

THOU SHALT NOT BE BLACK

“Thou shalt not be black”: The subjugation of Negroes in the Caribbean through Christianity

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Religion—be it a system of beliefs, a way of life or a by-product of structural functionalism—is interwoven into the fabric of any society. Its illusory nature is based on the concepts of deism and theism, which allows the beliefs and values of any particular religion to be attributed to some objective and supreme source(s). However, one argues that even if it were possible, the objective nature of values from a supreme source(s) immediately loses their objectivity by way of being processed by the subjects; the human believers who are inherently subjective. Karl Marx who, not only highlights the subjective nature of religion, but also highlights its functional role to the individual within, as well as the collective of, a society echoes these sentiments:

Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But, man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man — state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification¹.

When one delves deeper into the use of religion as a means of sanctioning and justifying one's actions, one observes that right and wrong actions from the perspective of a human being becomes more obscure as it is the 'will of God' for such actions to occur. Hence it is no surprise that throughout history wars, genocide, and discrimination; ostracism and slavery have all been linked to some religious purpose. It must be noted that one cannot say conclusively or definitively that all the actions of the subjects within a belief system are solely based on religion; nor is one saying that religion supersedes all other factors that affect the cognition, attitudes and behaviour of individuals who adhere to a particular belief system. The only assertion is that based on a range of literature on the role of religion in many historical events; the role of religion in the formation and structure of a society; in addition to the aforementioned illusory nature of religion; that it does play a significant

¹Joseph O'Malley, Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843) (www.marxists.org, 1843), accessed February 15, 2011, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critique_of_Hegels_Philosophy_of_Right.pdf, 1.

role in the cognition, attitudes and behaviour of individuals as well as in the structuring of society. Barry Chevannes even alludes to the role of religion in development by highlighting an article by Joop van Kessel and Andre Droogers that attributed the failure of countries within the Latin American region towards modernization, due to the failure to acknowledge the importance of religion in development theory².

Within the Caribbean, and more specifically the Jamaican context, the failure to acknowledge religion as a significant factor in the distribution of power, opportunities and status still exists. And although such failure is evident among all sections of the Jamaican society, the group that has lost and continues to lose the most is the lower class African group. By describing this disenfranchised group along class and racial lines, it implies that there is a correlation between the two descriptions. This implication is not a fictitious one; “in fact they are two separate phenomena which may be dialectically related or not related at all depending on the particular context”³, thus “the long and short of these developments is that Jamaica’s social structure is not simply a matter of class, but rather of both class and colour”⁴.

There is the tendency of theorists to explain the construction and restructuring of society through theories such as politic process and the structural-functional paradigm without factoring in the role of culture⁵. The end result is that it is difficult to “distinguish between problems which concern race relations and other nonstructural problems which are structurally dysfunctional in a context such as in Jamaica where color divisions and class divisions parallel each other but are not strictly congruent”⁶. Therefore in order to understand the role religion—more specifically Christianity—has played in the subjugation of blacks in Jamaica from slavery till present, in accordance with Brown, one has to take a socio-political, psycho-historical, cultural and economic approach⁷. In other words, how the Jamaican society functions today as it relates to the placement and treatment of blacks is based on historical, political, socio-cultural and economic factors; all of which bear some relation to the white nature of Euro-Christianity that was brought to the Caribbean during slavery. To expand even further, the lack of social mobility of blacks in Jamaica from the period of slavery till present is due to the institutionalization of representation and meanings inherent in ‘white’ Christianity that infers a lower class status to individuals of African lineage, for the purpose of maintaining a societal structure and power distribution that favors individuals of a

² Joop van Kessel and Andre Droogers, *Secular views and sacred vision: sociology of development and the significance of religion in Latin America*, in Philip Quarles van Ufford and Matthew Schoffeleers, *Religion and Development: towards an integrated approach* (Amsterdam, Free University Press, 1988), quoted in Barry Chevannes, *The case of Jah versus middle class society: Rastafari exorcism of the ideology of racism in Jamaica* (December 1989), accessed April 30, 2011, publishing.eur.nl/ir/darenet/asset/18837/wp68.pdf.

³ Aggrey Brown, *Color, class, and politics in Jamaica*. (New Jersey, Transaction, Inc., 1979), 2

⁴ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: roots and ideology* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1994), 9

⁵ Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Mary Bernstein, *Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements* (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Hilton San Francisco & Renaissance Parc 55 Hotel, San Francisco, CA., *All academic*. 2004), accessed January 11, 2013, http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/0/9/6/4/pages109641/p109641-46.php.

