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**CARIBBEAN  
THEOLOGY:  
SELF-ESTEEM  
AND BLACK  
IDENTITY**

By  
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In January, 2002, Ambassador Imam Douglas Owen Ali, after having been officially appointed in October, 2001, assumed office as the International Ambassador of Peace with spiritual, social, economic and political responsibilities for the Universal Islamic Centre based in the United States to Jamaica and the entire Caribbean. Imam Ali, who, not unlike many Jamaicans, enjoyed a Christian religious heritage<sup>1</sup>, confesses to having embraced the Islamic faith, "as it gave him a sense of self as a black man, racial dignity and a sense of community" (McGibbon 2002, 9G). The identity issue.

Two months later, the prospect of the visit to Jamaica by one of the persons influential in Imam Ali's conversion, leader of the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan<sup>2</sup>, caused jitters in some church circles. It was pointed out by one reputable Christian psychologist that if Farrakhan and his movement were to be successful in Jamaica, it would be largely because he speaks to the identity issue<sup>3</sup>. Again, the identity issue.

R.B. Burns, expounding on E.H. Erickson's developmental theory, describes identity as recognition of one's self, arising out of "a complex of identifications, and from an awareness of one's power and weakness and of one's place in the social context (Burns 1979, 175). In this complex of identifications, he explains, a Black child exposed to White models may experience identity confusion (Burns 1979, 175). What does this say for

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<sup>1</sup> He is described by McGibbon in the Sunday Gleaner dated February 24, 2002, as "the (non-religious) son of Anglicans". As such, it could be safely assumed that he attended at least a few church services with his parents, and was exposed to some Christian teaching.

<sup>2</sup> The visit took place in March, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> This point was made by Dr. Dave Carlson during the question and answer session of a seminar on Islam held on the campus of Jamaica Theological Seminary, March 18, 2002. The presenter at the Seminar was Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo, world renowned authority on Islam.

the Black child growing up in the Caribbean where the ideal is often painted white or labeled "foreign"?

According to Carlson (1988, 34), a firm sense of one's identity in relation to others is a crucial ingredient for the development of a healthy self-esteem. Self-esteem, he says, is "a feeling of being happy with ... a positive and accurate picture of [oneself], a confidence that [one is] okay [as is]", i.e. with one's sinfulness yet "forgiveableness", gender, nationality, race and colour, etc. (Carlson 1988, 241). Self-esteem and identity are thus integrally linked.

One need not look too far to see the devastating effects of an insecure sense of self and low self-esteem. Of course this is not a problem unique to Jamaica or even to the Caribbean. This is what underlies much of societal problems such as the break-down in family life, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and ethnic conflicts in the Caribbean and beyond. In the Caribbean, in particular, this poor sense of self is largely linked to race and colour. Certainly, there is no doubt among Caribbean theologians that Caribbean theology needs to be addressing issues such as these (Smith 1991, Watty 1981).

Caribbean theology, according to Smith (1991, 14) is an attempt to interpret the revelations of God within the peculiar historical, ethnic, political and cultural context of the Caribbean. In other words, Caribbean theology, like all other theologies, should attempt to apply the universal message of God to a particular situation. However, while being contextual, it must avoid parochialism. While most Caribbean theologians concur on this point, the big question is how to do this in the face of such diversities. As Noelliste (1997, 46) points out, from a linguistic point of view, one can speak of at least five Caribbeans: the French, English, Spanish, Dutch and Creole speaking Caribbean. Within these are the different racial/ethnic groups which have come to be a part of the Caribbean: Europeans, Africans, East Indians and other Asians, plus varying mixtures of all. One of the greatest challenges of the fledgling Caribbean theology is to keep it applicable to all the different Caribbean cultures (Ham, 4). Fortunately the factors which unite the Caribbean are in many respects greater than those which divide it. These include a common history of slavery, emancipation, indentured labour and colonialism. It is based on this commonality that this paper will attempt to explore an issue, which though a universal one,

has special application to the Caribbean. This is the problem of a negative self-image.

### **The Problem: The negative self-image of the Caribbean man**

Josh McDowell (1984) of Campus Crusade for Christ aptly defines a healthy self-esteem as seeing oneself the way God does, no more and no less. Most psychologists concur that this is one of the most basic of all human needs (Carlson 1988, 19). Caribbean theologian Kortright Davis (1990, 103), in his discourse on emancipatory theology, has specifically cited this as the most crucial human need in the Caribbean. According to him,

... the most crucial human need in the Caribbean at this time is neither trade, nor aid, nor arms, nor even the liberation of the mind, but rather the emancipation of the "disvalued self".

