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Rastafarians and Orthodoxy

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Orthodox mission reached one of its lowest points in the fifty years between 1920 and 1970. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and its consequences virtually put a stop to any mission outreach by the Orthodox Church. In the same period there was an enormous growth in Christian and semi-Christian new religious groups and movements. In South Africa alone there are nearly 8000 different African independent churches. Wandering "bishops" (*episcopi vagantes*) travelled the world, starting new sects and denominations as they went. Some of the groups wanted to be Orthodox, and many thought they were Orthodox. In recent years, many of these groups have been "coming home", seeking in one way or another to be united to canonical Orthodoxy. Many of these groups have connections with one another, either through common origins, or because they have later joined with each other. Some groups are found in South Africa, some in other places. There are often connections between groups in different parts of the world. In this issue of *Evangelion* we will look at some of these groups.

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A HISTORY OF RASTAFARI

Part One: the Garveyite period.

Marcus Garvey was a Jamaican-born Black nationalist leader whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was the most prominent Black Power organization of the 1920s. Although himself a Roman Catholic, Garvey encouraged his followers to imagine Jesus as Black and to organize their own church. To emphasize that the new church was neither Catholic nor Protestant, the name "Orthodox" was adopted and the Filioque was dropped from the creed.

The African Orthodox Church entered into negotiations with the [Russian] Metropolia (now the [Orthodox Church in America, or] OCA) for formal recognition as an Orthodox jurisdiction. Unfortunately, these negotiations broke down: the Metropolia demanded an unacceptable degree of administrative control, while the Garveyites wanted to promulgate whatever doctrines they chose. Eventually, the African Orthodox bishop was consecrated by the "American Catholics", a group which had rejected the authority of the Pope but was otherwise similar to the Roman Church.

The Garveyite Church had thousands of members on three continents, and was a symbol of anti-colonialism in Kenya and Uganda. The African Orthodox in those countries quickly broke off relations with the New York church and instead became part of the Greek Patriarchate of Alexandria and fully Orthodox. The same process repeated in Ghana more recently, where Fr. Kwami Labe, a St. Vladimir's [OCA Seminary] graduate, has been building a strong Orthodox community on the foundations laid by the Garveyites.

Today the African Orthodox Church as such is largely defunct, although the parish of St. John Coltrane(!) in San Francisco remains quite active.

More Origins: The Black Israelites

Black slaves always felt an obvious affinity to the enslaved Hebrews; a few took this sympathy to its logical extreme and claimed to be, in fact, Jews. It is said by historians that this movement originated on a Jewish-owned plantation in the US where the slaves adopted their master's faith; that particular group, if I am not mistaken, is the one which is now actually living in Israel but many other sects exist.

These groups (some very anti-Semitic their claim of being "real Jews") are often Christian, although with an Old Testament emphasis. Frequently they claim that whites have distorted the text of the Bible, and there are attempts to "restore" the text.

One of these, of importance 'in this story, is the “Holy Piby”, an occult bible allegedly translated from “Amharic” and emphasizing the destruction of white “Babylonia” and the return of the Israelites to Africa, the true Zion. The Piby was adopted by Rastafarians as the source of their liturgical texts.

Garvey the Prophet

The Marcus Garvey of history books is a mainly political leader interested in making the black race economically equal with the white. In oral tradition, however, he appears as a divinely anointed prophet, the Forerunner of Haile Selassie.

In addition to many miracles and prophecies, he is credited with having predicted that a “mighty king” would arise in Africa and bring justice to the oppressed. When the Ras (i.e., “Prince”) Tafari I of Ethiopia was crowned emperor to world-wide fanfare, many Jamaicans claimed the prophecy of Garvey had obviously just been fulfilled: the Ras Tafari Movement was born.

Garvey himself was still alive, although his movement had largely collapsed and he himself had been jailed on (subsequently disproved) allegations of business fraud. Garvey was no admirer of Haile Selassie, observing that slavery still existed in Ethiopia, and he attacked the Rastafarians as crazy fanatics. They, however, continued to revere Garvey nonetheless, remarking that even John the Baptist had had doubts about Christ!