⁶ Brown, *Color, class, and politics in Jamaica*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

lighter skin colour. The danger in making such a statement is that it paints a picture of helplessness of Jamaican blacks to a deeply entrenched system that has been designed to keep them down; however this is not entirely the case. As a matter of fact the Rastafari movement emerged as a direct response to the oppressive social conditions in the form of ‘economic deprivation, political disfranchisement, and cultural alienation that prevailed among Afro-Jamaicans in the 1920s and 1930s’⁸. The role of religion seems to disappear within the spheres of economics, politics and to a lesser extent in culture; but it is no coincidence that Rastafari emerged as a religious movement seeking to redefine the signs and symbols created by Christian ideology through language, images and biblical interpretations embedded in religious, educational and political institutions⁹. In other words Rastafari emerged as a counter culture. One significant attribute of the movement is that it has survived in a way that is atypical to other social movements. Armstrong and Bernstein¹⁰ echo McAdam’s sentiments that theories of social movements usually point to a more general model of institutionalized power¹¹ but “the Rastafarian movement is characterized by much fluidity and heterogeneity and lacks an umbrella organization under which all elements of the movements are subsumed [It] has developed its own complex of enduring forms of social organization¹². One argues however that this lack of structure, which in some ways can be viewed as its reason for survival can also be viewed as one of the reasons Rastafari as a movement steeped in Ethiopianism and Black Liberation cannot eradicate the traces of black subjugation that has been woven in the fabric of Jamaican culture and society through white Christianity. Another reason is that by virtue of its emergence as a counteraction to an oppressive ideology, the linkage between the new ideology and the old still exists albeit less observable through the “pink elephant theory”¹³. Therefore if one tells you not to think of a white Christ, it is the first image that comes to mind. Using an analogy to bring across another point, if an adopted child grows up in a family and the reality of being adopted is unbeknownst to him, then it may be quite difficult to encourage that individual to depart from that which he has grown to know, even if he does not stand to inherit an equal amount of the family’s birthright. This is the nature of the dilemma of Jamaican blacks in a society comprised of institutions that perpetuate the ‘white’ Euro-Christian ideology, which infers a lesser status to black African descendants. In the end, one believes that a structural social movement approach similar to how Christianity was established in the Caribbean or a purely African doctrine devoid of all ideological similarities to Christianity can be the only means of ‘salvation’ for blacks in Jamaica.

⁸Ennis Barrington Edmonds, *Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2003), 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Armstrong and Bernstein, *Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements*.

¹¹Doug McAdam, *Political process and the development of black insurgency 1930-1970* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹² Edmonds, *Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers*, 67

¹³ Gregg Steinberg, *Flying lessons: 122 strategies to equip your child to soar into life with competence and confidence* (Tennessee, Thomas Nelson, 2007).

“How it happens that class inequalities are reproduced across generations, yet are accepted as legitimate, is a central question in the study of class societies”¹⁴. Prentiss poses a more specific question as it relates to the role religion plays in the maintenance of racial and social boundaries: “what part did religion have in the making of “blackness” and “whiteness””¹⁵? Prentiss’ underlying presumption for this question runs concurrent with Stuart Hall’s concept of culture.

It is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and events. Things ‘in themselves’ rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning. Even something as obvious as a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on what it means—that is, within a certain context of use, within what the philosophers call different ‘language games’. Meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part. In a sense, this is the most privileged, though often most neglected site of culture and meaning Meaning is also produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural ‘things’; that is, when we incorporate them in different ways into the everyday rituals and practices of daily life and in this way give them value¹⁶.

After analyzing Hall’s concept, one also wishes to pose two questions. Firstly, how did ‘black’ come to mean ‘lesser than white’? And secondly, how does colour prejudice still exist in Jamaica over 150 years after the abolition of slavery that according to Chevannes, “its forms have varied, and although there is ample evidence of its diminution in recent times, it has by no means withered away”¹⁷. The answers lie in an examination of the socio-historical events that led to the formation of meaning, which currently exists in Jamaican culture.

