

Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali, the American boxer, Three times World Heavyweight Champion, embraced Islam in 1965.

"I have had many nice moments in my life. But the feelings I had while standing on Mount Arafat (just outside Makka, Saudi Arabia) on the day of the Hajj (the Muslim pilgrimage), was the most unique. I felt exalted by the indescribable spiritual atmosphere there as over one and a half million pilgrims invoked God to forgive them for their sins and bestow on them His choicest blessings.

It was an exhilarating experience to see people belonging to different colors, races and nationalities, kings, heads of state and ordinary men from very poor countries all clad in two simple white sheets praying to God without any sense of either pride or inferiority. It was a practical manifestation of the concept of equality in Islam."

One of the first public figures in America to be identified with Islam was boxer Muhammad Ali, to whom more media attention has been given than to any other athlete. He has appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated more than thirty times, and his name and face are known to people all over the world.

Ali was born Cassius Marcellus Clay in 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky, of a Baptist mother and Methodist father. He started boxing at a young age so as to be able to buy his parents a car; by the time he was in his twenties, many considered him the greatest fighter of all time. After winning the Rome Olympics in 1960, he became the darling of the American public—handsome, charming, and greatly successful. In 1963 he recorded an album in which he extolled his own merits ("I am the greatest") in a stunt that brought him even greater publicity but also earned him some ridicule. Eighteen days before he defeated Sonny Liston to become heavyweight champion of the world, Clay joined the "Black Muslims," influenced by Malcolm X. After his conversion he seems visibly to have changed, bragging less about his accomplishments and stressing the importance of Islam as a spiritual force in his life. Adopting the Muslim name Muhammad Ali, he has always insisted, was one of the most important occurrences in his life. He did it, however, at a time when the Nation of Islam was unpopular in the United States. The boxing commission was furious, and from a hero Ali quickly became the object of suspicion. Meanwhile, when the rift in the Nation occurred between Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm, Ali to the deep disappointment and hurt of his friend Malcolm, sided with Elijah, whom he believed to be God's messenger. In 1967, in opposition to the Vietnam War, Ali refused to be inducted into the armed forces on the grounds that he was a minister in the religion of Islam. The New York State Athletic Commission suspended his boxing license and withdrew his recognition as champion.

Muhammad Ali's later career has been extremely checkered, and it is generally recognized that he fought well beyond the time that his physical condition allowed. He was finally diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. Meanwhile, he also did a great deal of public speaking about his life and about Islam, while the government continued surveillance on him as a member of the Nation of Islam. Never a strong advocate of the Nation's racist doctrines, he did preach racial pride and became a hero of Black Americans.

Today, Ali continues to practice Islam, lending his name to the distribution of Islamic education materials. He has been a significant contributor to the financing of Islamic institutions such as Masjid al-Faatir, the first mosque built from the ground up in the city of Chicago. The truly great men of history, he has said, want not to be great themselves but to help others and be close to God.