

# n e w   w o r l d   o r d e r s

## millennialism in the western hemisphere

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### **Rastafarianism and the Third Millennium: Cultural Liberation and Judgment of the World**

**Leslie R. James  
De Pauw University**

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This paper recognizes that millennial consciousness, “as the millennium approaches,” along with a sense that “the time is at hand,” have been pivotal in the Rastafarian movement and discourse. It investigates the millennial nature of Rastafarianism, which began in Jamaica in the 1930s and is now a global phenomenon. Rastafarianism, once a New Religious Movement (NRM) has become somewhat mainstream in certain parts of the world. Millennial movements, in religious terms, expect imminent, total, ultimate, this-worldly, collective salvation. In the millennial movements the present world order is expected to be transformed at any time. The central role of a prophet or leader who may have experienced revelations concerning the imminence of the millennium and believes that he has been specifically chosen to inaugurate the millennial era is a common and important factor in millennial movements. Such a person can be a resurrected cultural hero or a supernatural figure in human form. Millennial moments of a messianic type are those movements which believe that when the final catastrophe occurs a messianic leader, frequently, a past cultural hero, will re-appear, bring about the millennial event, and transfigure history. A deep sense of guilt or responsibility for the plight in which the followers find themselves prevails in such movements. This sense of guilt, which embraces the historical past, is coupled with a deep confidence in the eventual reversal of a condition marked by various forms of deprivation. This sense of historical reversal is expressed in Rastafari philosophy in the dialectic between Babylon/Ethiopia, Exile/Repatriation, John the Baptist/Marcus Garvey, Jesus Christ/Haile Sellassie, violence/peace, guilt/atonement, traditional (natural)/technology, I-It/I-n-I.

#### ***Introduction***

The Ras Tafari is a Jamaican millenarian cult That is to say, by virtue of certain peculiar traits they have become a group of Jamaicans the essence of whose cohesion lies in the fact that they look outward from the society, not because there is anything out there, but because it is no longer possible to look inward upon the system of which they are a part.<sup>1</sup>

When the Third Millennium arrives it will mark the end of the modern period which began around the time that Christopher Columbus encountered the New World. This tragic encounter led to the construction of a European colonial mercantile imperial project. The dark cost of this

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<sup>1</sup> Orlando Patterson, “Ras Tafari: The Cult of Outcasts, *New Society* (November 12, 1964): 15

mercantile project was the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the enslavement of millions of Africans, and the destruction of the cultures of the peoples of Africa and Asia. Those who celebrate the progress and development that have marked the modern era simply fail to see, or simply deny, the horror that has been at the center of modernity. The horror can be described as the genocidal nature lying at the center of European colonization and passion for world domination. Europe's progress, indeed the progress of the so-called first world, has been at the expense of the peoples of the Third and Fourth World. A strange myopia makes it impossible for some to see that apocalyptic horror. If apocalyptic refers to the end of the world as we know it, then, there have been those in the Caribbean and the Americas who have tasted the apocalypse a long time now. How strange do we seem to those who have suffered the brutish history of the modern age when we parade before them our material and other successes? They must consider us strange; perhaps they do not even know how to tell us that they are simply afraid of us; that they have no trust or hope in us? They hear us proclaim one thing loudly; yet they know that we do not believe what we say or are simply deluding ourselves.<sup>2</sup> In a real sense, therefore, the dawn of the new millennium can well be a time of judgment; a time in which the accumulated transgressions must be paid for. This paper therefore sees the Third Millennium from the perspective of judgment. Crisis can be another term. This paper posits that, in the modern period, humankind, especially a certain section of our global family, created a project to construct a world on the exploitation of the greater part of humanity and the environment. The point is that those who considered themselves to be culturally superior exploited, and sought to legitimate their cultural exploitation, of those they considered to be culturally inferior. It is not that prophetic voices did not arise to express outrage at such exploitation.<sup>3</sup> The points is that such voices have seldom being heard, in some cases they have been silenced (and honored after). Amongst such voices Rastafarianism has been one of the most strident and sustained voices. The purpose of this paper is to bring the voice of Rastafarianism into critical dialogue with the modern project and to reveal how its voice is one of cultural liberation and judgment on the modern world and those who constructed it. It is a voice that seeks to subvert and overturn the hegemonic, genocidal, nature of the modern project. Consequently, this paper emphasizes both the cultural resistance, liberative, and millenarian dimensions of Rastafarianism. This study does not see the dimensions of protest and millenarianism in Rastafarianism as discrete but as conjoint. In terms of judgment Rastafarianism calls oppression and those who perpetrate it into account.

To fully understand Rastafarianism it is essential to understand the determination intrinsic in the struggles of diasporic African peoples to construct an identity radically different from that which Europe tried to impose upon them consequent on the Columban "discovery" of the New World, New World slavery and colonization. Rastafarianism is by far the most articulate expression of that African determination. According to Elliot P. Skinner:

The determination of African peoples to end the feeling of self-alienation and to restore our civilizations is an imperative for the for the twenty-first century. For over four

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<sup>2</sup> The good we would, we do not; the evil we would not, we so easily do. Herein lies St. Paul's most significant relevance for the modern age.

<sup>3</sup> An early voice in the tradition of protest against was Bartolome de Las Casas who protested against the Spanish exploitation of the indigenous Indian inhabitants of the New World. He, however, no matter how much revisionists have tried, cleared the way for the enslavement of the African in the New World. The dark side of Las Casas' legacy is the way in which the peoples of African decent are treated in Latin America today.

centuries, those of us whose ancestors were torn away from Africa's shores by the slave trade have been victims of what has been termed an "exilic" agony.<sup>4</sup>

Rastafarianism, born out of the slums and ghettos of Jamaica, now one of the fastest growing and most universal religious traditions, is one of the most articulate and enduring African Diasporic attempts to transcend and end the Black "exilic" agony.<sup>5</sup> In its emphasis on repatriation, return to Africa/Ethiopia, Rastafarianism has made the ending of Pan-African "exilic" identity an imperative. Repatriation, in addition to the divinity of Haile Sellassie, and the use of herbs, is one of the primary canons of Rastafarian theology. These primary emphases of Rastafarianism, when properly considered, are geared toward the reconstruction of fragmented Afro-Jamaican and Black existence. They also express the millenarian nature of Rastafarianism.

### *Towards a Definition of Rastafarianism*

Rastafarianism, perhaps because of its profound critique of the world in which Black existence is precarious and vulnerable, is not easily definable. Conceptual frameworks tend to break down in their attempt to define Rastafarianism. Scholars and other should therefore apply conceptual frameworks to Rastafarianism with great humility. There are those for whom, including Rastas, the issue of situating Rastafarianism within specific conceptual frameworks is irrelevant. The point is that however one might try to conceptualize it one cannot fail to recognize "the enemy" As far as Rastafarianism is concerned it is "Babylon" against which Rastas are engaged in an apocalyptic struggle. The famous 1960 Smith, Augier, Nettleford report on the Rastafari movement helps to bring out the movements millennial nature:

Babylon really covers the Western world. Extreme racialists include Russia but many do not. In its local form, Babylon is explicitly represented by the Government, the Police and the Church. Ministers are Antichrists and preach Antichrist. They are the agents for the mental enslavement of the black man. Their most vicious representatives are black priests, the oppressive allies of the white man. Both the white and black oppressors shall suffer the same fate. The original God of the white man was Adam-Abraham, the leper, Anglo-Saxon blood-sucker and slave-master. Pope John has inherited his role. All white men are evil, all colored men are evil, some extreme racialists say all yellow men are evil; some black men are positively evil--these are the allies of the white oppressors. Others live in sin, not knowing that Ras Tafari is the Living God. These mental slaves nonetheless are Ethiopians who will be redeemed by the work of the Church Triumphant, which is the Ras Tafari brethren, and will be brought back to their own vine and fig-tree in Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Elliot P. Skinner, "The Restoration of African Identity for a New Millennium," in *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, eds. Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, Ali A. Mazrui, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Rastafarianism is to be found not only in Jamaica, where it originated, but also throughout the English speaking Commonwealth Caribbean; Europe, North America, Russia, South Africa and even Japan. Indeed Rastafarianism has gone into all the world.

<sup>6</sup> M.G. Smith, Roy Augier, Rex Nettleford, *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*, (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, Department of Extra-Mural Studies, 1978), p. 20.

The converse of Babylonian reality is Zion. The Smith, Augier, Nettleford report describes Zion as follows:

Zion is “on the side of the North, the City of the Great King” (Psalm 48). It is known to the uninstructed as Addis Ababa.<sup>7</sup> Ethiopia is the prepared place for Israel, the heaven of the black man, just as Europe is the heaven of the white man and China is the heaven for the yellow man. Long ago the entire continent of Africa was known as Ethiopia; the white man called it Africa and carved his empires within it. Now these empires have crumbled. Africa is almost free. South, East and Central Africa are the last white strongholds but these shall surely fall quite soon. The complete collapse of white dominion in Africa is the direct effect of Haile Sellassie’s will and word.<sup>8</sup>

The above quotations support the central argument or thesis of this paper that Rastafarianism is a millenarian movement. Rastafarianism announced the dawning of a new world for African peoples. In apocalyptic terms it is the birth of a new heaven and a new earth. It is the arrival of the New Jerusalem; the City of God now dwells with humankind. A Divine Haile Sellassie now dwells with his people and they dwell with him. This has tremendous implications for Black people and for the history which they have had to endure in the modern world. In this new era “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” As Messiah Haile Sellassie is redeeming his people. The government of the peoples is therefore on Haile Sellassie’s shoulders. . Today, the system of apartheid has ended in South Africa.

