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***ENGAGING RASTAS:  
PRESERVING  
AFRICAN ROOTS AND  
BLACK PRIDE  
THROUGH  
CHRISTIANITY***

**Deseree Whittle, PhD  
(Cand.)**

**Adjunct Professor of  
Inter-cultural Studies,  
Jamaica Theological  
Seminary**

In Jamaica today, and in many other parts of the world, being a Rasta seems to be a “cool and acceptable thing.” Our Most prominent Ambassador, Bob Marley, was a Rasta, and the most popular Deejays and musicians today are Rastafarians. Sporting the dreadlock hairstyle is “en vogue” even in some of our churches and schools. The wearing of Rasta arm bands, head bands or its colours is deemed cool and popular these days especially among our young people. The young people are the future and even Solomon implores the young to remember their Creator in the days of their youth, and Christ Jesus himself said, “Suffer the little children to come unto me” (Mk. 10:14). It is enough to say then that

the church had better come up with a plan to reclaim the youths or prevent more of our youths from being ensnared in the attractiveness of the Rastafari religion, if we truly believe Jesus is the only way to the Father.

The question is, what makes the Rastafarian faith so attractive to the youths today? The answer I believe lies in its Afrocentric thrust, the concept or the question of black identity and black pride. The state of black people worldwide has not been grand economically speaking. For example, in the United States, the Census Bureau reveals as it relates to poverty that in 1998 Blacks and Hispanics suffer

higher rates of poverty than whites and Asians. The poverty rate for blacks in 1998 was 26.1 percent, statistically unchanged from the year before. The poverty rate for Hispanics was 25.6 percent, down from 27.1 percent. The rate for Asians and Pacific Islanders was 12.5 percent, down from 14 percent (not a statistically significant change). The poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites was 8.2 percent, down from 8.6 percent. Even though the poverty rate for whites is lower than for other groups, because whites make up the largest share of the population, nearly half of the poor (46 percent) were non-Hispanic whites in 1998.<sup>1</sup>

Murrell posits “Essentially, Rastafarians are ‘Africanists’ who are engaged in the consciousness-raising with regard to African heritage, black religion, black pride, and being in the world” (1998, 5; cf. Palmer 2008). Hutton and Murrell contend that Rastafarian psychology is, “Afrocentric and came to birth, over a long period of time, in an oppressive environment in the diaspora that made black psychology absolutely necessary for the survival of people of African ancestry” (1998, 11). The aforementioned assessment therefore begs the following questions:

1. Does Christianity have African roots?
2. Is there a black presence in the Bible or in the Judeo-Christian tradition?
3. Can Christianity promote and preserve African roots and black pride?
4. How can Christians preserve African roots and black pride through Christianity?
5. What should our method of evangelism look like?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.policyalmanac.org/social\\_welfare/poverty.shtml](http://www.policyalmanac.org/social_welfare/poverty.shtml).

This paper is an attempt at answering these crucial questions. It is by no means a Christian apologetic response to Rastafarianism, nor does it attempt to delve deeply into the intricacies of the Rastafarian faith. What it will however seek to do, is to uncover evidence that indicates a preservation of black roots and pride throughout the history of Christianity especially in the mother land of 90% of Jamaicans: Africa. Even more relevant to this discourse, is the place of Christianity in Ethiopia's history, since this country holds such pride of place amongst Rastas. In addition, a few of the key tenets of the Rastafarian faith will be delineated, along with a look at issues to bear in mind when evangelizing persons from other faith groups. Included also is a section on Haile Selassie (Follower of Christ or Christ Incarnate?).

### **Christianity in Africa**

According to Hugh Quarshie of the BBC, in *The Story of Africa*, "So far the evidence that we have in the world points to Africa as the Cradle of Humankind. Most of the available scientific evidence suggests Africa was the continent in which human life began." Not only did life begin in Africa but Christianity while in its formative years also spread to this continent. He also states that Christianity first arrived in North Africa, in the 1st or early 2nd century AD. The Christian communities in North Africa were among the earliest in the world. Legend has it that Christianity was brought from Jerusalem to Alexandria on the Egyptian coast by Mark, one of the four evangelists, in 60 AD. This was around the same time or possibly before Christianity spread to Northern Europe. Once in North Africa, Christianity spread slowly West from Alexandria and East to Ethiopia. Through North Africa, Christianity was embraced as the religion of dissent against the expanding Roman Empire (BBC World Service).