This disvalued self, according to him, is the product of a skewed view of oneself, or a poor self-image. A poor self-image can be shown to be at the heart of many of the problems facing the Caribbean. Schuller (1982, 145), a theologian who examines the issue of self-esteem from the double perspective of theology and psychology, claims that at the root of all social, political, economic, religious, and even scientific problem is the private and collective need for positive pride, or healthy self-esteem. Though this may seem to be somewhat of an exaggeration, it is not difficult to see that the man lacking in self-pride may also lack the initiative and motivation to even try to contribute to his own social, political or economic well-being. Within the Caribbean, this poor self-image, along with the corresponding poor view of others, is manifested in the political and business ethos whereby power and profits are placed above human life, in the unstable family life, in the ethnic and social class tensions, and in the hopelessness experienced in the slums.

Caribbean history has not been conducive to engendering of a positive self-image in the Caribbean people, particularly among the black majority. One legacy of the plantation system is a sense of racial and cultural inferiority among Blacks. In the slave and post-emancipation society, social standing was based on skin colour. Whites were at the top of the social ladder, Blacks at the bottom, and various shades of Browns in

between. This state of affairs was buttressed by religious ideologies such as the curse of Ham, as well as by the denigration of Africa and the African cultural heritage (Chevannes 1995, 10). History tells us that when the East Indians and other Asians joined the Caribbean landscape they found a place in the already established colour scheme, in which the African descendants remained at the bottom (Henriques 1963).

More than 150 years after the abolition of slavery, vestiges of this social structure remain, as evidenced in the racial/ethnic tensions and in the child socialization. If much of the overt emphasis on colour in countries like Jamaica has given way to a focus on class, with wealth as the principal determining factor, the covert hierarchical colour scheme continues. Blacks, especially, still struggle with self-hate and self-depreciation. It is not difficult to understand that this group would be most seriously affected by a poor self-image when one considers that unlike the other ethnic groups who were able to maintain links with their cultural heritage, the African descendants were forcibly alienated from their roots (Reddock 1998, 420). According to Reddock (1998, 418), Trinidadians of African descent still struggle to have their African cultural identity validated by the dominant culture.

Of course, it would be too simplistic to claim that all the Caribbean's problem with low self-esteem is due to the colour or racial factor. As was mentioned above, other criteria used in the assessment of self-worth include material wealth and power. Dr. Elsa Leo-Rhynie (1993, 16) has also noted that the excessive use of negative feedback of whatever type in the socialization process usually leads to a poor self-concept and low self-esteem. However, colour and race are still major contributing factors to the Caribbean self-image, and are factors which have been by and large neglected by the Caribbean Church. It is for all these reason that this paper seeks to zero in on the self-esteem issue with special focus on the Caribbean Blacks who comprise about 70 percent of the Caribbean population.

### **Self-esteem and Caribbean theology**

For many Caribbean theologians, a healthy self-esteem needs to be one by-product of doing theology from a Caribbean perspective. According to Smith, Caribbean theology should aim at producing "a new Caribbean

person with a more healthy self-concept" (Smith 1991, 13). According to Watty, for whom Caribbean theology is one of liberation,

Liberation in the Caribbean is primarily and essentially a liberation of the mind, both from self-depreciation and imitation on the one hand, and from dreaming the impossible dream on the other hand. (Watty 1981, 49)

Nevertheless, not much has been done to articulate a theology that would bring about such a liberation. The best attempts have come from the camp of the Evangelicals. Palmer (1998, 84), in addressing the question of the nature of the Christian, makes the point that though the Christian struggles with human depravity, he should not be viewed as such, but rather as a creature of dignity and destiny based on the present *imago Dei* and the future *imago Christi* (1 John 3:2). This focus is one step in steering Caribbean Evangelicals away from a negative self-image, which may be due, according to American evangelical theologian, Anthony Hoekema, to the emphasis on the sinfulness and unworthiness of man in the presence of God (Venema 1993, 283). McGrath, a leading British Evangelical, has charged that this is one weakness among Evangelicals in general. According to him, the preaching and counseling styles among Evangelicals are such that they induce excessive guilt in the hearers, thereby destroying human self-confidence and any sense of personal worth (McGrath 1988, 148).