Orlando Patterson asserts, “The Rastafari is a Jamaican millenarian cult.”<sup>9</sup> According to Patterson, by virtue of certain peculiar traits the Ras Tafari have become a group of Jamaicans the essence of whose cohesion lies in the fact that they look outward from the society, not because there is anything out *there*, but because it is no longer possible to look inward upon the system of which they are a part. In other words the Rastafari find it impossible to integrate into Jamaican society; consequently they must separate; they must look outward, away from that society.<sup>10</sup> Patterson, critiquing Worsely and Firth, argues that the millenarian cult is an outlet, rather than an agent, for revolutionary social action. It functions far more in maintaining the status quo than in disturbing it. “The millenarian cult may be defined as a pseudo-revolutionary social movement in which the overwhelming desire of the members to change their social position in the order of the social system (rather than the system itself), so as to be accepted by it, is expressed in and displaced through the medium of group fantasy.”<sup>11</sup> One does not get the impression that Patterson is enthusiastic about Rastafarianism or ascribes much significance to its future role in Jamaican culture; at least not at the time he wrote. Is it that Patterson’s thought is too heavily influenced by that of Albert Camus? That Patterson recognizes the “crucifixion” and marginalization of the Rastafarian marginalized status but has no hope for their “resurrection”? But do the Rastas depend on Patterson to determine their future?

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<sup>7</sup> In Amharic, Addis Ababa means new flower. Rastafarianism is drawing on rich imagery here.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Orlando Patterson, “Ras Tafari: The Cult of Outcasts, *New Society* (November 12, 1964): 5.

<sup>10</sup> The issue of outward/inward looking in the case of the Jamaica Rastafari is comparable to that of the integrationist versus the nationalists in the United States of America. Martin Luther King, Jr., is representative of the integrationist and Malcolm X of the Nationalists.

<sup>11</sup> Patterson, “Ras Tafari: The Cult of Outcasts,” *ibid.*, p. 15.

To understand the genesis of Rastafarianism in Jamaica, from a Black cultural perspective, it is critical to understand the racial construction of Jamaican society at the time the Rastafarian movement emerged. “Jamaican society was nurtured on the principle of race pride and has always experienced some overt form of it.” Until 40 years or so ago the white version of this principle was in vogue. It still is, though now tactfully held in abeyance. It was not until the 1920s that the inevitable counter principle of black racism began to emerge in the writings and speeches of Marcus Garvey, who, while not claiming superiority of the whites formed his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) to promote Black nationalism, racial pride, and the basic demand of “Africa for the Africans, at home and abroad.” “Garvey,” says Patterson, “proved too early for his times.” He was rejected by his own country, found some success in America but was later expelled from that country, finally dying in oblivion in England.<sup>12</sup> Garvey, however, did not preach in vain. The first stirrings of racial dissatisfaction on the part of the Jamaican Negro can be traced to this ostensibly unaccepted prophet. This dissatisfaction was later intensified in the thirties by the economic depression culminating in the island-wide riots and near rebellion of the black working class. If Patterson presents a minimalist cautionary interpretation of the significance of Garvey, a maximalist approach would see him as a millennial prophet of Rastafarianism. The life and work of Marcus Garvey therefore subverted the hegemony of “whiteness” in Jamaica and cleared the space for the ascendancy of “blackness” in Jamaica. He also helped to do the same throughout the Caribbean and the Black Diaspora.<sup>13</sup> Garvey placed “blackness” at the center of Caribbean identity. As a Black Jamaican prophet Garvey cleared the way for the emergence of Rastafarianism in Jamaica. Without Garvey, the Rastafarian doctrine concerning the divinity of Haile Sellassie would not have emerged. The fulfilment of Garvey’s prophecy in the person of Haile Sellassie actually defines Rastafarianism as a messianic type millennial movement. Millennial messianic movements believe that when the final catastrophe happens a messianic leader, frequently a past cultural hero, will re-appear and bring about the millennial event and transfigure history. The enthronement of Haile Sellassie as Emperor of Ethiopia therefore impacted the further development of Rastafarianism in Jamaica. Is it possible that Garvey, as the ancient Israelite prophets, saw the eventual decline of Babylon and the consequent moment for African exiles to return home to Zion/Africa/Ethiopia? Was there an inherent prophetic/apocalyptic notion in Garvey’s thought that “nations rise and wane?” What nations or civilizations did Garvey have in mind? Questions like these might lead one to consider that Garvey might have been more radically prophetic and apocalyptic than he is often imagined to be.<sup>14</sup> Tony Sewell is apposite when he states that “it is Garvey’s legacy that provides the minds, men and ideas for the evolution of the Rastafarian movement.”<sup>15</sup> In reality, Garvey passed on to Rastafarianism, to borrow a term from Cornel West, the task of “Decentring Europe.”<sup>16</sup> Garvey’s legacy and Rastafarian ideology and praxis are to be seen as a process of decolonization.

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<sup>12</sup> It is worthwhile to compare the rejection of Garvey to that of Jesus of Nazareth, as recorded in the gospels. Furthermore, it might be more insightful to compare Garvey and Jesus; Rastafarianism and early Christianity. Today, Garvey is the most celebrated of Jamaican National Heroes.

<sup>13</sup> Garvey traveled throughout the African Diaspora--the Caribbean, North and Central America, and the United Kingdom--and observed the oppressed conditions in which the people of African descent were held in these various situations. As successors to Garvey members of the Rastafari movement have also traveled throughout these regions and beyond.

<sup>14</sup> The coming Millennium might well call for a re-recovery of the life and thought of Garvey from a millennial perspective.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Sewell, *Garvey’s Children: The Legacy of Marcus Garvey*, (London & Basingstoke: MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD, 1990), p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> See “Decentring Europe: The Contemporary Crisis in Culture,” in *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism: Volume I. Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*, (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993), pp. 119-141.

Decolonization of the Third World, as an historical coordinate of “decentring” Europe, is “the exercise of the agency and the new kind of subjectivities and identities put forward by those persons who had been degraded, devalued, hunted and harassed, exploited and oppressed by the European maritime empires.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Rastas were able to interpret Haile Sellassie identity on the basis of Garvey’s prophecy:

The complete collapse of white dominion in Africa is the direct effect of Haile Sellassie’s will and word. This proves he is the Messiah, presently redeeming his people. “Africa for the Africans at home and abroad”--“One God, one Aim, one Destiny”; this proves that Marcus Garvey was a major prophet whose words are presently being fulfilled. It also assures the brethren that most black Jamaicans will soon accept this doctrine.<sup>18</sup>

As earlier said, there is a strange irony that Rastafarianism tends to elude those who try to impose any conceptual framework on it. This conceptual difficulty is in direct correlation with the nature of millenarianism which points to a radical reversal of the present order. However, if one listened to the some of the central doctrinal tenets of Rastafarianism one would not fail to hear the fundamental millenarian/apocalyptic vision of Rastafarianism. One has to inhabit Rastafarian discourse, in all its diversity and richness, to appreciate the millennial nature of the movement. When Rastas emphatically declare “Jah Rastafari” they are doing much more than affirming one of their central/axial tenets of faith. The revelation which Moses, the Hebrew liberator, received in response to his enquiry into the Divine Name was Yahweh/Jah: “I am that I am and I will be that I will be.” Some Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholars and commentators have interpreted the Divine response to mean “I am freedom.” Well, one could well imagine the Jamaican/Caribbean person indignantly responding to such enquiries by those who dare to stand at the gate: “What do you want to know?” “Why don’t you mind your business?” “You too fast!” It is the ultimate response of Caliban as he radically overturns the reality that Prospero had imposed on him. When the Rastafarian/Caribbean persons speaks like this she/he simultaneously questions the agendas of those who want to “study” Rastafarianism. In the final analysis, those who want to study Rastafarianism, with the intention of putting it within well defined conceptual frameworks must expect, like Jacob, to come away limping. But for those who do not need conceptual framework, those who treat all definitions of Rastafarianism in a very protean fashion, what matters most is to catch the vision, the fire, and be empowered with the courage to hope that Jah’s Kingdom Come on earth as it is in Zion. This mode of existence (or spirituality) is fundamentally millenarian. It expresses judgment on the Babylonian system whose eventual demise it anticipates. Its radical messianism anticipates “the One Who Cometh” to capsize Babylon. To enter into the world of the Rastafari is to enter a world that proleptically speaking envisions Zion replacing the reality of Babylon. After Garvey, Rastafarianism speaks of the African being the subject of his own history. Millennialism forces a people to take stock of their place and way of being in the world. It creates new spaces and new realms in their consciousness through they are able to transcend the harshest vicissitudes of history. Garvey, as prophet, did this for Rastafarians and for Africans and peoples of African descent everywhere. In so doing he provided an open historical stage for Jamaican Rastafarians to receive Haile Sellassie as Messiah; the “One Who Cometh.”

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<sup>17</sup> West, *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, Augier, Nettleford, *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*, *ibid.*, 20.

### ***The Emergence of Rastafarianism in Jamaica: Ethiopianism in Jamaica***

Several events affected the rise of Rastafarianism in Jamaica. These include the enthronement of Haile Sellassie as Emperor of Ethiopia and the return of Joseph Nathaniel Hibbert, H. Archibald Dunkley, and Leonard P. Howell to Jamaica after extensive travels in Africa and America.

In 1930 Ras Tafari was crowned Haile Sellassie, Emperor of Ethiopia. Quite suddenly many Negroes in the New World came to realize that there was in fact an independent African state with its own monarchy and cultural heritage. The Ethiopian Government, sensing the interest which Western Negroes had begun to take in the Kingdom formed, in 1937, The Ethiopian World Federation, Inc. The need for racial solidarity and a call for loyalty to Ethiopia were emphasized. Several locals of the EWF were formed in Kingston, Jamaica: "The United Ethiopian Body," "The United Afro-West Indian Brotherhood," "The Ethiopian Youth Faith." According to Patterson" they all suffered premature deaths due largely to differences of opinion between the various leaders, between leaders and followers, and to migration of many of their members to Panama."<sup>19</sup> The rise of Rastafarianism in Jamaica must be seen, not only in location to the de-colonization of Jamaican society, but also to presence of Ethiopianism in Jamaica. In other words, even at its inception, Rastafarianism had Pan-African potential.

