

**RASTAFARI:
FROM
OUTCASTS TO
CULTURE
BEARERS.**

By
Ennis Barrington
Edmonds.
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**Reviewed by
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This publication represents the author's maturing views and comes to us after he completed his scholarly trilogy on the movement regarded by some as the only major religion having its genesis in the 20th century. His first contribution is *The Rountinization of Rastafari: An interpretive Analysis of the Entrenchment of Rastafari in the Jamaican Society* (Ann Arbor, M.I.: UMI, 1993), a publication of his doctoral dissertation accepted by Drew University. This was followed up with "Dread 'I' In-a-Babylon: Ideological Resistance and Cultural Revitalization,' as well as 'The Structure and Ethos of Rastafari' both part of the symposium *Chanting Down Babylon: A Rastafari Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). Curiously, none of these earlier works is to be found in the bibliography of the book under review.

Rastafari appears to be a thorough revision of the author's dissertation mentioned above. In both works Edmonds interacts substantially with the thoughts of Max Weber in order to provide a basic theoretical framework for his interpretation of Rastafari. However, in neither of them is there any slavish dependence on the sociology Guru. In fact, what one finds in *Rastafari* is a sober critiquing of Weber's proposals along side a healthy appreciation of his

relevant works.

So what else does one find in *Rastafari*? A truly responsible treatment of the birth and development of a powerful religious movement from the Majority World—A movement which has now become a sociological phenomenon beyond its original borders. Here we learn of the humble beginning of the movement in the 1930s, its consolidation in the following two decades, its flowering in the 70s and 80s and of its global impact particularly in the final decade of the last century.

Edmonds is not only a scholar but an engaging writer as well; and writing about Rastafari could hardly be a dull affair. For the most part he successfully argued his thesis that the entrenchment of Rastafari was made possible by ‘ (1) the internal development of the movement, (2) the gradual rapprochement between the movement and the wider society, and (3) the impact of Rastafari on the evolution of Jamaica’s indigenous popular culture’ (p.4).

In chapters 1 and 2 Weber’s theory of charisma and routinization as well as the socio-political context of Rastafari are explored. Chapter 3 expounds the Rastafarian concept of Babylon as a response to the oppression of a society in which “Dreads” were increasingly marginalized. The next three chapters present the supporting evidence for the author’s thesis. Chapter 7, the final chapter, provides a summary and cautiously engages the question of the future of the movement.

The appendix, “ A Review of the Literature on Rastafari,” significantly updates information found in the dissertation. Although I find the comments made about the various books insightful, it would have been better, in my view, if Edmonds had engaged some of these pieces in the main body of the text, especially the ones written by Rastas themselves. But I suspect that a number of these, such as *Rastafari Women: Subordination in the midst of Liberation Theology* by Obiagele Lake did not arrive on time for him to carry out such a critical task. There is one Rastafari

title, however, now in its 5th edition, which is conspicuous by its absence. It is Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah's *Rastafari: The New Creation* (Kingston: Jamaica Media Production, 2002). This book was first published in New York in 1980, and the second and third editions in London and Kingston, respectively. Hannah, a Jamaican like Edmonds, is not only the first black TV journalist on BBC and the first independent female senator in the Jamaican parliament, but more significantly, the first Rasta to have published a monograph on the movement.

One notices too that the writer has carried out his sociological analysis so rigorously that there is little or no evaluation of the theological and historical claims of Rastafari. For example, whereas others have pointed out the lack of documentary evidence for the Garvey prophecy concerning the crowning of Ras Tafari (notably, Chisholm in *Chanting Down Babylon*), Edmonds appears prepared to defend the prediction by invoking the reliability of the oral tradition which bears it (p. 147 n.34).

And what of the future of Rastafari? Here again Edmonds' scholarly caution is evident. So the reader will not see the optimism of the Dread or the pessimism of the "bald head." In fact, the book's subtitle, "From Outcasts to Culture Bearers," gives notice that the movement is no longer a subculture but a very dominant determinant of (popular Jamaican) culture with a viable future. This is at least the perception of the writer.

But Edmonds also observes that "during the decade of the 1990s several notable Rastas, including Tommy Cowan and Judy Mowatt (of the I/Threes [sic]), converted to evangelical Christianity. This defection raises further questions about the possible demise of Rastafari." In fact, Ms. Mowatt, in an interview on Jamaica's CVM TV, even claims that the late Robert Nesta "Bob" Marley made a deathbed profession of faith. A similar testimony is recorded by Hannah (2002, 62). Interestingly, Marley's mother, turned biographer (*Bob Marley: An Intimate Portrait by his Mother*),

embraced Christianity before she was converted to the Rastafarian way of life by her famous 'Jam-icon' son.

As one would come to expect of an Oxford impression, the book is virtually free from typographical errors, though there appears to be something looking like an e-mail address on page 49: 'the lying. Preacher.' All in all, the reviewer recommends *Rastafari* as the most up-to-date and balanced treatment by a non-Rasta. For the student and scholar in particular, it should be read alongside Dr. Ikael Tafari's monograph, *Rastafari in Transition* (Chicago: Research Associates, 2001), also from a sociological perspective.