Noelliste, in his article *Faith transforming context: in search of a theology for a viable Caribbean*, posits as the basis for self-worth, regardless of race or class, the twin biblical concepts of creation and redemption (Noelliste 1997, 54-56). This view focuses on the unity of all mankind in spite of the diversity. However, I believe there is also need to affirm the *diversity* within the unity. Indeed, it is insecurity about the diversity which is at the root of evils like ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, apartheid in South Africa, and even religious ideologies like the curse of Ham. However, God has no problems with diversity. Rather as the author of all creation, he endorses it (Gen. 10). At the birth of the Church in Acts 2, God shows his approval and respect for diverse cultural and ethnic groups, firstly by having them present, and secondly by providing special translation for them. In the case of the Caribbean, especially in the case of

the Black population who has suffered so much discrimination and dehumanization on account of their skin colour, there is also need to affirm their particularities. If Caribbean theology does not deal specifically with the affirmation of the black man, then it would have failed in one vital area.

I pause here to consider the Rastafarians' approach to the self-esteem problem for two reasons. Firstly, they are one of the few groups in the Caribbean to have directly addressed this problem. Secondly, it is thought by several Caribbean theologians that at least some aspects of their view is indispensable for the construction of Caribbean theology (Hosang and Ringenberg 1982, 16; Murrell and Taylor, 1998, 390).

### **Self-concept and The Rastafarian**

Rastafarianism, born in the slums of Kingston in the 1930s, has now become a Caribbean, as well as an international phenomenon (Van Dijk 1998, 178-195). It is a movement of resistance with the aim of re-establishing the lost cultural identity and dignity of the Black man (Edmonds 1998, 23). According to Dennis Forsythe, Rastafarianism is the first mass movement among West Indians to be preoccupied with the question of Black identity (Edmonds 1998, 30). They have completely rejected Western colonial teaching and replaced it with their own ideologies which reaffirm the African heritage. Their theology affirms that God, or at least the Messiah, is a black man in the person of the late emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie. They also view many of the biblical personalities, such as Solomon, the Queen of Sheba and even Jesus as Black. They see themselves as the Jews reincarnated (Murrell and Williams 1998, 329-344). They proclaim the dignity of the Black man, for since he was made in the image of God, he possesses divinity (Owens 1973, 165). This dignity is expressed their symbols like the dreadlocks, Ethiopian colours, and dread talk. In this way they have sought to undo the damage done to the Black self-image.

Earlier this year, during the visit of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II to Jamaica, the Rastafarian community presented her with a petition seeking reparation - compensation for slavery - and repatriation - assistance to return to Africa (Bell 2002, 6A). This was a cry for reparation of a gross

injustice committed against the ancestors of the African Caribbean population over 150 years ago. It is really a quest for a restoration of dignity and self-worth to the largest ethnic population of the Caribbean. Wouldn't it be nice if it were the Church, which represents such a large proportion of the Jamaican people, leading such a campaign? Perhaps the Caribbean Church has not yet articulated the theology required for such a mission. The Rastafarians' theology, although it represents a valiant attempt, sadly cannot get to the root of the problem, as it is built on a foundation of error. A truly liberating ideology needs to be based on truth (John 8:36). This is the sort of theology the next section will attempt to develop.

### **Toward a Caribbean theology of self-esteem**

#### **Foundation**

On what basis can a Caribbean theology of self-esteem be built? On the double foundation of the biblical concepts of creation and redemption, as purports Noelliste (1997).

The Scriptures declare that man was created in the image of God and that God's evaluation of this creation was that it was good (Gen. 1:27-31). This image, we are assured, has continued even after the fall (Gen. 9:6). Since all humanity came from one man, then the creation narrative places all men on equal footing, and confers on all persons of all races and social classes the divine stamp of approval (Noelliste 1997, 54).

The concept of redemption and the "new creation" declares the high value God places on all men. To redeem mankind, the highest possible price was paid -- that of blood (1 Pet. 1:18; 1 Cor. 6:20). The value of man is expressed in the cross. Furthermore, Galatians 3:28 makes it clear that as far as place and position in the new creation are concerned, racial, social and gender distinctions -- often divisive factors in this world -- are of no importance. Thus, creation and redemption affirm the intrinsic ontological worth and equality of all human beings, regardless of status, race or creed. This value needs to be emphasized in Caribbean theology. Caribbean theology needs to show the specific expression of the image of God in Blacks, and also go further to affirm and give positive status to just those

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elements which were regarded as objects of shame, particularly the African heritage and the physical features unique to Blacks.