There is the tendency to view slavery as the oppression of the Negro race under the guise of economic gain. However Eric Williams argues for a picture that portrays quite the opposite. According to him, “slavery was an economic institution of the first importance”¹⁸. And although such a view is difficult to accept based on the wealth of historical literature that documents the ill-treatment of Negroes, Williams still maintains that “slavery in no way implied, in any scientific sense, the inferiority of the Negro”¹⁹. This view falls within Marx’s theory of social life, which is shaped by the economic substructure of a society²⁰. If one were to accept William’s argument then a gap is created between the economic imperative of slavery as priority and slavery as a tool for the subjugation of the Negro race. In other words, what caused the change of the aforementioned substructure where race was irrelevant to the economic substructure that Brownsays now exists in Jamaica, where according to Fanon, “The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich”²¹. The answer to the change in focus and culture of slavery in the Caribbean lies in Weber’s opposition to Marx’s view on social life; “[he] contends

¹⁴ Julia Wrigley, *Education and gender equality* (London, The Falmer Press, 1992), 244.

¹⁵ Craig R. Prentiss, *Religion and the creation of race and ethnicity: an introduction* (New York, New York University Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁶ Stuart Hall, *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* (London, Sage Publication Ltd, 1997), 3.

¹⁷ Chevannes, *Rastafari: roots and ideology*, 3.

¹⁸ Eric Williams, *Capitalism & slavery* (North Carolina Press, The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

²⁰ Edmonds, *Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers*.

²¹ Brown, *Color, class, and politics in Jamaica*, 3.

that ideas and the human actors who conceive and countenance them are often independent variables shaping cultural and social change”²². Ironically, the independent variable that was responsible for the ideas of subjugation of Negroes was, according to Williams, a change in the economic structure. The fundamental fact was “the creation of an inferior social and economic organization of exploiter and exploited”²³. One argues that it is here that the role of religion became a ‘necessary evil’ in the equating of blacks to the role of subservience.

A change in the substructure was inevitably a change in meaning. Such change however is not an objective process but one, which is subjectively carried out for the purpose of societal order. This subjective process of signification usually favors the producers of the meaning; those who wish to govern²⁴. In the context of slavery, the colonizers created a new meaning for what it is to be African based on “new needs”²⁵. Like all other systems of slavery there needs to be some justification, which Chevannes argues is grounded in “the force of ideology”²⁶. Thus Christianity was used during slavery; reiterating Marx’s view of religion being a means of justifying one’s actions²⁷.

Chevannes highlights William McKee Evans’ discovery of the myth of the “sons of Ham” being “one of the most enduring forms of this ideology . . . applied first by the Jews to the Canaanites, by the Arabs to the Europeans, by the Europeans to the Slavs”²⁸. Williams adds another piece of the socio-cultural and historical puzzle by mentioning Adam Smith’s view that it was “pride and love in the master that led to slavery”²⁹. Using Swidler’s theory of culture in Moore, this recycling of symbols can be explained:

During unsettled times, times of social (or personal) transformation, cultural toolkits may be consciously reorganized to address the problems faced in the new social context However, the new cultural toolkit is never entirely new, but rather a reformation or alteration of existing symbols, strategies and skill sets³⁰.

Thus out of slavery, a system that was once mainstay of the Greek and Roman economy³¹, “dark skin became part of the slave stereotype . . . associated with manual labor done under the sun, or with dirtiness, ugliness, and sickness in contrast to the healthy good looks of the ruddy free man”³².

²² Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 8.

²³ Williams, Capitalism & slavery, 23.

²⁴ Hall, Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices.

²⁵ Robin Small, Marx and education (Hampshire and Burlington, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2005).

²⁶ Chevannes, Rastafari: roots and ideology, 9.

²⁷ O’Malley, Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.

²⁸ William McKee Evans, "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The strange Odyssey of the Sons of Ham." (American Historical Review 85, 1980: 15-43), quoted in Chevannes, Rastafari: roots and ideology, 9.

²⁹ Adam Smith, The wealth of nations (New York, Cannan edition, 1937) quoted in Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, 6.

³⁰ Ann Swidler, Culture in action: symbols and strategies (American Sociological Review, Vol. 52, No. 2, 1986), quoted in Kesha Moore, "Class formations: competing forms of black middle-class identity" (Ethnicities, 2008: 492-518), 499.

³¹ Williams, Capitalism and slavery.

³² David M. Goldenberg, The curse of Ham: race and slavery in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2003), 119.

The need for a constant, fixed labour force led to the interpretation of the “curse of Ham” from being ‘faith’ based to ‘race’ based because “Ham was merely the symbol of the man in isolation, the clanless, lawless, heartless man who, like heathen ethnics, did not know God”³³. The story of the ‘curse’, devoid of race, is exemplified in Josephus’ division of the world:

In his account of the habitation of the world after the Flood, Josephus divided the world into three parts: Japhet inhabits Europe; Shem has the region of the Indian Ocean, Persia, Chaldea, and Armenia; and Ham dwells in the land of Africa, Egypt, and Libya. Noah cultivated vines and made wine, after which

He offered sacrifice, and feasted, and, being drunk, he fell asleep and lay naked in an unseemly manner. When his youngest son saw this, he came laughing, and showed to him his brethren; but they covered their father’s nakedness. And when Noah was made sensible of what had been done, he prayed for prosperity to his other sons; but for Ham, he did not curse him, by reason of his nearness in blood, but cursed his posterity. And when the rest of them escaped that curse, he inflicted it on the children of Canaan³⁴.