Parallel with the enthronement of Haile Sellassie was a much less pompous but far more significant event to the emergence of Rastafarianism: The return of Joseph N. Hibbert, H. Archibald Dunkley, and Leonard P. Howell to Jamaica after extensive travels in Africa and America. Consequent on their return to Jamaica, the three men began to independently preach the divinity of Haile Sellassie. In other words they appropriated and went beyond Garvey's millennial prophecy by being the "first apostles" of Haile Sellassie's divinity. In this sense they were acting as millennialists and simultaneously interjecting millennialism into primitive ("pure") Rastafarianism. Dunkley studied the Bible to discover evidence to support the divinity of Haile Sellassie. Hibbert, who had been a Master Mason of the Ancient Mystic Order of Ethiopia while in Panama, as soon as he returned in the late 1920s, began to proclaim Haile Sellassie as the Messiah who had returned to redeem the children of Israel in Jamaica. This message was both messianic, apocalyptic and millennial. Messianic in that it proclaimed a different Christophany, apocalyptic in that it announced the end of the present and a new regime or day for certain Jamaicans, and millennial in that it spoke of the return of a redeemer figure; in this case an African/Black Redemptive figure. In millennial terms one must not fail to note, beyond the horror of slavery and the uprooting and dislocation of traditional African identity in relation to space/time, that Garvey, and after him now Hibbert, were effectively returning Black Diasporic and Jamaican identity to a common reference point: Africa. It was matter of relocating Black diasporic consciousness to a different reality. It was both cultural resistance to European colonization and a process of decolonization. According to Patterson, Howell was the most successful of the three. "Painting an extravagant past during his years away from Jamaica in which he was supposed to have fought in the Ashanti Wars of 1896, he quickly built up a following in

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<sup>19</sup> Fundamentally, they migrated to Panama in search of employment. It was all part of what Leonard Barrett, Jr. called the "flight" from Jamaica. "Jamaica is hell." According to Horace Campbell, the links between Jamaica and Ethiopia were strengthened after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. Jamaican Blacks joined the international Pan-African movement which protested this form of fascism. Rastafari and non-Rastafari raised their voices against the Italian bombardment. In Jamaica the individuals who were preaching that Haile Sellassie was a Messiah found an outlet for their ideas through the Ethiopian World Federation. See Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1996), p. 69.

Kingston and Port Morant.”<sup>20</sup> Haile Sellassie was proclaimed the true and living God. Photographs of the later Emperor were sold all over Jamaica and buyers were told that they were passports to Ethiopia.

In millennial terms Rastafarianism expected the “imminent, total, ultimate, and this-worldly, collective salvation (or redemption)” of Afro-Jamaicans. Inherent in Rastafarianism, at least in its nascent stage, is the urgent eschatological expectation that the present world order was expected to be transformed at any time. Rastafarians were therefore ready to emigrate to Africa/Ethiopia. In the wake of Marcus Garvey’s prophecies, Howell, Hibbert, Dunkley, and others can be defined as millennial prophets. Garvey and the early Rastafari prophets and leaders experienced revelations concerning the imminence of the millennium and believed that they were specifically chosen to inaugurate the millennial era. The new day in which the regime of Babylon was ended.

The foregoing discussion locates the Rastafari “as a class and racial movement within the context of colonialised Jamaica.”<sup>21</sup> The race consciousness and political work of Garvey had sought to break the monopoly of the British over society. For the rural and urban poor, the crowning of an African King who could claim legitimacy from the Bible and from the line of Solomon led to a new deification, replacing the white King of England with a Black God and a Black King.

Jamaicans who spread the notion that Haile Sellassie was divine and human had taken sides in a spiritual controversy which still rages between the Western Christian Church and the Orthodox Christian religions.<sup>22</sup> The point is that God or Christ did not have to be Greek. Horace Campbell’s analysis of the origins of the Rasta links the first ideas of the movement to the writings of the *Voice of Ethiopia* to stress the view that the ideas expressed by black people that Haile Sellassie was the Lion of Judah was no mere millenarian escapism. “The question,” argues Campbell “is what made Jamaicans who identified with Ethiopia millenarian, and those who walked around with pictures of the British King well-adjusted?” The answer to this question can be explored in the context of the idealism of the society, but more significantly within the realm of the response of the masses to colonialism.<sup>23</sup> Campbell is apposite in seeing Rastafarianism in millenarian terms, that is, as the resistance of the oppressed Jamaican and other masses, to the horror of colonialism.<sup>24</sup> “The Rastafarians were the first to comprehend the limitations of constitutional decolonization and soon after the 1938 revolt a small group had sought to set up their own communal form of existence in the hills of St. Catherine.”<sup>25</sup> Campbell wrote:

Leonard Howell, one of the first spokespersons for the movement, used his considerable material resources to organize a commune in St. Catherine in 1940.. For his uncompromising call for racial awareness and support for the African king who was fighting fascist Italy, Howell was placed in a mental asylum in colonial Jamaica; for in the

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<sup>20</sup> Patterson, *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Of course there are those who would argue that colonialism was a good thing. Guess, it depends on who they are talking to.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, *ibid.*

eyes of the colonial State any black man who told black people to turn their backs on the white imperial King of England must have been a *mad man*.<sup>26</sup>

If Howell was mad it is perhaps he revealed the horror of British colonialism. As far as the Jamaican colonial authorities were concerned Howell was mad to tell oppressed Jamaican blacks that they had another King; an Ethiopian messiah who was not Greco-Roman. In Rastafarian consciousness Haile Sellassie was both a resurrected cultural hero and a supernatural figure in human form. Consequently, some later Rastafari sects, like the Twelve Tribes, would emphasize the continuity between Christ and Haile Sellassie in their theology. The Emperor's titles were appropriately significant for Rastafarian. H.I.M. *Negusa Negast*, His Imperial Majesty Haile Sellassie I (Power of the Holy Trinity) Emperor of Ethiopia, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Light of the Universe. It was a virtual proclamation of the death of the British monarchy, colonial imperialism, and the rise of the Black Jamaican proletariat in one of the most monarchical of the British Commonwealth countries. The six major tenets or doctrines of Rastafarianism express Howell's "madness":

The first is that black men, reincarnations of the ancient Israelites, were exiled to the West Indies because of their transgressions. Second, the wicked white man is inferior to the black man. Third, the Jamaican situation is a hopeless hell, Ethiopia is heaven. Fourth, Haile Sellassie is the living god. Fifth, the invincible Emperor of Ethiopia will soon arrange for expatriated persons of African descent to return to the homeland. Sixth, in the near future, black men will get revenge by compelling white men to serve them.<sup>27</sup>

Patterson does not analyze the formal statements of Rastafarian doctrine. On the contrary his general comments, though noteworthy, seem to suggest that he then thought that Rastafarianism was an insignificant movement. Or was he then suggesting that Rastafarianism was a movement that Jamaican society would have to someday come to terms with? Orlando Patterson's reflection on the Rastafarian phenomenon, from a millenarian perspective, is very intriguing. It needs to be carefully considered. On the one hand it might be very helpful in terms of understanding Rastafarian and Jamaican spirituality or existentialism. It might also be indicative of Patterson's appreciation of the absurdity of the Jamaican situation which gave rise to Rastafarianism. Beyond that it might well point to the absurdity of the wider African Diasporic situation. Perhaps a sense of quiet despair; the feeling that redemption is simply impossible under the present regime. One is simply left with hope as a framework within which to live; hope in the face of hopelessness, which leads one to affirm, "Everything is going to be all right." Rastafarianism has actually discovered the "horror," the existential nothingness that has underlined Jamaican and world history in the modern era. In this sense, Rastafarianism, is not only cultural resistance but also a revelation of Babylon's eventual fall/decline. What can be more millennial as Reggae songwriters proclaim the eventual fall of "Babylon." What Patterson wrote over thirty years ago is so relevant as we approach the year 2000. To be able to enter into the worldview of Rastafarianism as Patterson then saw it could lead one to make significant predictions for the future. Perhaps, it should come as no surprise that one Rastafari simply advocates community is imperative if the Caribbean and humankind are to survive this millennium.

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance*, *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Patterson, "Ras Tafari: the Cult of Outcasts," *ibid.*, p. 17. See also Leonard Barrett, Jr., *The Rastafarians*.

In other words a return to community, in all its dimensions, a coherent principle of Rastafarianism, is intrinsic to human future. Rastafarianism, which was born in Jamaica, has more than any other Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, intersected and combated with the wider new world American culture, and beyond, to such an extent that it has significantly affected the New World milieu. Consequently, as the Third Millennium approaches it is necessary that Rastafarian discourse be given a place in the dialogue leading to the construction of the next Millennium. This is even more appropriate because Rastafarianism is by nature millenarian.

Millenarianism, according to Orlando Patterson, is perhaps the most emphatic manifestation of what may be termed the psychology of withdrawal. Faced with a situation of extreme poverty, low social status, intense role deprivation, and racial humiliation, one can react in three basic but closely related ways. First, one can react within the framework of the system either by accepting it completely, and one's status in it, or accept it in opposition, by living, so to speak, according to the code of the anti-norm. Or one can react outside of the framework of the system, that is, withdraw from it. Withdrawal, however, is of two basic types. There is an introverted type of withdrawal, a regression inward upon the self. In this sense one blames one's sins for one's status, and seeks temporary and immediate release in the shamanistic orgies of revivalism such as the Pocomania cults do in Jamaica, and eventual and more permanent solace in the anticipation of the next life. Outwardly, this withdrawal appears to be a tacit acceptance of the social order.

Finally, one has the extroverted, aggressive type of withdrawal, such as the Rastafarians. The initial outward looking nature of the belief system is really a guise for and a function of the withdrawal which is an index of a total involvement in the society and a passionate need to be accepted by it, expressed in terms of a denial of any wish to be accepted.

This important fact is given weight by a closer examination of the belief system. First, we notice that the cultists really have no desire to change the system but merely the present relationship within it. Black men must rule white men rather than the other way round. A closer examination reveals that not even this is correct since it appears that it is not so much that black men should rule white men but that the present black men should be transformed into white men and the whites into blacks. A doctrine of atonement seems to be intrinsic to this way of thinking. The point is Rastafari thought is not operating at the level of pure abstractions; it is historically grounded. One understands one's existence in relationship to one's historical experience. Liberative discourse has to be in dialectic with history. Patterson seems to run into grave danger as he attempts to speak on behalf of Rastafarians. In giving the impression that the Rastafarians are not really serious about repatriation, he attempts to undercut one of the basic staples of Rastafarian doctrine--repatriation, and with it the remembrance of Africa. Patterson writes:

“The point I am here trying to make is that withdrawal is essentially a function of involvement. The last thing that the cultist, in the depth of his being, would wish to happen is for the ship to come. The matter is made more explicit by making a distinction between belief and belief-in-expectation. One can believe in the Second Coming of Christ without actually expecting it to come. One can, as it were, live in, and desire to live in, and only in, hope, which cannot be realized for the simple reason that its existence is due to a flight from reality, from the possibility of perpetual non-realization. It is nothing, and will remain nothing. It becomes real only in its anticipation which serves the sole function

of increasing the intensity of involvement in the historical moment.<sup>28</sup> The moment--the crisis, the burden, the humiliation, the despair--which, to the cultist, is resolved in pure expectation, sheer possibility.