### **The Image of God and the Black Man**

In exploring the question of how the image of God is expressed in human beings, Brand and Yancey (1984, 20) point out that philosophers and theologians have tended to define the image of God in accordance with the principal concern of their era. Thus, the Enlightenment thinkers saw the image of God in the ability to reason, the Renaissance thinkers in the capacity for artistic creativity, and so on. These aspects of God's image are universal, i.e. present in all mankind, regardless of race, class or gender. How does this apply specifically to the Caribbean man? This section will explore the manifestation of this image in his creativity, work and culture, and his physical attributes.

#### ***Creativity***

One aspect of the image of God in the Caribbean man may be expressed in the Jamaican proverb: "tun yu han mek fashun". This saying expresses not only artistic creativity, but also creativity in the face of limited resources and often difficult circumstances. This creativity has been the basis of survival for many persons living under harsh economic conditions. This is a God-given quality, which needs to be lauded and encouraged. This is what the Apostle Paul was expressing when he testified

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:12-13, NIV)

The single mom living in the inner-city, who, on a domestic helper's salary, manages to school and feed her children, needs to understand that her ingenuity is an expression of the image of God in her. Caribbean people can take pride in the fact that they have this special manifestation of God's image.

### *Work and Culture*

This creativity is of course, linked to work and culture, another universal expression of the image of God. In Genesis 1:28, man was instructed to "fill the earth and subdue it", and to rule over all the living creatures. The fulfillment of this mandate would involve creative use of the earth's resources, gardening, farming, management and supervision. In Genesis 2:15, the same mandate is expressed differently, as man is placed in the Garden of Eden and is told to "work it and take care of it". This mandate, often called the cultural mandate, was given before the fall. The myth of work as a curse resulting from the fall needs to be dispensed with. The exercise of any form of work is in fact, a point of identification with the Creator, who worked for six days at creation and then rested on the seventh.

Insofar as culture represents a specific group's way of "subduing the earth", then all cultures reflect aspects of God's image. Hiebert (1983, 25) in *Cultural Anthropology* defines culture as "the integrated system of learned patterns of behaviour, ideas, and products characteristic of a society." Though tarnished at the fall, and certainly in need of redemption, all cultures, including the African culture, continue to bear aspects of this image. The positive aspects of the African heritage, such as the story-telling tradition, the affinity for the bass rhythm, and artistic creativity, need to be embraced as expressions of God's image.

### *Physical Attributes*

The Rastafarians are not wrong in emphasizing the physical attribute of colour as a part of the image of God. Though by far, not the most important aspect, it is nevertheless an important aspect. Man, created in God's image, was not only soul. He came in a physical body. The history outlined in Genesis 1-11 shows how all the different races developed from the first image bearers – Adam and Eve. From this, it can be deduced that the physical features of all races, much like a kaleidoscope, all reflect the image of God. This includes the Black race. Although this position affirms a link with God, it does not lead us into the error of recreating God in our own image and positing a black god.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is what the Rastafarians do. This kind of reasoning would logically lead to a god for each race, which would of course be absurd.

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Further, Scripture shows that God affirms and validates the Black man in particular. They are replete with references to Black people, more often than not in a positive light. These include Ebed-Melek, Jeremiah's friend (Jer. 28:7-13), "the mighty men of Ethiopia and Put who handle the shield" (Jer. 46:9), and perhaps even Zephaniah<sup>5</sup>, one of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, there is the Ethiopian eunuch who was converted and baptized by Philip (Acts 8).

### *Curse of Ham*

Yes, there is still the question of what to do with "the curse of Ham", generally accepted to be the father of the Black race (McKissic 1990, 16). Because this curse has throughout history played such a powerful role in instilling a sense of inherent inferiority in Blacks, it would need to be challenged in Caribbean Theology. Two important points need to be made here. Firstly, it was Canaan, Ham's fourth and youngest son, who was cursed, and not Ham himself (Gen. 9:25-27). Ham had three other sons who apparently were not included in this curse (Gen.10:6). In fact, the biblical author pauses in his listing of the descendants of Ham (which he does not do for the Japhethites or the Semite) to highlight the great feats of Nimrod, the son of Cush, Ham's first son (Gen. 10:8-12). Hardly like one under a curse, he is described as "a mighty hunter before the Lord" (Gen. 10:8).

Secondly, biblical curses generally lasted until the third or fourth generations only (Ex. 34:6-7). This means that the curse, whoever was the recipient, would have already ceased to operate. The favourable Black presence in the Scriptures seems to bear this out. The biblical evidence, therefore, does not support any black inferiority based on the account of the so-called curse of Ham.