Part 2: The Classical Period

From 1930 until the mid-'60s, Rastafari was a local Jamaican religious movement with few outside influences. Several Garveyite leaders had independently declared that Haile Selassie fulfilled Garvey's prophecy, and the movement remained dominated by independent “Elders” with widely varying views. Not only did no Jamaica-wide “Rastafarian Church” develop, but there was not even agreement on basic doctrine or a canon of Scripture— both the Holy Piby and the King James Bible were used by various Elders, but were freely emended and “corrected”.

Overstanding

This “anarchy” was considered a virtue by classical Rastas. Rastafari was not a religion, a human organization, or a philosophy, but an active attempt to discern the will of JAH (God) and keep it. Classical Rastas were mainly uneducated Third World peasants, but they approached Rastafari in an almost Talmudic spirit, holding “reasonings”— part theological debate, part prayer meeting— at which they attempted to find the Truth.

Their attitude differed, however, from that of Protestants interpreting the Bible. They were certain that they would arrive, by divine guidance, at an “overstanding” (rather than

understanding) of the Truth. The Truth cannot be known by human effort alone, but “Jah-Jah come over I & I”, one can participate in the One who is Truth.

Mysticism

Early Rasta mystical experience emphasized the immediate presence of JAH within the “dread” (God-fearer). The doctrine of theosis was expressed with great subtlety (although not all Elders correctly distinguished essence from energy). Through union with JAH, the dread becomes who he truly is but never was, a process of self-discovery possible only through repentance. (For this reason, Rastas did not proselytize, but relied on compunction sent by JAH.) The mystical union was expressed by the use of the pronoun “I & I” (which can mean I, we, or even you, with JAH present) or simply “I” in contrast to the undeclined Jamaican dialect “me”.

Community

Many Rastas lived (and live today) in the bush in camps ruled by an Elder. Some of these camps are segregated by sex and resemble monasteries (down to the gong at the gate); more often, they are reconstituted West African Villages. The dreads observe the rules of “ital”, a dietary code based on the Pentateuch with various additions, and otherwise observe a spiritual rule. Males are usually bearded (uncommon in Jamaica during the classical period, and a cause of social and religious discrimination, so that Rastas who held jobs often were “baldfaces” who kept their affiliation secret.)

The famous “dreadlocks” were worn during the classical period only by a minority of dreads, mostly those who had taken the oath of Nazirite.

Repatriation

Among the few things all Elders agreed on were that Haile Selassie was “divine” (although what that meant was much debated) and that he intended to restore New World Blacks to Africa. Although a mystical interpretation of “repatriation” was advanced, there is no doubt that the early Elders (and most modern ones) expected outward literal return as well. This gave Rastafari an overt political dimension: the Rastafarians all, without exception, wanted to immediately emigrate to Ethiopia. This was a situation with no analogue except Zionism, and was beyond the ability of the Jamaican authorities to deal with. Revolutionaries are one thing, but the Rasta slogan was not “power to the people”, but “let my people go”. As time passed, Rastafarian frustration at this unmet demand became explosive.

The situation grew especially tense after 1954, when the government overran a Rastafarian mini-state called the Pinnacle, ruled by Elder Leonard Howell in exactly the style of a traditional West African chief. Howell's followers migrated to the slums of

Kingston, and the movement went from a rural peasant separatist movement to one associated with the ghettos of the capital. In the late '50s and early '60s, a few Rastas in desperation rejected the non-violent teaching of all authentic Elders and mounted a series of increasingly violent uprisings, culminating in several deadly shoot-outs between Rastas and British troops.

With this violence, the existence of Rastafari came to (negative) worldwide notice; more positive publicity was brought by the popularity of Rasta-performed reggae dance music a few years later. The classical period of isolation was at an end.

Part 3: Ethiopian Orthodox Missions

In this section, I will describe the Caribbean Missions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The Ethiopian World Federation

As an African country mentioned in the Bible and the only African nation to successfully resist colonialism, Ethiopia was always prominent in New World Black consciousness, but actual contact was minimal until the Second World War.

In 1937, Haile Selassie's government in exile founded EWF to raise money and political support from Black nationalist groups in the West. After the war, the EWF continued to exist in various forms, some completely under local control but all providing at least some contact with Abyssinia.

