 1927, sec. 7, p. 12, and Sept. 4, 1927, sec. 10, p. 1.

13. His books, in order of publication, included the following : *Gordon, the Sudan and Slavery* (1933) ; *Ismail, the Maligned Khedive* (1933) ; *Winning of the Sudan* (1934) ; *Ibrahîm of Egypt* (1935) ; *Benes, Statesman of Central Europe* (1935) ; *Clement VII and Henry VIII* (1936) ; *Unhappy Spain : The Tragic Plight of Spain Traced from Ferdinand VII to the Present* (1934) ; *Victoria's Guardian Angel : A Study of Baron Stockmar* (1937) ; *American Officers in the Egyptian Army* (1939) ; and *The Spohatim of Suez* (1940). For a guide to the reviews of these works see the appropriate *Book Review Digest*. For those books not listed in that guide, *Times* (London) *Literary Supplement* contains a review.
14. For details of this view by Black Muslims and its relation to the white race's creation by Yakub, which is a central belief in their movement, see Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, pp. 76-80.