Patterson's judgment condemns him. Does he actually take into consideration the radical nature of hope and its fundamental, radical dialectic engagement with history (Jamaican history included)? Does he actually understand the subversive nature of hope in dialectic with the systems of domination it interrogates? What was Patterson's social location when he wrote all this? Did he simply see Repatriation as a metaphor? Is Patterson an integrationist? In his way of speaking Rastafarianism then seemed to have created a tension in Jamaican society. The way in which that tension resolved itself could well have serious implications for the society. The "routinization" of Rastafarianism in Jamaican society is indicative of its success in making "blackness" or "Afro-centricity"<sup>29</sup> central in the construction of Jamaican identity in a post-colonial era.<sup>30</sup> In apocalyptic and millennial terms, Rastafarianism, offered a powerful fundamental and effective challenge to white supremacy in Jamaica and elsewhere. It is not possible to demonize Rastafarianism by calling it witchcraft; it distances itself from the ontology of spirit in Revivalism.<sup>31</sup> If Babylon was constructed on the basis of white supremacy and domination; then Rastafarianism has called all this into question. It has unmasked the truth of Jamaican and New World civilization. By calling for a return to that which is Black and African, for repatriation and racial and human reconstruction Rastafarianism has gone a considerable way in projecting an alternative culture and civilization in which Blacks are not "downpressed." In this new era Blacks are emancipated from all forms of slavery in which I-It modes of relating are fundamental. When Rastafarianism advocates an I-n-I paradigm for human interaction it implicitly abolishes tragic Western history from fifteenth to the twentieth century. Has the twentieth-century not been the most bloody of all centuries? The character of the modern period is defined by events which occurred at its beginning and its end. At the beginning of the modern era there was the discovery of the New World and the consequent destruction/Holocaust of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America followed by African slavery. The twentieth century experienced two world wars; the latter included the Holocaust of millions of Jews. Where was academic freedom in all this? How has the intellectual/academic enterprise, this notion of "I think, therefore I am," in the midst of all this? Perhaps, it might well be "I think, therefore I am not." Rastafarianism turns all of this on its head. The praxis of I-n-I calls for a radical reconstruction of inter/intra-cultural-racial and inter-human relationships in which the master-slave,

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<sup>28</sup> On the issue of "tension," see Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

<sup>29</sup> On the subject of Afrocentricity, see Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> It should also be noted, according to Sherlock and Bennett, that Marcus Garvey has in a similar fashion become the most venerated of Jamaican national heroes. See Philip Sherlock & Hazel Bennett, *The Story of the Jamaican People*, (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers & Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, Inc., 1998), pp. 292-315, 362-369. There are few countries in the Caribbean where one can feel a black ambience as in Jamaica.

<sup>31</sup> This does not mean that there is no spirituality in Rastafarianism. The issue is how there is a spiritual evolution in Rastafarianism which goes beyond that in Revivalism and other traditions in keeping with the evolution of Black identity in Jamaica and the Caribbean after Garvey. Spirit in the sense in which Teilhard deChardin understood it leads to evolution--it is necessary for humankind to move towards its Omega point. Consequently, as "a movement of Jah people" Rastafarianism, beginning in Jamaica, is actually an African religious New World paradigm that has, of necessity, spread to the rest of the Caribbean and beyond, where there has been cultural preparation for it. This preparation stems from the basic fact of African-American/Diasporic presence. The idea of judgment is related to the notion that there are those who would suppress the message and its fundamental calling into question the foundations upon which Babylon is constructed.

superior/inferior, Ivy/herbalist-no-league, exclusive/inclusive, chosen/diversity paradigm is overthrown in the radical affirmation that all persons are created in the *Imago Dei*, that is, the Image of God or the Divine. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., did not receive this notion from Gandhi, but from the very experience of being Black in America. When he went up into the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, a location so familiar to many a Jamaican and saw the world from that perspective he had the courage to hope and declare in immortal language: I have a dream. The Rasta dreams and goes further: He/she withdraws from and chants down Babylon. The Rasta knows that unless the present institutions and ordering of society are penetrated by Spirit they are all doomed to failure. Judgment has already been passed on them. Nevertheless, the movement offers the hope that the coming world catastrophe can be avoided; if only we have “I-n-I-tegrity.” The movement presents an alternative, compelling and more intelligible way of reading/re-reading history.<sup>32</sup>

The following section of this paper will take an in-depth study into Rastafarianism. The intention of this exercise is to demonstrate the fundamental millennial nature or thrust of Rastafarianism. Conceptually, it was designed to subvert or overthrow, more in practice than in theory, the dominant hegemonic superstructural ordering of Jamaican society.<sup>33</sup> This closer look at Rastafarianism is therefore intended to throw light on the passion for cultural liberation that is intrinsic to it. Within the context of global history (spanning the second millennium) Rastafarianism, beyond Garvey, is the most effective and sustained response to racism. It is cultural resistance and liberation which critiques, or judges, the way in which New World history was constructed over the last thousand years around the dominant European cultural paradigm. Within that paradigm, Europe and its history were primary and dominant. The history of non-European peoples, especially those of Africa and Asia, and their descendants, were but footnotes to European history.<sup>34</sup> Those who wrote the story controlled the narrative. Rastafarianism announces the end of that history. It is the announcement of the “resurrection” of the “downpressed” peoples of African descent in Jamaica and elsewhere. It is the announcement of the re-structuring of power in the global arena. To grasp this historical development it is important to see Rastafarianism in continuity with Revivalism and other expressions of African religious and cultural survivals in Jamaica and the Caribbean.

Rastafarianism’s “roots lay in the different forms of ancestral beliefs among rural Jamaicans, which were submerged during the period of slavery and colonialism.”<sup>35</sup> Barry Chevannes’ work on Rastafarianism has done much to re-locate and integrate Rastafarianism in continuity with African religion and culture in Jamaica. He has done so with specific reference to Revivalism.<sup>36</sup> According to Chevannes, “Rastafari has been shaped by Revivalism to a far greater

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<sup>32</sup> Rastafarianism can be understood as a critique of modernity. From the Black perspective it provides a mirror from which to dialogue with other aspects of the Black experience in the modern world.

<sup>33</sup> Based on insights drawn from the Latin American liberationist thinker, Gustavo Gutierrez, Rastafarian doctrines can be seen as secondary reflections. What is primary is the praxis; the engagement with lived reality. At the same time one ought not to divorce praxis from reflection on life and its problems. Rastafarianism, in its original setting, raised the question as to how one could or should live in Babylon. Indeed, it is an analysis of Babylon; an exploration of the human possibilities for existence in Babylon. Rasta’s stance toward Babylon and their announcement of its eventual overthrow is millennial to the core.

<sup>34</sup> The thinking here is related to what W.E.B. DuBois defined as the problem of the twentieth century; “the relationship between the peoples of lighter to those of darker complexion.” It is fundamentally a matter of power relations.

<sup>35</sup> See “Rastafarians,” in *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, *ibid.*, p. 878.

<sup>36</sup> See Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), pp. 22-33; See Barry Chevannes, “New Approach to Rastafari,” in Barry Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp. 20-42.

degree than is thought.”<sup>37</sup> Chevannes perspective on the peasant origins of Rastafarianism sees the Rasta phenomenon as indigenous to Jamaica also creates the insight to see the movement, from a comparative perspective, to peasant culture throughout the Caribbean. This revival perspective opens a window of understanding the capacity of Rastafarianism to spread throughout the Caribbean and Black Diaspora. Chevannes’ argument, or methodological approach by no means takes away from the millenarian nature of Rastafarianism. On the contrary, it supports a central position of this paper that Rastafarianism is millennial in nature.<sup>38</sup> Rex Nettleford argues that “Rastafari has a genealogical pedigree and is an integral part of a discourse that turns on the age-old resistance to forms of oppression.”<sup>39</sup> Resistance is the very nature of millenarianism. “These experiences have their origins in the expansionist zeal of European nations and in the barracoons of West Africa, which preceded that sustained *downpression* of humans by humans in the Americas and continued long after slavery was abolished, with more than vestigial traces languishing in a tarnished splendor to this day.”<sup>40</sup> According to Nettleford, himself a advocate of the millennial nature of Rastafarianism:

“The revivalist tradition is itself an act of re-creation, continuity of life, and living through some cycle of death, resurrection, and ascension--ascension into areas of inviolability that afford not only survival but acres of space beyond survival (through the dialectic of scattering, exile, and return).<sup>41</sup>

This understanding of Revivalism, essentially millenarian, is necessary to the understanding of Rastafarianism as millenarian. The section of this paper, drawing on Barry Chevannes’ work, provides an outline of Rastafarianism, intended to show its millennial thrust and radical critique of Babylonian culture. The definition of religion which emerges from the study so far, and in what follows, also sees Rastafarianism as an individual search for integrity, both as an individual and in relationship to community. In Rastafarian understanding Babylon is not a place of community. Babylon is a death zone. Rastafari hermeneutics/theology is designed to unmask Babylon so that the children of Jah will turn/return to Zion, the city of life/livity.

### ***Anatomy of Rastafarianism: The Overthrow of Babylon***

The tragedy of the Negro in America is that he has rejected his origins--the essentially human meaning implicit in the heritage of slavery, prolonged suffering, and social rejection. By rejecting this unique group experience and favoring assimilation and even biological amalgamation, he thus denies himself the creative possibilities inherent in it and in his folk culture. This “dilemma” is

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<sup>37</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> A “hermeneutics of suspicion” should be applied to those who dismiss Rastafarianism as Millenarian, or who raise the issue without going into it in depth. Throughout history millennialism has been associated with the rise of the peasantry against various forms of oppression; the protest of those who have been alienated from the land and their cultural investment.

<sup>39</sup> Rex Nettleford, “Discourse on Rastafarian Reality,” in Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, Adrian Anthony McFarlane, *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p. 315.