To show the extent to which race has become a significant social reality³⁵, the use of the word ‘ethnic’ in the aforementioned statement in Hannaford³⁶ was in no way linked to racial attributes. As a matter of fact, “at the end of the Roman Republic the people who appear in the Gospel of John as having set themselves against ‘faith’ are described as ‘ethnics’ whether they are from Greece, Rome, or Israel”³⁷. One argues that by replacing the abstract concept of faith which is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”³⁸, with the more ‘visible’ concept of race was what made the perspective of Blacks being the cursed ‘Hamitic race’ more deeply entrenched in the Christian doctrine and then into slavery.

This theological foundation was the platform for contrary hypotheses by anthropologists like Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752—1840) who classified human beings based on skin colour, anatomy and climate in what he termed his “pentagist (five-part) arrangement”³⁹. Even with the emergence of a “new and more rational science of physical anthropology”⁴⁰, writers like Williams and Weber still maintained the link between economics and deism; Weber more in depth than Williams. William stated that the emerging capitalist class during slavery was “beginning to reckon prosperity in terms of pounds sterling, and . . . becoming used to the idea of sacrificing human life to the deity of increased production”⁴¹.

Weber explores the distinctive characteristic of rationalization in the West and argues that it has its roots in Puritan Protestant theology and practices. He seeks to demonstrate that

³³ Ivan Hannaford, *Race: the history of an idea in the West* (Washington D.C., The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996), 95.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 91.

³⁵ Prentiss, *Religion and the creation of race and ethnicity: an introduction*.

³⁶ Hannaford, *Race: the history of an idea in the West*

³⁷ *Ibid*, 88.

³⁸ *The Holy Bible* (Iowa, World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1997).

³⁹ Hannaford, *Race: the history of an idea in the West*

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 188.

⁴¹ Williams, *Capitalism and slavery*, 5.

capitalism in the West is characterized by rational calculation, which matches means with ends. This rationalization grew out of the Calvinist-Puritan ethos in which believers systematized their behavior in order to bring glory to God and to prove their election by Him through success in a worldly vocation. These believers saw material success as a sign of their election and proof that they were glorifying God in their calling. Therefore, they set about their worldly business in a systematic manner, using the most efficient means to achieve success as indexed by the accumulation of material resources. Although largely detached from its religious roots, this calculating spirit has become entrenched in the West and finds its purest manifestation in bureaucracy, which is a type of organization based on rationally developed and clearly expressed rules, characterized by clearly defined hierarchical relationships and specific responsibilities, and geared toward the attainment of specific goals by the most efficient means available⁴².

This framework created by Weber and Williams makes it easier on the one hand to understand why missionaries were so eager to help the Africans after the abolition of slavery, while on the other hand makes it more difficult to accept that the missionaries' primary objective was to offer the slaves a means of salvation through Christianity. This dichotomy is also displayed among scholars.

Brown⁴³, Chevannes⁴⁴ and Edmonds⁴⁵ all speak of the role of missionaries after Emancipation but from different perspectives. Brown is quite skeptical and urges one to "recall that cultural invasion was a technique used by the planter class to foster and nurture emanation with the slaves in their efforts to dominate them. It is not by coincidence that this same technique was used by the missionaries in their efforts to assist the slaves to obtain "freedom""⁴⁶. On the other hand Chevannes⁴⁷ and Edmonds⁴⁸ allude to the fact that the intervention of the missionaries was to the benefits of the former slaves. However, these views are not as antagonistic as they may seem; Brown⁴⁹ and Chevannes⁵⁰ agree that the missionaries had an impact on the human relationships and the development of a counter culture in Jamaica. Although Chevannes admits that the missionaries helping the former slaves by way of land redistribution also strengthened the church⁵¹, Brown goes further to describe how this resulted in the further degradation of the religious, traditional and cultural aspects of the Africans, which began during slavery but merely in a new form.