### Identification with the Messiah

Given that self-identity develops out of "a complex of identifications" (Burns 1979, 175), it is important to note that God, through the Messiah, identifies with the Black man, as with any other group of oppressed people. The "Black Christ" is not necessarily one who came in a black

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<sup>5</sup> In Zeph. 1:1, the prophet is described as the son of Cushi, a term sometimes used in the Bible to refer to Ethiopians or Africans.

body, but one who identifies with the suffering of the Blacks (Isaiah 53, Heb. 4:15). Blacks can therefore identify with Christ in this way, and incorporate this into their identity. This is the kind of identification the Apostle Paul describes in Galatians 2:20 when he says "I have been crucified with Christ..."

Thus, the Afro-Caribbean man can be affirmed firstly because he is included in the "every race" which bears God's stamp of approval and secondly, because of the specific manifestation of the image of God in him. He can take pride in Christ's identification with blackness and the Black presence in Scriptures. All this would need to be included in a Caribbean theology of self-esteem.

## Application

### The Salvation message

#### *The starting point*

Most Caribbean persons, particularly those of African descent, already have a poor view of themselves. Sam Vassel (1997, 84), in his dissertation on the absence of men in Jamaican churches makes this observation of Jamaican men. Such persons do not need too much persuasion to be convinced of their utter unworthiness before a holy God. What would take much more work is to convince them that this holy God could take interest in them and find them valuable as individuals, when all their lives they grew up hearing and believing how worthless they were. As Schuller (1982, 150-51) contends, this is the news that needs to be placed at the heart of the salvation message.

#### *Parallels with Caribbean history*

Just as God repeatedly commanded the Israelites to remember their history, he wants us to also remember our history. Black history needs to be mentioned when talking about God's plan for mankind and God's control of history.

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Our Caribbean history does have striking parallels with the Jewish history recorded in the Bible, and the Rastafarians have made use of these. Thus, drawing on the similarities of the suffering and the exile, they see themselves as incarnated Jews. The Church can also make use of such parallels. We must present a Christ who is acquainted with suffering and grief. Rather than speaking about "saving souls" we can talk about emancipation, and not just of the soul but of the whole man. In this way we draw on our history of slavery and emancipation.

### **Positive Work Ethic**

The association of hard work with slavery must be challenged. The exercise of any form of work, be it cleaning toilets, farming or managing a business, does not lower one's self-worth. On the contrary, as an expression of God's image, it reflects dignity.

### **The Re-valuation of things black**

As mentioned above, one strategy used in the deliberate deculturization of the Blacks brought to the Caribbean was the denigration of Africa and the African cultural heritage, as well as of Black physical features. A theology which sees both the African culture and the physical features unique to Blacks as expressions of the image of God adds value to things black. One deliberate way of re-culturizing our people in terms of the value of things black is to point out references to Africa and Blacks in Scripture during the proclamation of the Word. Perhaps not too many Caribbean Blacks have given thought to the fact that Jesus spent a number of his childhood years in Africa (Matt. 2:13-15). Specific mentions are made in the Bible of African countries such as Ethiopia and Egypt (Psalm 68). Although these names may not refer to the same geographical locations that they do today (Chisholm 1990), they nevertheless refer to places on the African continent. The names of a number of Black persons in Scripture have already been mentioned above.

In a culture of beauty contests, where standards of beauty are largely based on Caucasian features, Blacks need to learn that their blackness, -

the dark skin, woolly hair, spread nose, etc. – is an expression of God's image, and is beautiful and acceptable.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored a very small slice of Caribbean theology, a theology of self-esteem, especially as it relates to the Black population of the Caribbean. We have shown that a firm sense of black identity founded on creation and redemption is crucial to the rebuilding of the self-esteem of this racial group. This was by no means an effort to sideline the other ethnic groups, but rather, in view of space and time limitations, to give adequate focus to the section of the Caribbean population believed to be most acutely afflicted with the problem of a negative self-image. It is hoped that as Caribbean theology grows, other theologians will see the need to focus on the sections of the Caribbean population. The challenge of course, is to get such a theology to filter down in the general teaching of the Church. I believe that when the Caribbean man begins to have a more positive view of himself, the effects will not only be individual, but social. Family life, the corner stone of any society would certainly improve. Every other facet of life, including the financial, political, judicial and moral aspects, would also be positively affected. It is my hope that this paper will pave the way for further exploration on the part of Caribbean theologians in this vital, but alas, neglected aspect of Caribbean theology.



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