<sup>40</sup> Nettleford, “Discourse on Rastafarian Reality,” *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Rex Nettleford, “Discourse on Rastafarian Reality,” in Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, Adrian Anthony McFarlane, eds, *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p. 315.

fundamental; it severely limits his ability to evolve a new identity or a meaningful synthesis, capable of endowing his life with meaning and purpose.<sup>42</sup>

Rastafarians were bitter about racialism and about class differences in Jamaican society. They railed against the white man and the black traitors--politicians, the police, clergy, landholders, teachers, and business and professional people--who were said to have mistreated and misled the people. Rastafarians, in apocalyptic millenarian terms, saw the above socio-political configuration called "Babylon." In spatial-psycho-spiritual terms "Babylon" was the site of Rastafarian "downpression." On the one hand Rastafarians were committed to separation from Babylon. On the other hand they prophesied the ultimate demise of Babylon. Thus they were Black Nationalist, in one sense, and apocalyptists and millennialists on the other hand. If Babylon did not change; Babylon walls would come tumbling down. Rastafarians, therefore, prophesied or announced deliverance to "downpressed" Jamaican and other peoples of African descent throughout the Diaspora.

Originally, there were seven basic Rastafarian beliefs: black people were exiled to the West Indies because of their moral transgressions; the wicked white man is inferior to black people; the Jamaican situation is hopeless; Ethiopia is heaven; Haile Sellassie is the living God; the emperor of Ethiopia will arrange for all expatriated persons of African descent to return to their homeland; and black people will get revenge by compelling whites to serve them.<sup>43</sup> However, Rastafarian doctrines have undergone mutation in certain specific areas. These include repatriation to Africa, and perceptions of whites. These changes, undoubtedly, have taken place with the spread and "routinization" of Rastafarianism in Jamaica and elsewhere. It all points to the fact that "blackness" has been re-located, to a certain extent, as a more acceptable value in Jamaican society and elsewhere. One of the significant contributions of Rastafarianism has been to challenge Jamaicans, and other colonised Blacks for whom being white is normative, to embrace their "blackness." Indeed, part of the legacy of slavery and colonialism was to make Jamaica and other Diaspora Blacks hate themselves and their own culture. This cultural denigration and humiliation, still extant in some parts of the Caribbean, seriously damaged the religious, spiritual, psychological and mental psyche of many Diaspora and African Blacks.<sup>44</sup> Rastafarianism is therefore an Afro-Jamaican, Afro-Caribbean redemptive religious ideology. It fundamentally and radically seeks to subvert and reverse the cultural death that has been inflicted on Black people consequent on slavery and its aftermath.<sup>45</sup> Rastafarianism speaks of redemption and reversal. It is Black redemption from Babylon and the ultimate reversal of Black destiny. As such it is millennial in its expectation of the imminent reversal of the present order of Babylon in which the situation of Black people is reversed. Rastafarianism confronts the violence that has been responsible for the "downpression" of Blacks in Jamaica and elsewhere. No wonder it has emerged in the bloodiest century in human history. The movement was born after World War I and increased in significance after World War II. The founders of Rastafarianism, like Garvey,

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<sup>42</sup> E.U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. Vii.

<sup>43</sup> See, "Afro-Americans (Caribbean and South America), new religions among," in *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, Jonathan Z. Smith, William Scott Green, eds., (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Stories of Caribbean Blacks who tried to change the color of their skin in order to escape the prison of discrimination abound. Malcolm X and the Black Power movement railed against the Black tendency to imitate whites. V.S. Naipaul is fatalistic in his accommodation to colonialism by suggesting that the Caribbean can only be imitative; its creative potential has been extinguished. The work of Walter Rodney and Frantz Fanon are relative here. So also Wole Soyinka, especially with reference to Leopold Senghor of Senegal.

<sup>45</sup> Orlando Patterson's thought on social death is relevant here.

had traveled beyond Jamaica, seen and experienced the plight of Blacks in the New World and elsewhere. They all returned to Jamaica with a passion for Black emancipation. They were not unaware of the internal colonialism in their native land. They had to emancipate themselves from the most fundamental and degrading form of slavery; mental slavery. They had to get to the dungeon of their oppression; mental slavery, for that is what colonialism tries at its best to achieve. Liberation from mental slavery was essential for authentic cultural formation. To do so they had to use religion as a weapon. In this regard they were kin to oppressed Blacks throughout the Diaspora and antecedent to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s. More than anything else they had to find an alternative religion and messiah to the dominant one in Jamaica and the Western world. Christ simply did not have to be Mediterranean and Greco-Roman. Christ had no other choice but to be Black;<sup>46</sup> to be Jamaican and Caribbean and Diaspora and to lead the dispersed children of Africa back home to Africa, to Zion. Revivalism indeed, for so much of these sentiments had been retained in the consciousness of Diaspora Blacks throughout the centuries in one way or another. Consequently, investigation of Rastafarian thought, doctrine and practice, like a journey back through time, a descent into the underworld, will lead the competent traveler back to Africa. This notion is very much in keeping with Millennialism that calls for return, retrieval, reform, renewal and reclamation of one's past.

The following aspects of Rastafarianism are, properly explored, millennial. Based on Chevannes' work they not only show the relationship between Revivalism and Rastafarianism but also the millennialism inherent in Rastafarianism. Rastafarianism is a radical cultural critique of Babylon, the Rastafari name for the cultural system or configuration of oppression responsible for the "downpression" of Jamaican, Diaspora and other Blacks.<sup>47</sup>

### **1. Ritual Structure/Mythos:**

According to Chevannes, Rastafari meetings retain "an initial period of considerable duration in which the drumming-singing-dancing triad reigns, but without spiritual possession." This essential dimension reflects the continuity between Rastafarianism and Revivalism. Ritual in this regard must be seen not simply as structuring mythos. The underlying Revival retention in Rastafarianism is an expression of cultural continuity with Africa. Furthermore, in practice it is also an act of cultural resistance and defiance. To those who hear it is a different discourse, from the dominant Jamaican discourse. It is a summons to the scattered children of Africa to xodus. Ritual therefore announces, in millennial terms, the end of the present order. They create a sort of tension, and expectancy in the life of the Rastafari, which points to the overthrow of Babylon. Ritual, in other words, constructs an alternative culture: a culture of repatriation, a return to Africa. The following words of poetry are apposite:

Old Drum, my redeemer, I hear you  
above all others. You, alone, speak  
my language--boom-boom-badood--  
echoing on the cobbles of Congo Square.

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<sup>46</sup> On the subject of God being black, see amongst others, James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*.

<sup>47</sup> The use of the concept "downpression" by Rastafarians is similar to the use of the expression "keeping down" used by other English-speaking Caribbean Blacks in reference to anyone or institution perceived as voluntarily contributing to keeping one in "one's place" as African Americans would say.

Your words  
Telling me that the hour of Africa has come,  
When we hear you, we shall fly away  
like pigeon's and children's  
voices-verses that straighten up in the air  
and drift away over field and wood  
and across the sea, like a dream--  
Old Drum, do you know that I, too,  
was born in Africa?<sup>48</sup>

Gerald Hausman & Kelvin Rodrigues

“The drum is the voice of God given to man so that he might speak in tones of godliness.”<sup>49</sup> According to Hausman and Rodrigues, “the Shona people of Zimbabwe, Africa, express the power of the drum as necessity, and as cultural urgency.”<sup>50</sup> Within the context of Rastafarian liturgy and ritual, the drums declare the freedom “to the oppressed.” The drums declare the atonement/reconciliation between the cultists, the gods and the ancestors. The drums declare Jubilee and set the Rastafari free.<sup>51</sup> There is a pedagogy in the drums: a pedagogy of resistance and flight. Drumming therefore plays a pivotal role in Rastafari worship. It is millennial. This pedagogy of cultural resistance, in which the present world order is expected to be transformed, is further developed in the ensuing section which deals with ritual instruments in Rastafarianism.

## **2. *Ritual Instruments/Invocation:***

The drums used in Rastafari worship are sacred. One does not beat the drums; on the contrary, one plays the drums. Drums are a retention from Revivalism. The category of drums according to Chevannes are: (1) the huge bass; (2) the funde, which establishes rhythm; and (3) the repeater, which pronounces variations. The drums actually help to re-establish the African sacred cosmos and usher in the Ancestors into the community. Community is sacred in African religion; it is a moral imperative. Rastafarian use of the drum contests the lack of community in Jamaica and the Diaspora. In millennial terms it is a summons to collective identity and a rejection of the “divide-and-rule” strategy of colonialism. If Babylon is to rule it must create a system of apartheid in which the lost children of Africa fight among themselves for imperial favors and the “crumbs which fall from the masters’ table.” Rastafarianism is thus anti-colonial and as such a post-colonial religion.

The drums therefore empower Rastafari to dream a different set of dreams: dreams of freedom and liberation; dreams of Africa. There is a relationship between the drum and social order. The drum is ritual centering of the African cosmos. A comparative study with the use of

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<sup>48</sup> See Gerald Hausman & Kelvin Rodrigues, *African American Alphabet: A Celebration of Afro-American and West Indian, Culture, Custom, Myth and Symbol*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Hausman & Rodrigues, *African American Alphabet*, *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Hausman & Rodrigues, *African American Alphabet*, *ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>51</sup> Naturally, the drum role in Rastafari can be dealt with in greater depth. However, it must be borne in that drum playing draws members of Caribbean communities together across social divide. Reference can be made to steel-band in Trinidad and throughout the Caribbean. An important study with respect to drums in Caribbean culture is, Lorna McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, (Gainesville, et al: University Press of Florida, 1998).

the Big Drum in the cultural life of the island of Carriacou is relevant.<sup>52</sup> The drum preserved the African cosmology or system in the Diaspora. According to Lorna McDaniel, “whether conceived as African or Caribbean, syncretized or reversed, this system was erected by people whose dance aesthetic, ritual symbols, and dual generative concept tell us that *‘their bodies were here but their minds were in Africa.’*”<sup>53</sup> Drum beating therefore mediates the African cosmology in Rastafarianism and throughout the African Diaspora. Drumming therefore is cultural resistance, cultural retention, and the announcement of the eventual overthrow of Babylon. In the ensuing section on magic, it will be seen that the obtaining of power was considered essential to the overthrow of Babylon.