Trinidad and Tobago

In the 1940s, a Garveyite bishop named Edwin Collins set up what he said was a legitimate Coptic church under the Patriarch of Alexandria. However the Garveyite Coptics were tied more closely to the African Orthodox Church than to Egypt, and their canonicity was widely doubted. In 1952 the Garveyite Coptic diocese of Trinidad and Tobago broke away and placed itself under Addis Ababa. Clergy were imported from Africa and a fully canonical church was organised in the islands. Trinidad is an Ethiopian Orthodox success story: native-born clergy (including old-time Garveyite leaders) were rapidly ordained and parishes were founded all over the country and in Guyana.

Abba Laike Mandefro

In 1959 the central Garveyite Coptic organisation in New York tried to improve its canonical status. The archbishop went to Ethiopia, where he was supposedly ordained chorepiscopus, and returned with a group of young Ethiopian priests and deacons who were to study in American universities. These clergy almost immediately broke with the Garveyites, however, and set up parishes more oriented to the needs of Ethiopian immigrants; the Garveyite Coptic church which had sponsored them went into an

evidently irreversible decline. One of the young priests who came over at this time soon became Ethiopian Orthodoxy's representative abroad. He is Laike M. Mandefro, now Archbishop Yesehaq, exarch of the Western Hemisphere and many would add Apostle to the Caribbean.

The EWF in Jamaica

All of the above developments took place independently of the Ras Tafari Movement, which was still confined to Jamaica. An EWF chapter had opened there in 1938 and been almost immediately taken over by Rastafarians, in particular by the prominent Elders Joseph Hibbert and Archibald Dunkley. Both men were noted mystics and initiates of an ail-Black "Coptic" Masonic lodge in Costa Rica; some might therefore find it ironic that they more than anyone else would prove responsible for the illumination of Jamaica!

Grounation Day

Presumably because of the spread of the Ethiopian Church in Trinidad, Haile Selassie was invited to visit that country in 1966. Jamaica was then in the throws of an ongoing national social crisis in which Rastas were perceived by the establishment as a revolutionary threat which had to defused; a team of social scientists had advised the government that one way to do this was to foster close ties with the real Ethiopia. Accordingly, the Emperor was invited to make a stop in Jamaica.

On April 21 —"Grounation Day" to Rastas ever since— Haile Selassie arrived in Kingston. Contrary to the widely repeated claim that the Emperor was "amazed" or "bemused" upon "discovering" the existence of the Rastafarians (the greater number of whom by 1966 believed him to be God in essence), Haile Selassie's whole purpose in visiting Jamaica was to meet the Rasta leadership. Greeted at the airport by thousands of dreads in white robes chanting "Hosanna to the Son of David", Haile Selassie granted an audience to a delegation of Elders headed by Hibbert and Mortimo Planno. He urged them to become Orthodox and held out the possibility that Jamaican settlers could receive land grants in South Ethiopia. Oral tradition, which in this case seems very believable, adds that he gave the Elders a secret message for the Rasta multitude: "Build Jamaica first."

The Jamaica Missions

In 1970, at Hibbert's invitation, Abba Laike Mandefro began to evangelize the Rastafarians in person. In the course of a year he baptized some 1200 dreads and laid the foundation for the church's subsequent growth. He also encountered fierce opposition from those Elders who taught that Haile Selassie was Jah in essence and

demanded “baptism in Ras Tafari’s name”. In Montego Bay, only one dread accepted Orthodox baptism; Laike Mandefro baptized him Ahadu— “One Man”.

The Ecumenist Crisis

A major crisis struck the young church in 1971, when a public service marking the ninth anniversary of Jamaican independence was held in Kingston. Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox (Greek and Ethiopian) clergy all participated in the service. The Rastas were scandalized that Orthodox would pray with representatives of “false religions”; hundreds of baptized members defected, and an entire parish was lost. Many of these persons no doubt joined the organized Rastafarian churches which were beginning to replace the traditional Elder system, and which soon incorporated widely varying degrees of Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical and theological influence.