This time, however, the mysterious source of his "superiority" was not the colonizer's language, nor his race, but his God. So that although "most of the negroes appear to have possessed some notion of a Supreme Being", the Baptist missionary J. M. Phillippo observed, ". . . like all uncivilized nations, their ideas of the Deity were very confused and unbecoming". For the English missionaries, this was not a point that could be debated; their

⁴² Edmonds, *Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers*, 9.

⁴³ Brown, *Color, class, and politics in Jamaica*

⁴⁴ Chevannes, *Rastafari: roots and ideology*.

⁴⁵ Edmonds, *Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers*.

⁴⁶ Brown, *Color, class, and politics in Jamaica*, 48.

⁴⁷ Chevannes, *Rastafari: roots and ideology*.

⁴⁸ Edmonds, *Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers*.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Color, class, and politics in Jamaica*.

⁵⁰ Chevannes, *Rastafari: roots and ideology*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

God, the English God, and the Christian God was the one true God. Yet, giving the devil his due, unlike the slave trader and slaveowner who expressed the belief that the slave was “subhuman,” and “racially inferior”, the missionary merely thought of him as being unenlightened, uninformed, and misguided⁵².

One tends to agree with Brown based on a combination of Swidler’s theory of culture⁵³ and Hall’s view of the subjective nature of the signification process⁵⁴. What occurred was that within the emerging counter culture the ‘tools’ used by the labourers for coping with everyday interactions with the planter class were changed while the negative symbolism of being Black was maintained, since the concept of whites being superior was never a point of contention as they (whites) were the producers of meaning in any case⁵⁵. These meanings and value judgments were woven into the fabric of the Jamaican society through the needle of institutionalization.

The term institution implies consensus. And although Bourdieu argues that the term does not capture the social conflict that exists in the social world⁵⁶, the consensual implication of institution is necessary as it fits into Brown’s concept of power in social interaction as well as the focus of this paper⁵⁷. Moreover, there are many traditional functionalist conceptions of institutions therefore the term will only apply to religion, education and politics; all other concepts will fall into one of these categories. Brown and Hall agree that power is used in relationships and thus can inevitably be found in culture⁵⁸. Institutionalized power is one aspect of capacity, which is the “ability to deal with the issues of continuity, change, collaboration, conflict, and justice simultaneously”; while institutionalized power itself “results in acceptable forms of distributive and productive justice”⁵⁹. Within the context of the utilization of Christianity as a means of black subjugation, these definitions explain how the institutionalized power of the whites in Jamaica increased their capacity to maintain the lower class status of Blacks over the years. Although race and class seem to be inextricably linked, Brown’s definition of class makes it possible to classify different races of people in the same class. He states that there are and can only be three classes: conservative, transformative and destructive. “Class conflict is designed to preserve, destroy, or transform society. Race or color conflict is conservative—designed to always preserve the status quo based on the false vivification of the concept race or color”⁶⁰. Institutionalized power becomes relevant here to ensure that race and class conflict work together to preserve the existing conditions of a society; creating the image that race and class are the same. Taking a similar approach to the interactive way in which Brown defines class⁶¹, one argues that there can be interaction both within and among institutions, which increases the power of those with the capacity to shape society. This means that

⁵² Brown, Color, class, and politics in Jamaica, 49.

⁵³ Swidler, Culture in action: symbols and strategies.

⁵⁴ Hall, Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ David Swartz, Culture & power: the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁵⁷ Brown, Color, class, and politics in Jamaica.

⁵⁸ Brown, Color, class, and politics in Jamaica

Hall, Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices

⁵⁹ Brown, Color, class, and politics in Jamaica, 6,7.

⁶⁰ Brown, Color, class and politics in Jamaica, 10.

⁶¹ Brown, Color, class and politics in Jamaica.

the planter class and the laboring within the various institutions after the abolition of slavery agreed to the lower class status of Blacks. Chevannes describes the interaction among institutions (religion, education and politics) that worked together to keep Blacks at a certain level after slavery in a detailed way.

Throughout the post-emancipation decades of the nineteenth century, opportunities began to open up for peasants to join the lowest ranks of the middle class, as schoolteachers, ministers of religion, and clerks in the civil service. At the first impetus came from the nonconformist churches. Attached to every church was a school, where the brightest could be employed as teachers. Many churches also established seminaries for the native clergy; some of these seminaries grew to become high schools and colleges. As the Jamaican government increased its responsibility for elementary education and teacher training, limited opportunities for upward mobility increased apace. Education thus became the main vehicle for upward social mobility and achieved status either as clergymen, schoolteachers, sanitary inspectors, agricultural extension officers, or clerks in the civil service. Few blacks had the opportunity to advance to a higher status⁶².