### 3. *Magic:*

Magic can be defined as “the art of performing charms, spells, and rituals, to seek to control events or govern certain natural or supernatural forces.”<sup>54</sup> Magic can be good. It can be malevolent as in the sense of witchcraft or sorcery. Sorcery implies magic where powers are intentionally used for a harmful purpose, often involving artificial means. Witchcraft implies the possession of a supernatural power through a pact with evil spirits; this power may be exerted involuntarily. Magic, witchcraft, and sorcery generally function at the level of the individual, and often in opposition to organized religions. Magical beliefs deal with the individual crises and acts of fate which religious morality cannot explain. According to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology*, initial attempts to explain magical beliefs foundered on nineteenth-century scientism and simplistic psychological theories. Magic thus served a psychological function only when technical knowledge was inadequate. Later anthropological approaches have seen magic as containing a symbolic logic and meaning, and have sought to place it into a context of the cosmology and social relations of the people concerned. This approach, to a certain extent, is more relevant to understanding the place of magic in the Rastafarian world-view. Here magic, or the use of magic is understandable in relationship to downpression.” Dance also plays a pivotal role in bringing down Babylon. To ‘dance nyabinghi’ against an identified oppressor was, Rastafari believed, to invoke in a sure and compelling way the power of God to destroy him.<sup>55</sup> Chevannes claims that according to one informant fire was made to consume an effigy of a person.<sup>56</sup> “Although the practice may have ceased,” claims Chevannes, “I have heard Rastafari threaten to dance nyabinghi for public personalities they have considered oppressive to Rastafari.”<sup>57</sup> The dreadlocks are also believed to have magical properties, not to be used to harm the owner, but to be able to wreak destruction on Babylon. Citing Robert Hill “popular belief in the power of the occult played a formative role in the early stages of Rastafari consciousness.”<sup>58</sup> This issue of power raised in Rastafarian consciousness, with its roots in Revivalism, resonates

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<sup>52</sup> Carriacou is a member of the three-island state of Grenada, Carriacou and Petit Martinique. On the subject of the Big Drum in Carriacouan culture see, Lorna McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, *ibid.*, p. 79-97.

<sup>53</sup> See L. McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou*, *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>54</sup> See, “Magic,” in Gordon Marshall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 2988-299.

<sup>55</sup> Barry Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> The apocalyptic significance of fire must be borne in mind. Fire does not simply signify destruction; it can also be seen as a symbol of cleansing and purification.

<sup>57</sup> In a similar fashion a Haitian may claim to use his/her culture to deal with an oppressor or oppressive situation.

<sup>58</sup> See, Chevannes, *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, *ibid.*, p. 34.

throughout Caribbean culture and, especially during the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The term, “in power” is usually used to refer to the particular political leader or government in office in Caribbean territories at a particular time. There is the clear understanding that one cannot govern without power.<sup>59</sup> The Black Power Movement of the 1960s in America was, on careful consideration, intrinsic to the attainment of human rights for Blacks in America. It is by no means surprising that Stokely Carmichael had Trinidadian roots and Malcolm X Grenadian. By no means would the Black freedom struggle achieved the success it did without Black Power.<sup>60</sup> The need for power, whether in Rastafarianism, the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, or otherwise, recognizes that terrestrial relations were structured by race, caste, and power. Rastafarian magical practices, in continuity with Revivalism, implicitly recognize that the redistribution of power was necessary to Babylon’s overthrow. Dance played a significant role in this liberative process. McDaniel’s comments with respect to the Big Drum dance in Carriacou is relevant:

The dance and the symbols surrounding the dance should in some way elucidate the cosmology mediated by the Big Drum. Because the ancestors are the invited guests for whom the event is staged, the dances include the beloved dances of the past, from the era when the spirits enjoyed life on earth. Consistent with the purpose, new compositions of dance or song are not part of this program; there is every effort to retain the ancient repertoire intact as well as protect the dance aesthetics from change. The historicity of the event is thereby balanced upon the single aspiration of entertaining the old parents.<sup>61</sup>

To dance Big Drum is therefore a process in which African cosmology and community is recreated. It is a process of maintain and re-inventing African diasporic community. In this process the children of Africa are restored to their proper monarchical and royal status or dignity.<sup>62</sup>

Thus far it can be established that Rastafarianism, developed on Revivalism, preserves African cosmology in the Diaspora. Consequently, from the perspective of eschatology, and the millennium, Rastafarian consciousness points to eminent repatriation; return to Africa. If Rastafarianism, with its Revivalist roots, doctrinally emphasizes African repatriation, then, in millennial terms, we see a movement towards the recovery of African community and a sense of nationhood. Divination, an important aspect of African cosmology played an important role in the construction and maintenance of the African world.

#### **4. Divination:**

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<sup>59</sup> Whether actually so or not, the popular perception is that Afro-Caribbean politicians, to be and remain in power, must do so through the agency of Afro-Caribbean religious traditions whose spiritual leaders are considered to have access to power through their connection to traditional African ancestral religions.

<sup>60</sup> This point is so often overlooked. The struggle for Civil Rights was also a struggle for Black Power. It was a struggle that involved the entire Black world in the Western Hemisphere and beyond.

<sup>61</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum of Ritual of Carriacou*, *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup> On this matter see Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 155. According to Paris, “every member of the community was expected to develop the moral nature of a good king or a good queen. A community of such moral integrity guaranteed its preservation.”

Divination, the ritual acts performed to diagnose the reason for a misfortune or the means to the solution of some human problem, is widespread throughout Africa.<sup>63</sup> It has achieved a highly systematic and intricate character among the Yoruba. Divination is an important activity among the Zulu, and the role of the diviner is widespread in Zulu society. One needs a special calling from the ancestral spirits to become a diviner. Though anyone can become a diviner, this is vocation in Zulu society that is most often assumed by women. The Zulu regard the ancestors as the ones who do the calling. Such a calling takes a special form. Often it comes in the form of a vision or a dream. Such a visitation is often accompanied by aches, pains, or other bodily disorders. The calling also involves special training under an experienced diviner; divining is not regarded as a casual affair, for identifying the cause of a problem takes great skill. However, there is a difference in between Rastafari and traditional African religion with respect to the practice of divination. The Bible is used in divination in Rastafari. According to Chevannes, “Rastafari believe in the power of the Bible to expose evil.”<sup>64</sup> Theophus H. Smith, drawing on Breiner, argues that the prominence of among Rastafarians of prophetic texts drawn from the English Bible displaces the centrality of spirit possession found in other Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latino religions. This renders Rastafarianism closer in phenomenological perspective to Black North American Christianity in its Protestant, more biblicist, and prophetic variants.

##### **5. *Herbal Lore/Nature and Holism:***

According to Chevannes, Rastafari place heavy stress on nature as a gift of the Father ‘for the healing of the nation’ This attitude applies not only to ganga but to all of nature. With almost the force of doctrine, they reject artificial things pertaining to life, preferring the natural: herbal medicinal cures, herbal teas, natural spices and flavoring such as pepper and coconut milk.<sup>65</sup> It stands to reason that Rastafarianism rejects the increasing process of simulation in contemporary Western culture.

Rastafarian civilization can thus be seen as committed to the integrity of all creation; to the restoration of the cosmic balance, or harmony, between all aspects of creation. In environmental terms, this integration points to the abolition of the conflict between nature and humankind. This restructuring of the relationship between humankind and nature has wider implications in Rastafarian praxis. It points to the notion of a community, or form of communalism, in which all persons share the goodness of creation. Eschatologically speaking, it points to regeneration and the genesis of a new creation. Consequently, Rastafarianism is very critical of technology which it sees as part of the Babylonian system designed to oppress Black people.

In economic terms this Rastafarian idea is inherently critical of consumerism and Jamaican/Caribbean bourgeois values which contribute to economic impoverishment of so many Caribbean countries, their economic dependency and vulnerability, and soaring balance-of-trade deficits. The return to the natural in Rastafarianism is therefore both cultural critique and resistance to the continued persistent cultural and economic marginality of Jamaica and the Caribbean. Currents trends of consumerism are inherently seen as “apocalyptic” and Rastafarian natural ideology is a counter-ideology of preservation. Furthermore, the use of herbs in Rastafari

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<sup>63</sup> See, E. Thomas Lawson, *Religions of Africa: Traditions in Transformation*, (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1985), pp. 21-22.

<sup>64</sup> Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

culture is not only indicative of its continuity with Revivalism but also with African traditional culture and religion.

The herbalist was an important person in the maintenance of the community's well-being in traditional African culture. In Zulu culture, for example, the herbalists prescribed the cure; the diviners find the cause of the problem. With respect to Yoruba traditions, however, in which the diviner also plays an important role, connection with nature is essential to keep the destiny of the community on course.

## **6. Visions:**

Chevannes argues that the same worldview which Rastafarians share with other Jamaicans distinguishes dreams from visions. Dreams are the images and fantasies which appear in sleep. Visions are dreams of particular significance, usually rich in symbolic meaning, and regarded as encoded messages from the world of the spirits. Although Rastafarians do not believe in spirits other than the Father, they nevertheless believe in His communication through visions.<sup>66</sup> The point is "where there is no vision the people perish." In the final analysis the capacity to receive visions is an African retention. Chevannes rightly notes other aspects of Rastafarian culture that, to a large extent, is an expression of cultural resistance and millennial in thrust. In the ensuing section, for example, we argue that the Rastafarian use of words is apocalyptic, it is poetic, in the sense that it is speaking before the void; it is a challenge to non-being.

## **7. Word Power/Rhetoric:**

The creation of a new mode of speech by the Rastafari has been noted by linguists. Underlying it is a belief in the magical power of the word. Alleyne, for example argues Chevannes, does not doubt that Rastafari ideas about language are "an expression of African culture." Chevannes sees this as suggesting that more research is needed to establish the link, more research on the worldview Chevannes calls Revival and its belief in the magical power of the word. Ethnographers have noted the predilection of the Jamaican peasant for the spoken word; a predilection not just for the spoken word but for "big words, as if their use transforms the speaker's ability to be more effective."<sup>67</sup> Contemporary Jamaican culture is essentially oral. Names are viewed like extensions of one's person, and therefore as the possible object of imitative magic. Underlying all this is the understanding that words, or language, has power. Language is the extension of one's very being and creativity. For the Rastafari, to speak, is to create, it is to author an alternative reality; to bring down Babylon. Chevannes is right when he says that:

Nowhere is the power of the word more manifest today in non-Rastafari contexts than among Pentecostal sects, where Spirit possession take place through the power of the preacher's words. But even in other conventional denominations the measure of satisfaction with the worship is directly a function not of the singing or the ritual but of the sermon. If good, it is described as 'sweet.'<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, *ibid.*, p. 35. The writer notes Rastafarian predilection to recognize the capacity of the Spirit to speak through human persons or to receive special messages. This may not be unrelated to Rastafarian understanding of Scripture and methods of "reasonings."