EWF Rastafari

Besides the heretical syncretist groups, however, a legitimate Orthodox Rastafari Movement continued to flourish as the backbone of the Jamaican church. The EWF under the leadership of Dunkley and Hibbert had enormous prestige, being tied both to the roots of the movement in Garveyism and directly to Jamaica. The EWF retained the political and social aspects and the distinctive cultural features of classical Rastafari while advocating a rigorously correct and canonical Orthodoxy, venerating the Emperor as a holy living ikon of JAH but not worshipping him. The first steps toward Orthodox Jamaica were being taken— albeit by people whose main secular goal was, to leave the country as soon as possible!

Reggae

This was also the time when reggae music was at the height of its popularity, and when explicitly religious lyrics were the norm within reggae. Many popular bands were Orthodox, notably The Abyssinians, a group with priestly and monastic connections. The family of reggae’s “superstar”, Bob Marley, were mostly Orthodox, although Marley himself was for most of his career a member of the Twelve Tribes sect. In his last years, dying young of cancer, Marley underwent a remarkable spiritual transformation (evident in his music also) culminating in his baptism; his Orthodox funeral in 1981 was attended by tens of thousands of mourners.

The Shearing of Locks

Haile Selassie was reported dead in 1975 (to the disbelief of many Rastas even today). The Ethiopian church, like many Orthodox churches under communist rule, endured terrible persecution which it survived partly by compromise with the persecutors. The

Marxist regime in Addis Ababa was very unenthusiastic that an emperor-venerating or worshipping cult was flourishing in a part of the world otherwise ripe for revolution.

In addition, I have the impression that some of the increasingly numerous and often middleclass Ethiopian emigres in the West looked down on Rastafarians. The pious suspected their Orthodoxy (no doubt often rightly; that many "Orthodox" Rastas continued to secretly harbor heretical views is quite likely); the staid resented association with an impoverished and reputedly criminal Black underclass. The latter consideration was especially strong in Britain, where all forms of Rastafari spread rapidly among the West Indian minority in the '70s. (It is important to add, however, that England's Ethiopian community also provided legal and other support for Rastas subjected to racist and police harassment during this period, especially in the Handsworth section of Birmingham.)

For whatever reason, in 1976 all Orthodox Rastas were required to cut their locks and to make an elaborate formal repudiation of heretical emperor worship (*Iatreia*). Whatever its long-term wisdom, this decree forced people who were "growing into an overstanding" by the slow traditional process to make a sudden decision; the cutting of locks, a purely external issue, seemed to many a repudiation of the movement's history.

Syncretism

In Part I showed how the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has spread through the Caribbean thanks to the Ras Tafari movement. While only a minority of Rastas have actually become Orthodox, nearly all have been influenced by Orthodoxy. The *makwamya*, or prayer stick, used by Ethiopian clergy is ubiquitous among dreads; items of clerical garb are also frequently adopted. Rastafarian painters have been heavily influenced by ikonography. Syncretism is particularly evident in the organised sects which have partly supplanted the charismatic Elder system.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel

This group (unrelated to the various Black Hebrew churches of the same name) is probably the largest and most famous of the sects. Founded in 1968 by Vernon Carrington (the Prophet Gad), the Tribes hold that Haile Selassie is Jesus Christ returned in majesty as King: the Second Coming has already happened. Their coherent theology and tight organization have won them many converts, including most of the famous reggae singers of the '70s. Something of the syncretistic feel of later Rastafari is conveyed by the cover art on the album "Zion Train" by Ras Michael (a brilliant hymnographer and one of the Ras Tafari Movement's more impressive living spokesmen). The painting shows two clerically-turbaned dreads before the open Royal

Doors of an ikonostasis— beyond which, however, is only a view of mountains against a red sky.

“Prince” Edward Emmanuel

“Prince” Edward Emmanuel, founder of another prominent sect, was a famous Elder of the classical era, responsible for convening the first “Nyabinghi” or Rastafarian general synod in 1958. The Prince was already a controversial figure who claimed to be one of the Holy Trinity along with Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey; presumably, he hoped the Nyabinghi would recognize this claim (which it did not). Thereafter the Prince began transforming his large band of worshipers into an organized church, complete with dogma, liturgy, hierarchy, and a kind of monasticism. The group’s priests, some of whom have actually been to Ethiopia, wear Orthodox vestments.