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, we may admit that the evangelization of Northern Africa began very early. By the opening of the third century there was a large Christian population in the towns and even in the country districts, which included not only the poor, but also persons of the highest rank. A council held at Carthage about the year 220 was attended by eighteen bishops from the province of Numidia. Another council, held in the time of St. Cyprian, about the middle of the third century, was attended by eighty-seven bishops. Christianity was an agent of great change in Africa. It de-stabilized the status quo, bringing new opportunities to some, and undermining the power of others. With the Christian missions came education, literacy and hope for the disadvantaged. However, the spread of Christianity paved the way for commercial speculators, and, in its original rigid European form, denied people pride in their culture and ceremonies (BBC World Service).

Christianity, therefore, has had a rich history in Africa. It is important to note that this was long before the atrocities of slavery; before the colonization of Africa by the Europeans; before the formation of the papacy; before the conversion of Constantine and before the Dark Ages or Middle Ages and before the centuries in which atrocities were committed in the name of Christianity. Attention will now be focused on Christianity in Ethiopia because of the pride of place that Rasta's attribute to Ethiopia.

### **Christianity in Ethiopia**

Bill Neil of the CBC notes, "Ethiopia is one of the oldest Christian nations. In fact The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is said to be one of the oldest churches in the world and actually may be the first established church" (See Acts 8:27-39). That Ethiopia has found strength in the church is well supported in Christian history. From as far back as biblical times, the church has been the foundation upon

which this magnificent country has developed. Europeans were very intrigued with Ethiopia during the Middle Ages because they believed it to be the only Christian nation outside of Europe (Kurtz, 66). Legends began to circulate in twelfth-century Europe of a mysterious priest-king named Prestor John. This devout Christian ruled a kingdom strategically placed to ward off the Islamic influence (Marcus, 14).<sup>2</sup>

In support of the aforementioned the *Jamaica Culture* website acknowledges that in the fourth century Christianity was made the official religion of that country. The majority of the Kings of Ethiopia were Christians including the former Emperor His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I. Ethiopia is a land of churches. Quarshie concurs with this noting that in the 4th century AD the Ethiopian King Ezana made Christianity the kingdom's official religion. In 312 Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. In the 7th century Christianity retreated under the advance of Islam. But it remained the chosen religion of the Ethiopian Empire and persisted in pockets in North Africa.

Evidence from the Dread Library indicates that the Ethiopian Church has maintained many more Jewish practices than most other Christian Churches. Every Ethiopian Christian male is circumcised. Devout Ethiopian Christians keep Sabbath (as well as Sunday), an ark is an essential part of every church, and is carried out of the church for festivals, and priests will sacrifice a goat or a lamb for the sick. Ethiopian Christians claim a long Jewish heritage before the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fhi.net/fhius/ethiopiafamine/christian.html>.

coming of Christianity. They trace the royal line back to Menelik the son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, though that claim cannot be independently verified. They also claim that the true Ark of the Covenant still exists and is kept safe in an Ethiopian monastery.

### **Early Church Fathers**

Even some of the most famous Early Church fathers were Africans including, Tertullian and Augustine. The Fathers of the Church spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, defended the Church in apologetic writings and fought the many heresies of the first six centuries of Christianity. These men, also called Apostolic Fathers, gave special witness to the faith, some dying the death of a martyr. Like Jesus who referred to Abraham as a spiritual father (Luke 16: 24) and St. Paul, who referred to himself in the same terms (1 Cor 4: 15), the Fathers were zealous for the word of God. Their writings are a testimony to the faith of the early Church, yet many Christians are unfamiliar with the works of Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin the Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage, Athanasius, Ephraim, Cyril of Jerusalem, Hilary of Poitiers or Gregory the Great to name of few of the early Fathers.

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian was born to pagan parents in Carthage, North Africa between 155-160 A.D. A lawyer by profession, he converted to Christianity in 193 A.D. and became a Catholic apologist until 212 A.D. His writings during his period of orthodoxy arguably represent the first in the new vernacular of the West, Latin, by a Christian author. His prolific writings are often quoted by later Christians, especially St. Jerome and St. Augustine. His most famous work entitled simply, "Apology" is preserved in no

less than 36 codices. Written about 197 A.D., it is most quoted phrase is, no doubt, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Church!" Tertullian wrote many other works, some of which are quoted below. He died between 240-250 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

Saint Augustine (354-430) is widely regarded as the greatest of the Latin Fathers and one of the most eminent Western Doctors of the Church. Considered to be one of the most outstanding theologians in the history of the Catholic Church, Augustine was born in North Africa in Tagaste, Numidia (now Souk-Ahras, Algeria) and died there in 430. Aurelius Augustinus grew up to be one of the leading Rhetoricians of his time.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, being Christian is not a denial of our African heritage or roots as black people in the Caribbean. Being a Christian is an "African thing" and a means of preserving our heritage. Furthermore, to be an Ethiopian and a true follower of the Emperor Haile Selassie is to be truly Christian. Moreover, in an *Ebony* article by Lisa C. Jones, entitled, "Blacks in the Bible," Dr. Renita J. Weems, an Old Testament assistant professor at Vanderbilt University who specializes in biblical hermeneutics asserts that "The information has been there for the reader all along, to the extent that African-American people identify with their African heritage, I think that they can take pride in [the fact] that African people were very much embedded in the founding of the Judeo-Christian traditions." Black characters in the Bible in terms of colour are many, these include, Moses' wife, Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian Eunuch and Zephaniah.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [www.colostate.edu/Depts/Speech/rccs/theory21.htm](http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/Speech/rccs/theory21.htm).