<sup>67</sup> This is a Caribbean habit. It is manifest throughout the Caribbean.

<sup>68</sup> Chevannes, ed. *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, *ibid.*, p. 36. The success of both clergyman/preacher and politician in the Caribbean depends on his/her rhetorical skills. A politician's stay in office or "power" depends on her/his ability to speak with power. The minute the perception is given that the politician's oral skills have declined his/her stay in

According to Chevannes these examples indicate that Rastafari predilection for the spoken word did not originate with them. The Rastafarian's attribution of power to the word, so beautifully expressed as 'Word, Sounds and Power!', is but a refinement of a tradition.<sup>69</sup> In light of this paper, this tradition of speech, call it Revival if you may, can be found throughout the Caribbean and the Black Diaspora. Wherever it is manifest, Caribbean politicians, in particular, chant down Babylon, the entire modern Western European system. They do so whether they are subverting slavery, Crown Colony Government, declaring that Massa Day Done. In other words proclaiming the Gospel of Babylon's decline, that is, the end of colonialism. In this respect Rastafarian language is millenarian. It proclaims a new order. For those who would deny that Rastafarianism has no revolutionary thrust the role of Rastafarianism in the Grenada Revolution (1979-1983) is relevant.<sup>70</sup> The word in order to be creative and regenerative must be apocalyptic. In this sense Rastas speaks with the efficacy of Old Testament prophets. If the Old Testament prophets are to be considered the Puritans of their day; then so must the contemporary Rastafarians. All this moves in the direction of suggesting that as we do stocktaking at the end of this century and the millennium it is important that we hear the Rastafarian critique of modern history. That critique will serve us well in evaluating the past that we can envision the future; less we repeat history all over again. If the century ending has indeed been one the bloodiest, and thus the most violent, in history then heed must be given to the seminal report on Rastafarianism prepared by Smith, Augier and Nettleford in 1960, the year Rastas believed Marcus Garvey had prophesied as the end of Western colonialism; the dawn of a new age:

The language of the movement is violent. This is because it is the language of the Bible, and especially of the Old Testament. It is apocalyptic language, in which sinners are consumed with fire, sheep are separated from goats, oppressors are smitten and kings and empires overthrown. All Christians use this violent language, in their religious services and elsewhere. The use of such language does not mean that they are ready to fight in the streets. It does, on the other hand, mean that the concepts of revolution are neither frightening nor unfamiliar.<sup>71</sup>

The foregoing statement is a clear understanding of the apocalyptic nature of Rastafarianism. In millenarian terms, and African terms, Rastafarianism, fundamentally conjures an alternative culture to that of Babylon. Rastafarianism advocates a new cultural formation.<sup>72</sup>

## **8. Contamination of Death:**

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office is at risk. The same applies to the clergyperson. To a certain extent the female members of a congregation are able to evaluate when the clergyperson's message lacks "the spirit." Male members or persons in the wider community are also adept at this.

<sup>69</sup> Chevannes, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> On this subject of rhetoric see my paper on The Bible and Post-World War II Caribbean Political Rhetoric. What is said in that paper about certain Caribbean politicians is also true of Rastafarianism as a whole.

<sup>71</sup> See M. G. Smith, Roy Augier, Rex Nettleford, *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*, (University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica: Department of Extra-Mural Studies, 1978), p. 27. The writer of this work is responsible for the bold type where they occur.

<sup>72</sup> See Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 126-131; 231.

A careful assessment of the Rastafarian position with respect to death must be noted. To a certain extent the Rastafarian “fear of contamination of the world of the living by the spirits of the dead which inspires them” might well have Revivalist or deeper African roots. Rastafari might well carry “this fear of contamination to the extreme” in their distancing from Revivalism. However one deals with death in the Rastafarian worldview consideration must be given to the fact that there is considerable diversity in Rastafarian traditions and, at the present, in Caribbean and global Rastafarianism. In general the dominant doctrinal position in Rastafarianism is the belief that “the true Rasta will die.” Rastafarian thought on death (thanatology) might have adjusted consequent on the death of Haile Sellassie in 1974 and that of Bob Marley in 1981. “Some brethren,” according to Chevannes, “now admit that man is put on earth only for a time, not to live forever.”<sup>73</sup>

The majority view, however, is that the true Rasta will not die. Rastafari thought on death might well have richer scope than is usually attributed to it and more sophisticated in its nuancing than many recognize. The following outline by Chevannes, on the subject of death in Rastafarianism must therefore be taken with a certain degree of reservation. According to Chevannes, “the Rastafari will have nothing to do with death: he attends no funerals, takes no part in their arrangement, no matter how close the deceased, does not mourn or even discuss the event.”<sup>74</sup> Rastafarian understanding of death might be more in consonance with that of the non-Synoptic Gospel of John, in which, death has been radically transcended. Rather than looking to some Second Coming of Christ (the Parousia) in an indeterminate future, Rastafarianism affirms the conquest of life over death, of the New Heaven and the New Earth, of Zion, over Babylon. Death is overcome in victory and resurrection. In ver millennial terms Rastafarianism proclaims the abolition of death. What is needed is a more systematic and radical treatment of Rastafarian thought; especially if it is to be considered a worldview.<sup>75</sup>

Herein Rastafarianism might be profoundly critical of Western culture and way ahead in its proposals for dealing with the spiritual and mental and post-modern civilization.

In the final analysis a people who have been stripped of their humanity must affirm their immortality; resurrection and the conquest of must be fundamental to their new creation mythology.<sup>76</sup>

### **9. Woman as Source of Evil:**

The place of women in the Rastafarian world is also a reflection of the apocalyptic/millennarian nature of the movement. The female does not seem to fare well in millennial movements. This matter requires considerable study which goes way beyond this paper. Much is made of the Rastafari belief in male supremacy buttressed by beliefs in woman’s natural inferiority and power to contaminate. Rastafari believe that a woman is of such wayward nature that only through her male spouse, her ‘King-Man,’ may she attain the legitimate enlightenment of Jah. Relationships are consequently marked by female submissiveness and

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<sup>73</sup> Chevannes, ed., *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> The ideas expressed here can be further developed. Rastafarianism, with respect to its thought on death, may well be more radical than is realized. At the same time it might well be leveling a fundamental critique, perhaps a hypocritical aspect, of Western Christianity. The work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., on the subject of dying might well be relevant here. See for example, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., *The Wheel of Life: A Memoir of Living and Dying*, (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997). It is also necessary to examine the philosophical categorical underpinnings of those who try to understand Rastafarian thought on death.

<sup>76</sup> Rastafari use of the Bible is relevant here as well.

obedience to the male, and ritual avoidance and even confinement during the menstrual flow. Interestingly, Chevannes points out that” while this strong patriarchal tradition is indeed a direct contrast to traditional household patterns in Jamaica, its ideological root within the traditional worldview is often missed.”<sup>77</sup> Surely, there is the need to develop this comment. What does it have to do with African genealogy and the fact that if there is to be Black ethnic reconfiguration it must take place through the male head? The whole issue of male/female relationships in Rastafarianism might well, from a millennial perspective, have deep eschatological significance in terms of the restoration/revival of Black Diasporic peoples.

### **10. Man as God/Imago Dei:**

Rastafarian identity, or cultural agency, is characterized by the notion of divine sonship, doing or manifesting God’s work. According to Chevannes, “Just as Revival possession is the means by which the spirit performs, so is Rastafari identity with God the means whereby God’s works are manifest.”<sup>78</sup> “To do good means to allow the God in you to perform his work, just as to do evil means allowing Satan to perform his.”<sup>79</sup> The human person can therefore be a “battlefield” between God and Satan. These ideas can also be found in African traditional religion. Good character is considered to be the culmination of Yoruba morality.<sup>80</sup> Eschatologically speaking, humankind is summoned to be “repatriated” to divine status. Thus to do good and be good is to abhor injustice; a matter which is intrinsic to Rastafarians seeing Babylon as the site of all injustices. Here again one confronts the Millenarianism of Rastafarianism. Chevannes, in his advocacy of a new approach to Rastafarianism, one which takes into consideration the movements transcendence of Revivalism, draws several implications which deserve citation. They do justice both to the understanding of Rastafarianism as a cultural movement, which indeed it is, and as millennial, which it also is. The movement is indeed highly complex and thus capable of analyses from different perspective. However, it is not necessary to deny its nature as a cultural movement at the expense of its millenarian nature. Such a focus can do the movement irreparable damage. When seen as a cultural and millenarian movement Rastafarianism is radically critical of the dominant culture responsible for the structuring of the modern era and at the same time it has advocated an alternative culture that looks beyond the present. Its critique has been so compelling that the movement has spread to all parts of the world and even into non-Black cultures. It is now more appropriate to speak of a varieties of Rastafarianism.

### **General Implications**

In silhouetting his view of Rastafari against the historical backdrop of Revivalism Chevannes recognizes the continuity/discontinuity between Rastafarianism and Revival. He draws several implications with which we enter into conversation.<sup>81</sup>

1. Rastafari must be included when considering Africa-derived religion in Jamaica and the Caribbean. It is more authentic expression of that tradition than generally thought. This is

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<sup>77</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari*, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari*, *ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>80</sup> See, Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>81</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari*, *ibid.*, pp. 38-41.

indeed the case. Whereas Rastafarianism might be indigenous to Jamaica, the Jamaican Revival roots with which it is in continuity has further continuity with African roots which are spread throughout the Caribbean. Rastafarianism, like Garveyism, has the predilection to spread throughout the Caribbean. It might be worthwhile to ascertain whether some Caribbean Rastas had ancestors who were Garveyites or members of indigenous Caribbean religious traditions.