These interactions created the context for the transmission of the inherent subjugation of Blacks through white Christianity from one generation to the next. It must be mentioned however that family life, media, work and language were all affected in ways that still exist today. For example, if one asks you to close your eyes and think about Christ, what image do you come up with? More often than not it is the 'stereotypical' image of a white man with blue eyes and silky, flowing hair. An individual who perceives Christ in this way subconsciously separates himself from that Supreme Being by virtue of not having the "image and likeness" of Christ. Even if one eventually thinks of Christ in a different way, one argues that an individual must think of the white Christ even before arriving at another; similar to asking an individual not to think of a pink elephant and it is the first thing that enters the mind before consciously dismissing it⁶³. Moreover, European cultural values still remain the standard for appropriate attire, grooming, physical appearance and language due to "widespread acceptance of the ideas that associate whiteness with beauty, goodness, and God and that associate blackness with ugliness, evil, and the devil"⁶⁴. Kombo further emphasizes that media portrayals also perpetuate the concept God and godliness being equated to whiteness by highlighting that it is the submerged norm⁶⁵.

Although religious institutions contributed to the perpetuation of white Christianity, the role of educational institutions cannot be overemphasized. Since as Small states "Every educational theory implies, whether it recognizes it or not, some concept of what human beings are and what they can become" then the education system after slavery limited the potential of Blacks to be all that they could be⁶⁶. Wrigley further highlights sociologists' view that the legitimation of class reproduction is necessary in Western Democracies⁶⁷. However, Marx argues that although

⁶²Chevannes, *Rastafari: roots and ideology*, 7.

⁶³ Steinberg, *Flying Lessons: 122 strategies to equip your child to soar into life with competence and confidence*.

⁶⁴ Edmonds, *Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers*, 31.

⁶⁵ James Henry Owino Kombo, *The doctrine of God in African Christian thought*, (Boston: IDC Publishers, 2007).

⁶⁶Small, *Marx and education*, 3.

⁶⁷Julia Wrigley, *Education and gender equality* (London, The Falmer Press, 1992).

Capitalism creates greater opportunities for some individuals, it leaves others largely undeveloped⁶⁸. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century this feeling of oppression due to the group of elites who “to a large extent, ran the educational apparatus and the economic system”⁶⁹, led to the formation of the Rastafari movement by those of African descent.

Many theorists like McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly have sought to explain the emergence of social movements like Rastafari. However Kwame Dawes argues that existing models fail to capture the emergence of Rastafari as its growth and survival as a movement is quite unique⁷⁰. What can be said of Rastafari however is that according to McAdam, “it was initiated by the powerless to redress economic and political inequality through non- institutionalized channels”⁷¹. A counter culture based on the view that European values oppressed the society always existed⁷². This means that there existed a different set of meanings than what was produced and disseminated by the dominant class. What makes the Rastafari movement significant is that they challenged the institutions by redefining the meaning of their existing symbols in the concepts of God, language, education and society; in favour of Africans. This process of re-articulation was necessary for those of African descent to deal with the problems they faced during the early 1900’s⁷³.

Identities are storehouses of information that persons draw on to navigate their lives, elements of the human capacity to reflect and be self-and-other aware. Identity helps us deal with two perennial and perhaps universal concerns” “What do I make of you?” and “What do I make of myself?” Our identities, both the ones we assume and the ones imposed on us, are continually open to and undergoing modification as we draw on what we learn and experience⁷⁴.

Ultimately the Rastafari movement was a movement towards redefining or some would argue, regaining African identity. Since the experiences of Blacks were “deeply rooted myths and religiously sanctioned degradation”⁷⁵, Rastafari sought to ground their opposition in the same roots but a different interpretation. Therefore, John the Baptist who announced the coming of the Christ came to mean the Jamaican born Marcus Mosiah Garvey, who Rastafari claim prophesied of the crowning of the Christ, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. Edmonds⁷⁶ explains this His Majesty’s crowning was of utmost significance because Rastafari’s historical roots were in the liberative struggle of Africans found in African and Afro-Christian faiths, Ethiopianism and Garveyism⁷⁷; His Majesty’s crowning was therefore the ultimate symbol of liberation and salvation. Biblical scriptures were interpreted through a ‘black lens’ to legitimatetheir beliefs and practices such as the coming of a black Christ (Psalm 68:31); the fulfillment of the

⁶⁸Small, Marx and education.

⁶⁹ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, vii.

⁷⁰Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers.

⁷¹ Armstrong & Bernstein, Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements, 5.

⁷² Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers.