The Zion Coptic Church

The Zion Coptic Church, a semi-moribund Garveyite Orthodox denomination, was revitalized by white hippie converts in the '60s; despite its partly foreign leadership, it enjoyed explosive growth among Black Jamaicans disillusioned with the canonical church's approach. Although the “Coptics”, as they are called, insist that they are a legitimate Orthodox jurisdiction and even publish tracts on such issues as the *mia physis* [“one nature” of God] and the Council of Chalcedon, they also engage in some very questionable speculations verging on Gnosticism. To their credit, they have gone much further than the canonical church incorporating the best of classical Rastafarian culture into church life, and their retention of dreadlocks, Nyabinghi drumming, etc. has helped them gain many converts.

This success is reflected 'in their great material wealth, for which they have been criticized (they are supposedly among the largest landholders in Jamaica). One aspect of their “reverse syncretism” has caused much controversy, as well as a landmark church-state case which landed the Coptics' leadership in prison: their gnosticizing theories are used to justify ritual consumption of marijuana.

Ganja

Contrary to popular belief, pious Rastas do not smoke marijuana recreationally, and some (the canonical Ethiopian Orthodox and also the followers of certain classical Elders) do not use it at all. Most Rastafarian teachers, however, have advocated the controlled ritual smoking of “wisdom weed” both privately as an aid to meditation and communally from “chalice” pipes as an “incense pleasing to the Lord”.

The argument is that ganja is the “green herb” of the King James Bible and that its use is a kind of shortcut version of traditional ascetical practice. The Ethiopian Church, of

course, strongly discourages this: Orthodox monks have learned over centuries of experience that such shortcuts are at best dangerous and at worst soul-destroying. The issue, however, has been much sensationalized by the press, in keeping with the racist stereotyping of Rastas as stoned criminals.

Conclusion

I believe that the Rastafarians have been greatly underestimated by the outside world, including, to some extent, many elements in the Orthodox community. The classical Rastas were sophisticated theological and philosophical thinkers, not cargo-cultists worshipping newspaper photos of an African despot. They had discovered many sophisticated theological concepts for themselves, and had retraced many of the Christological and other debates of the early Church. They brought a rich cultural legacy.

While Abuna Yesehaq, at least, certainly seems to recognize this, in practise Rastas often seem to be told by the church that they must become Ethiopians in order to become Orthodox. Many are willing to do this, so great is their thirst for Truth and so acute their sense of having lost their true African culture. More, however, are not— and in a way rightly so. The Church is the poorer to the extent it does not incorporate what is good about the Rasta experience and instead tiresomely emphasizes the “heresy of emperor-worship” and “herbal sorcery”. What is forgotten is that the existence of the Rastafari movement is a miracle: a forgotten people and a lost culture bringing itself by “reasonings” to the very edge of Orthodoxy.

Surely this is a supernatural event, and so the Orthodox Rastas see it. An anonymous Nyabinghi chant goes:

Michael going to bring them, bring them to the Orthodox Church.
No matter what they do, no matter what they say.
Gabriel going to bring them, bring them to the Orthodox Church.
Raphael going to bring them, Uriel going to bring them,
Soriel going to bring them, Raguel going to bring them,
Fanuel going to bring them, bring them to the Orthodox Church.

I will conclude with a song by Berhane Selassie (Bob Marley), written around the time he was converting to Orthodoxy from the Twelve Tribes and summing up the whole Orthodox Rasta “seen”

Old pirates, yes, they rob I
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.

But my hand was made strong
By the hand of the Almighty.
We followed in this generation, triumphantly.
Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?
Cause all I ever have: redemption songs,
These songs of freedom.

This was the last song on the last album Marley released before his death.

For further reading:

R. Auger et al. *The Rastafarian Movement in Kingston*, Univ. of the West Indies, 1960 (A long excerpt is in Lincoln, infra.)

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Archbishop Yesehaq, *The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church* (available from Holy Trinity Cathedral, 140-142 W. 176th St, Bronx NY 10451). [*Tewahedo* means "Orthodox".]