<sup>4</sup> [www.colostate.edu/Depts/Speech/rccs/theory21.htm](http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/Speech/rccs/theory21.htm).

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1077/is\\_n4\\_v49/ai\\_14781982](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_n4_v49/ai_14781982).



## **Rastafarian Beliefs**

There are about ten basic beliefs which underpin the Rastafarian movement. The most important one and common in all strains of Rastafarian groups is the belief that the Emperor Haile Selassie is the living God. Haile Selassie is the Christ, the black Messiah whose promised return or “second coming” the emperor fulfills. The emperor is the living descendant of King Solomon and the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Elect of God. God is man and man is God. God is to be found in every man but there is one man in whom he exists most eminently and completely, and that supreme man is Ras Tafari Selassie I. He is the living God and black Messiah.

Akin to the preceding belief is that which concerns black people’s African heritage. There is a strong belief in the rejection of Western values and the preservation of African roots and black pride (Murrell 1998, 5). Two questions are of particular importance in light of the preceding beliefs: was the Emperor a follower of Christ or Christ incarnate? Does the acceptance of Christianity by black people signify an approval of Western Values and the non-preservation of African Roots and black pride?

### **The Emperor Haile Selassie: Follower of Christ or Christ Incarnate?**

*Today man sees all his hopes and aspirations crumble before him. He is perplexed and knows not whither he is drifting. But he must realize that the solution of his present difficulties and guidance for*

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*his future action is the Bible. Unless he accepts with clear conscience the Bible and its great message, he cannot hope for salvation. For myself, I glory in the Bible.*

Chisholm notes that in the “Religion” section of the emperor’s *Selected Speeches*, not only does the compiler describe Haile Selassie as “a devout Christian,” but the emperor indicates Christian orientation and reliance upon God. He accepted the title *Defender of the Faith*, with great honour. In his speech at the 1966 World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin, the emperor urged, “Christians let us rise and... labour to lead our brothers and sisters to our Saviour Jesus Christ who alone can give life in its fullest sense” (1998, 175; see also Chisholm 2008).

It was the emperor himself who sent the Abuna to establish the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Jamaica. According to the Dread Library, his family members and other Ethiopians denounce the worship of Emperor Haile Selassie as God. Some despise the use of their flag as a symbol of Rastafarianism. Emperor Haile Selassie was a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as all past Kings in Ethiopia. In an interview with Bill Neil of the CBC in 1966, the emperor staunchly denied that he was God.

Nevertheless, the Rastas continue to believe that he is divine. This they attribute to his outstanding achievements as a black man and to the titles the emperor bore. This begs the question: were these titles unique to him. Clinton explains that these titles were not unique to the emperor. The emperor ceased to be “*Ras*” or head in 1928. He assumed these titles or they were conferred upon him as with his predecessors and reflected the Christian religious organization in that country. For example, Melinek II was *King of Kings*. *Haile Selassie* (Power of the Trinity) was also a title that

his cousin “*Imeru Haile Selassie bore. Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah*” was their motto symbolizing the Christian nature of the nation (1998, 170 -172). At this point it should be clear that the Emperor considered himself a devout Christian and his lifestyle never reflected otherwise.

What is more, if Haile Selassie is Christ incarnate or Christ returned, he certainly from a biblical perspective lacks the accompanying signs. The Bible indicates that the return of Christ will be public and spectacular: “the heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, the earth and everything will be laid bare... and there will be a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10-12). The point is that Jesus came to liberate people regardless of colour and class. Those who follow in his footsteps are to do likewise. The fact that the emperor was patterning Jesus does not make him God or Jesus incarnate.

### **Evangelizing Rastas: Methods**

In evangelizing Rastas, I propose two methodologies: *Dialogue Personal Evangelism and Forum Evangelism*. *Dialogue Personal Evangelism* as explicated by Peters is:

*A two-way conversation rather than a one-way presentation or proclamation. The meeting of Christ with Nicodemus maybe taken as a Biblical pattern. The purpose is evangelism, the procedure is dialogue –the sharing of experiences, needs, aspirations and frustrations, with a view of dissolving difficulties, obstacles and prejudices in the heart and mind of the unsaved person. It is a gentle attempt to persuade the individual to accept the offer of God in Jesus Christ and to commit himself for salvation and life (1974, 3).*

In this method of evangelism one could use various springboard techniques such as questions concerning Rastas' view of the Bible, or a line from a Bob Marley Song or any one of their popular artistes. Rastas have a high regard for the Bible although their hermeneutic is quite different from us Christians.<sup>6</sup> One could also genuinely inquire about their faith and posit certain questions to them in a non-offensive manner about why they hold to certain beliefs. One could use a survey technique to gain an understanding of their faith. One would also introduce him or herself and ask some of the following questions.