⁷³ Keshia S. Moore, Class formations: competing forms of black middle-class identity (2008).

⁷⁴ Charles Price, Becoming Rasta: origins of Rastafari Identity in Jamaica (2009), 101.

⁷⁵Prentiss, Religion and the creation of race and ethnicity: an introduction, 25.

⁷⁶ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers.

⁷⁷ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers.

prophecy of Emperor Haile Selassie I as the Messiah (Revelations 5:2-5); and the use of marijuana (Genesis 1:29). The role of religion as a means through which an individual satisfies his social needs cannot be overemphasized. Marx's view that religion is a coping and justification mechanism for human actions, and in Weber's routinization theory where he argues that "religiously . . . motivated behaviour is relatively rational"⁷⁸; makes it clear that religion can address "existential needs, especially economic survival and the problem of meaning"⁷⁹.

Language is perhaps the most important medium or device in the formulation of identity and the creation of culture⁸⁰. The early Rastafari members fully grasped its significance and thus utilized language as a site for the opposition of European values. Language was the platform used in the creation of the concept of Babylon:

The most immediate referent is the gut-wrenching experiences of suffering, hardship, and estrangement faced by the underside of Jamaican society. It is not only the pain of economic hardship, but a sense of not belonging, of cultural alienation. It is a feeling of uprootedness and of being "out of whack" with one's environment. This sense of being in exile recalls and parallels the experience of the forced deportation of the ancient Hebrews under the Babylonian world power⁸¹.

Hence English, "standard articulation of the educated, which smacks of British culture"⁸², was deconstructed and reconstructed with loads of African and Rastafari meaning as a form of protest and degradation of 'Babylon's' language. For example the terms "downpressor and downpression" substituted "oppressor and oppression" based on the accurate belief that language shapes perception. "In a similar way, the Rastafarians changed the word "understand to "overstand". . . . they do not have to "go under" to gain knowledge and wisdom"⁸³.

The institution of education itself, alongside churches, was also rejected by early Rastafari as the source of the promulgation and perpetuation of the subjugation of Africans. The institution of education as a tool was so potent that many Blacks were, and still are, convinced that they are innately inferior to other races. "The end result of Babylon's education is the "whitewashing" of the African mind, stripping it of its African vibrations (de-Africanization), and inculcating European values, perspectives, and tastes (Europeanization)"⁸⁴.

Most Rastas stay away from the sphere of politics altogether, citing it as "politricks", and an "unending scheming of the powerful to maintain their positions of privilege and to keep the populace in its place"⁸⁵. Nevertheless, the politicians began to realize the significance of the symbolism in Rastafari and the use of ska and reggae music as media of sociopolitical commentary⁸⁶. It is still a point of contention as to whether the politicians in the 1970s were really

⁷⁸ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 9.

⁷⁹ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 9.

⁸⁰ Hall, Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices; Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers.

⁸¹ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 44.

⁸² Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 63.

⁸³ Stephen A. King et al., Reggae, Rastafari, and the rhetoric of social control, (University Press of Mississippi, 2002).

⁸⁴ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 48.

⁸⁵ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 49.

⁸⁶ King et al., Reggae, Rastafari, and the rhetoric of social control.

concerned about the poor and Rastas or whether they were just fulfilling the cunning, selfish and deceitful perceptions that Rastas had of them. Nevertheless, the symbolism of Africa and Rastafari became assimilated into the sphere of politics, as both parties utilized them in their campaigns⁸⁷. Apart from the political party formed by Ras Astor Black and Rastas like the Minister of State - Entertainment and Tourism, Damion Crawford; the political sphere has remained relatively untouched by Rastafari because some still argue that for many years “they were exploited for political gain, which has strengthened their view that politics is really polytricks”⁸⁸.

A 2010 report on the Political Culture of Democracy in Jamaica highlighted the 48.5% attendance to religious events as an indication that church attendance is a significant ritual among Jamaicans. And although this figure fell by 16% when compared to 2006, the report asserts that the “relatively high level of attendance . . . is a manifestation of the significance of religion in the lives of Jamaican people”⁸⁹. There is some level of ambiguity as to whether these statistics speak to all religions or solely to Christianity as Jamaica can be regarded as a ‘Christian’ society. Nevertheless these figures are helpful in quantitatively assessing the role of religion in the Jamaican society. If one were to pose a quite optimistic argument, then the decrease in church attendance could be attributed to the increased realization that “Christianity has not been real for blacks” in a society that is predominantly Black.

