

## HISTORY MATTERS

# William Allen Brown, Jr., 1934–2007: An Appreciation

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I initially encountered William Allen Brown in Madison during the early seventies, having arrived at the University of Wisconsin to begin doctoral work in the late summer of 1972, some months following my graduation from University College of Arts and Sciences at New York University's Heights campus.

Brown returned to Madison two years later, following a prodigious period of field research and teaching which made his presence in the classroom seem electrifying.

The seminar I took with Brown explored Islamic reform movements in Africa. Even though I was then in my third year of graduate study in Comparative World History-Africa, and a veteran of seminars led by Steve Feierman, Phil Curtin, and Jan Vansina, Brown imparted a singularly inspirational quality to classes he taught; albeit similar in content, they were fundamentally different, indeed genuinely unique in form. The easiest way to attempt to describe this would be to aver that there was at the core of each Bill Brown lecture the bombast of a Baptist minister, for Brown truly preached.

At times it was said that Brown descended from a line of Baptist — or one might think Pentecostal or perhaps Methodist exhorters — a specific group of fire and brimstone homilists whose task it was to alternately rally the faithful and reach the heathen or unchurched. In this sense I must confess or testify or bear witness that Brown made me a believer. This is not spoken lightly, nor with the slightest hint of heterodoxy or apostasy. Nor was I alone in this response; it was characteristic of most of his hearers. This religiosity was critical in capturing his essence if we could take the measure of the man. It was no accident that his *métier* was African Islamic history. Since Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam mesmerized Black America, the matter of the roots of African descended religion has helped transform not merely the North American conversation on faith but global consciousness on the subject.

Brown once vividly recollected a moment when Malcolm X spoke at UW-Madison. This occurred during October 1962. Following Malcolm's formal presentation, he entertained audience questions, at which Brown raised a particularly provocative query intended to test the orator's knowledge of Islam. As he formed a response the speaker fixed his intense gaze upon Brown, looking sharply into his eyes. Brown recalled that, 'It felt as if he knew all kinds of things about me at that moment'. Malcolm then asked if Brown was a Muslim. Brown responded no, but rather a student of Islam, whereupon Minister Malcolm further replied, 'Keep studying'.

Although I did not pursue this dimension of that conversation at that time, it seems highly unlikely that this was the first time Brown would have witnessed Malcolm X. As a longtime resident of Harlem, it is plausible that he may have seen him before on any number of occasions, perhaps also within other academic lecture halls. It seems similarly safe to conjecture that for Brown there was a clear link between Malcolm's theological odyssey and his own preoccupations with West African Islamic history. In fact, it is hard to argue that many, if not most Islamicists and students of Islam in Africa who happen to be of African descent are not, *ipso facto*, students of Malcolm X.

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