### Sample Questions

1. *Many of the Reggae artistes today are Rastafarians. What do you think is responsible for this trend?*
2. *Would you be so kind as to explain to me why you are a Rastafarian?*
3. *If I were to become a Rastafarian give me at least three reasons why I should become one.*
4. *Would you be interested in hearing why I am a Christian and what makes Christianity so appealing to me?*

Due to the nature of the questions, this technique is proposed for persons who would be willing to spend at least half an hour speaking to the unbeliever. Previous arrangements will have to be made. This should not be a 'by-the-way' strategy. This latter statement is significant because many Rastas are argumentative

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<sup>6</sup> But see "I-n-I in the NT and the Hermeneutics of Caribbean Theology," *Groundings: Catholic Theological Reflections on Issues Facing Caribbean People in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* 29 (January 2013): 37-59.

and it calls for patience and wisdom on the part of the Christian. One should spend a great deal of time listening to the person as s/he speaks, and attempt to find areas of commonality to discuss issues concerning your faith. Of note I suggest that the witness make mention of Christianity's African roots or connection.

The idea of *Forum Evangelism* is taken from Acts 19: 8-10, where the Apostle Paul whilst in Corinth for two years held discussions in the lecture-hall of Tyrannus and the result was that the whole province of Achaia, both Jews and Gentiles heard the word of the Lord and many miracles were done. In terms of *Forum Evangelism*, these forums should be public, at community centers, schools and other neutral grounds. The topic could include issues relating to Black identity, preserving African Roots and Black Pride, Christianity in Africa, Poverty and the Black Race, Christianity and Oppression, Haile Selassie and the Church, et cetera. One of the key periods to do such forums could be Black History Month. The event should be highly publicized and great efforts made at contacting persons in the Rastafarian Community. The hosts should be quite knowledgeable about the Rastafarian faith, the history of Christianity and Africa. The format of the forum could include music and the use of the drums and conscious lyrics. One could also include a segment on the claims of Christ and a time of reflection and testimonies from former Rastafarians.

### **Preparation**

I would go so far as to describe these two methods of evangelism as power encounters, and the tearing down of strongholds of the mind. I would encourage much prayer and even fasting prior to the event. Prayer should not only be done prior to the event but during the event. Evangelism must be done in the power of the

Holy Ghost. The aim of these two methods is conversion. Only the Holy Spirit can convict men of sin (Jn. 16: 8ff). As Drummond explains, "The proclamation of the gospel is not a mere reciting of theological dogmas; it speaks of a positive faith response with definitive results" (1992, 204):

Furthermore, as Christians we are not merely scattering seeds, we are to be looking for a harvest. We should expect to find when we seek. Calling for a decision is very important in evangelism. The Apostles, Drummond highlights, were not shy about asking people to decide for Jesus, there and then. They expected results. It takes more than just understanding Scriptures to be an effective witness in today's world... the proclaimer must be a student of contemporary society" (1992, 210, 218). In addition to this one's lifestyle need to reflect the lordship of Christ.

### **Evangelizing People of Other Faith Groups**

Sandi Dolbee, the Religion and Ethics Editor of the San Diego Union-Tribune, underscores the point that many non-Christians find conversion attempts offensive. Hinduism, for example, holds that all religions are equal. "The concept of conversion is a kind of aggression." But for evangelical Christians, salvation is only possible through Jesus. To not preach that, and to not reach out to unbelievers, would be a betrayal of their faith. I agree.

## CONCLUSION

In light of our Christian mandate, captured quite poignantly in the “Great Commission,” which essentially is to make disciples of all nations, people, tribes, it is of utmost importance that we understand the people whom we intend to win. This makes proper sense if we intend to approach them from an informed position. Considering our Jamaican context, due to the popularity of the Rastafarian faith, it would seem imperative for Christians to have a ready response to deal with such an opposing force. Key to this opposing force (the Rastafarian Faith) is the idea of black pride and African roots.

Christians therefore, must be aware of the presence of both in Christianity. Christianity is after all a religion for all races and peoples. Our place or history as Africans is inextricably linked to that of Christianity and it is not all negative. We should boldly capitalize on this knowledge and engage Rastas today.

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