To begin with, white Christianity emphasizes individualism, and divides the world into separate realms of the sacred and secular, public and private. Such a view of the world is alien to African-American spirituality. The Christianity that has been communicated to blacks had as its primary focus life in a world to come. This was at odds with traditional African spirituality which was focused on life in the present world. And if that were not enough, Christianity is hopelessly associated with slavery and segregation in the minds of African-Americans⁹⁰.

However there is no empirical evidence to make such an assertion. Nevertheless, through a critical analysis of the Rastafari movement, recommendations can be made as it relates to how this movement can more effectively aid in the eradication of the black subjugation that is built into the Jamaican society’s institutions, due to white Christian doctrine.

Edmonds argues that, using Weber’s theory of routinization, Rastafari can be considered an entrenched social movement in Jamaica based on three factors: (1) the internal development of the movement (network of ‘mansions), (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 primarily through visual and performing arts. This is in response to the reluctance of scholars to attribute such status to the movement. Though their reasons for hesitation vary, the general reason is that the individualistic, fragmented and decentralized nature of Rastafari prevents

⁸⁷Chevannes, Rastafari: roots and ideology; Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers; King, Bays III & Foster, Reggae, Rastafari, and the rhetoric of social control.

⁸⁸ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 92.

⁸⁹Alfred Lawrence Powell et al., The Political Culture of Democracy in Jamaica (University of the West Indies & Vanderbilt University, 2010).

⁹⁰Terry Matthews, A Black Theology on Liberation (2011), accessed May 1, 2011, www.wfu.edu/matthetl/perspectives/twentyseven.html.

the routinization of the movement. Edmonds further contends that “these scholars have . . . uncritically accepted the idea that the development of formal organizational structures is the only indicator of the routinization of new movements”⁹¹. Other scholars tend to agree with Edmonds’ stance arguing that the said decentralized nature of Rastafari is the reason why it has survived despite extensive persecution⁹². They also highlight Chevannes’ claim that the diversified nature of Rastafari is due to the influence of Revivalism. Based on Weber’s view that in order for a movement to survive through its initial stages it must be routinized, then one must admit that Rastafari has become a significant part of Jamaican history and society. Moreover, it has succeeded in redefining existing symbols of blackness and Africanness. However the Rastafari movement has not quantitatively achieved its role as an effective African alternative to Christianity because it is still a small fraction of the Jamaican population⁹³. “The problem was that Rasta was counter to the strong Christian structure that dominated and continues to dominate Jamaican life and was seen first as heretical and misguided before its powerful social and political ideas were fully appreciated”⁹⁴.

Armstrong highlights the similarity between the concept of institutionalized power⁹⁵ and Dorothy Smith’s concept of the “relations of ruling”. “The “relations of ruling” refers to the ways that institutions intersect to produce and reproduce power relations and regulate society”⁹⁶. This concept is similar to the interaction among institutions that was mentioned earlier in this paper. One argues that such a concept increases the capacity of a group of individuals to dominate due to a significant increase in institutionalized power⁹⁷. This was the nature of the entrenchment of white Christianity, which perpetuated the subjugation of Blacks that began during slavery. The power of the Rastafari movement will be greatly increased if they take such an approach. This is based on the fact that although theirs was a struggle to rearticulate the symbolic tools within the Jamaican institutions while also opposing the institutions themselves; their emergence as a counteraction to White Christian value judgments inevitably allows for the continued interpretation of Blacks as being inferior albeit residual. The only other alternative is an Afrocentric religion devoid of all Christian symbols, being established as a structured social movement. Until one of these suggestions can be taken into consideration, one argues that the perception of Blacks in Jamaica, both by themselves and other races, as lower class and inferior due to the white Euro-Christian values will persist through established institutions and ultimately, Jamaican culture and society. “When we focus on something we don’t want, we bring attention to it. Everyone knows the classic lines about bringing attention to something we do not want: *Please don’t think of a pink elephant. Think of anything else, but not a pink elephant*”⁹⁸. Thus, if one asks you not to think about a White Christ, what is the first image that comes to mind?

⁹¹ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, 4.

⁹² King et al., Reggae, Rastafari, and the rhetoric of social control.

⁹³ Chevannes, Rastafari: roots and ideology.

⁹⁴ Edmonds, Rastafari: From outcasts to culture bearers, viii.

⁹⁵ Armstrong & Bernstein, Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements.

⁹⁶ Armstrong & Bernstein, Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements, 4.

⁹⁷ Brown, Color, class and politics in Jamaica.

⁹⁸ Steinberg, Flying Lessons: 122 strategies to equip your child to soar into life with competence and confidence, 63.

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