2. Rastafari, because of its indebtedness to Revival, must be regarded as a fulfilment of Revival. It is clear, argues Chevannes, that particularly after Garvey, that the Revival Worldview was inadequate in Pan-African terms, since it had no really viable answer to the problem posed by White Racism. After Garvey, a return to a worldview that accommodated black skin as an ontological deficiency to be rectified only by transmogrification was out of question. Rastafarianism is thus both a response to racism and a Black Nationalist movement. In those respects it is a movement that is culturally critical of Western hegemony and turns its back on it. According to the 1960 University Report:

All Ras Tafari brethren agree that the black man is exploited in the Western world, and must get back to Africa ... When challenged, they point to the contemporary situation, where economic and racial lines run close together ... The slums of Kingston are an excellent breeding ground for black nationalism. Unemployment is endemic and widespread in Kingston ... The areas where many Ras Tafari brethren live have no water, light, sewage disposal or collection of rubbish. It is not strange that those who live in these conditions would like to emigrate ... Marcus Garvey taught that the black man would find his soul only by turning his back on white civilization, and returning to Africa, to live under black government. All Ras Tafari brethren believe this to be true.<sup>82</sup>

A key note to Black Nationalism is its radical lack of confidence concerning any meaningful future for Blacks in white-dominated Western society. Black Nationalism therefore proposes separation and the creation of an alternative destiny for Blacks over which they control their own destiny and sovereignty. In this respect Rastafarianism is a radical critique of Jamaican and Western civilization; of Babylon. When one takes into consideration the social and economic situation which gave rise to Rastafarianism and compares them to similar situations of deprivation in the Third World, one can only affirm, "that you kill one Rasta; another Rasta will take his place." The point is that the cultural critique made by the early Rastas is as valid at it was in the 1930s as it is at the end of the second and dawn of the Third Millennium. If human society is to be transformed in the Third Millennium the voice of the Rastaman sorely needs to be heard. If the millennium calls for political reform and the re-invention of human community and the world the question is whether policy makers and others are willing to listen and to act on the insights which come from those on the underside of history; those who are subject to persistent poverty and persistent marginalization? If so, then, the future will be well served by remembering the early millenarian tendencies in Rastafarianism. The alternative is that kind of realism in which we can simply hope for the best. Just imagine what could happen in South Africa if apartheid fails!

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<sup>82</sup> Smith, Augier, Nettleford, *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*, *ibid.*, p. 25.

3. According to Chevannes, Rasta is itself essentially a world-view movement, 'a system of beliefs and a state of consciousness.' This accounts for its acephalous and somewhat spontaneous nature, very much in the same vein as Myal and Revival. Its greatest impact lies here, and it would be quite wrong to judge it by the failure of its prophecies of repatriation.<sup>83</sup> At least the memory of Africa is a systematic remembering and questioning of the events which led to the Black presence in Jamaica, and the New World. How New is the New World anyway, if Rastafarianism questions its fundamental nature? For whom was the New World new? Chevannes comment that Rastafarianism should not be judged by its failed prophecies of repatriation needs to be clearly heard.<sup>84</sup> Although repatriation is a central doctrine of Rastafarianism; the movement itself is much more than repatriation as the foregoing questions indicate. As a world-view movement Rastafarianism competes with other world-views. It has its own vision of the future which calls into question the present order of Babylon. Rastafarianism strength lies in the depth of its critique and analysis of the human condition. The more profound its critique the wider in application its proposals by way of solution to the problems it is addressing. The spontaneity of Rastafarian is in direct correlation to its raising those existential questions of "ultimate concern" faced by Rastafarians and a significant number of the worlds population. The movement has an intrinsic energy or force that transcends Jamaica. This capacity to reach beyond It is an adequate window or paradigm to evaluate the past and fashion a future which transcends the perils of the present.
4. Chevannes asserts that while Rastafari has manifested millennial tendencies, which give the movement a political character, it is much more fruitful to conceive of it as a cultural movement. What has accounted for its growth is not the dream of the millennium but the appropriation of a new and more coherent reality. There is the real revolution. As I have already said, Rastafari search for the millennium occurred four times. It is a fact that its periods of greatest growth occurred after them: in the decade of the 1930s and first half decade of the 1940s, when the focus was on spreading the message that Sellassie was God; and in the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of the Dreadlocks and their symbolic announcement of a new and separate identity.<sup>85</sup>

Actually, Chevannes, in order to stress the continuity between Rastafarianism and Revivalism, and perhaps African religious traditions and culture, has minimized the millennial nature of Rastafarianism by demonstrating a pretty limited understanding of millennialism. The point is that this need not be the case. On the contrary, recognition of African continuity in Rastafarianism, and Rastafarianism's continuity with Revivalism, is vital to the understanding of the millennial nature of Rastafarianism. It is because of its African roots that Rastafarianism has spread, in response to the Black human condition, so much throughout the Caribbean, the Diaspora, Africa and elsewhere. Rastafarianism, which began in Jamaica, has touched the water-table of oppressed Blacks throughout the Diaspora. To a large extent Rastafarianism is a preservation of African identity and consciousness in the Diaspora.

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<sup>83</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari*, *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>84</sup> There is a resonance of Orlando Patterson's idea that the millennium expected in Rastafarianism did not happen. It depends on how one understands the millennium. Millennial thinking is more than a matter of dates; it is also a critical way of thinking that questions the way in which the world or reality is presently organized.

<sup>85</sup> Chevannes, *Rastafari*, *ibid.*, p. 39.

In considering Rastafarianism as subverting Jamaican Revivalism it is appropriate to ask whether there were varieties of Revivalism in other parts of the Caribbean which provided roots for Rastafarianism after the days of Marcus Garvey. Furthermore, Chevannes ought to give more recognition to Garvey's influence throughout the Caribbean and the path he cleared as a Rastafari prophet. In some Caribbean islands Garveyism was constrained to be an underground movement. Whereas the Jamaican origins of Rastafarianism are undeniable; the potential for the movement to have easily spread, despite opposition, throughout the region was potent and ever there. To recognize this fact could open the door for Caribbean religious scholars to transcend insularities and generate an ecumenical approach to Caribbean religious studies. Furthermore, with respect to Haile Sellassie, it must be considered, in millennial terms that millennial movements of a messianic type are those movements which believe that when the final catastrophe occurs a messianic leader, frequently a past cultural hero, will re-appear and bring about the millennial event, and transfigure history. Haile Sellassie can well be considered that messianic leader. The failures of repatriation, seen as a millennial event, by no means detracts from the millennial nature of Rastafarianism; neither does it detract from understanding Rastafarianism as a cultural event. There are inherent problems in equating millennialism with the Millennium per se. The latter term when used to refer to a specific date has over and over again suffered disastrously. Millennialism, on the other hand, in the sense that it has been used throughout this paper recognizes that although specific dates have often been set for the arrival of a/the millennium; millennialism never dies. So often dates have been revised. It simply must be recognized that there is more to millennialism than specific historical dates. When all is said and done, millennialism, from a Rastafarian perspective, speaks of the return of African Diasporic and African peoples as a whole to their proper status in history. One really can not appreciate the millennial nature of Rastafarianism without acknowledging the history, from 1492 to the present, which has been responsible for the standing of Black peoples on the stage of history and their struggle to reverse that history. No less a scholar than Rex Nettleford has done much in his scholarship and work on Rastafarianism to develop the focus on Rastafarianism as a millennial movement. Chevannes is not unaware of Nettleford's contribution in this regard.<sup>86</sup> According to Nettleford:

Rastafari can claim to be the only major indigenous Caribbean-creole phenomenon of its kind (apart from Garveyism). All other such "total systems" that have served Jamaica and the wider Caribbean in its resistance-driven process of "becoming" have been imported, whether they be Christianity, political nationalism, militant trade unionism, socialism (in all its myriad forms--from Fabian socialism through democratic socialism to Marxism-Leninism), or latter-day market-forces liberalism. To argue from this that Rastafari cannot solve the wide-ranging problems of Jamaica and is therefore useless is to ignore the fact that none of the above importations, all of "pedigreed stature," has been able to do so either. The case for

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

tolerant, open, and frank discourse on a belief system such as Rastafari here recommends itself.<sup>87</sup>

Nettleford goes on to say:

The creed/movement/phenomenon of Rastafari has, in fact, drawn on all indexes of culture known to humankind--language, religion, kinship patterns, artistic manifestations, political organization, and systems of production, distribution, and exchange. This gives it inordinate inner strength and accounts for its worldwide impact among diasporic Africans as well as others. The refraction of all such phenomena through the prism of Rastafari results in colors of different intensities, some stronger than others. It cannot claim with any certainty that it has all the answers for human development, but to deny the positive energy it brings to the quest is to perpetuate notions about the inability of African peoples to create anything or to think through their destiny on their own terms.<sup>88</sup>

This study supports Nettleford in his contention that Rastafarianism should be seen as “a genuine twentieth-century liberation movement.”<sup>89</sup> One cannot help, in terms of this paper, to quote Nettleford in full because the point/proposal he makes is exactly what this study wants to recommend:

That Rastafari--the people and the movement--should wish to assert a claim for inclusion in the dialogue, discourse, and determination of what happens to humankind over the next five hundred years is of great import to all humanity engaged in the quest for civil society, democratic governance, and spiritual well-being. The proffered return of exiles, psychological or physical may not be simply to Zion or Africa (real or imagined) but to all that constitutes planet Earth, which was meant for all humankind to tenant in any case.<sup>90</sup>

In the final analysis, however, one conceives of it, Rastafarianism, is intrinsically millennial in its eschatological vision, and hope, for all humankind and creation returned, restored, reconnected in its integrity. For this to happen Rastafarianism advocated, both is theory and practice the radical reversal of master-slave relationships imbedded in the modern existence.<sup>91</sup> Ontologically, Rastafarianism goes beyond Martin Buber’s notion of an I-Thou relationship. It speaks of an I-n-I relationship. Herein, lies perhaps, the most radical challenge of Rastafarianism:

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<sup>87</sup> Rex Nettleford, “Discourse on Rastafarian Reality,” in Murrell, Spencer, McFarlane, *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, *ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Rex Nettleford, “Discourse on Rastafarian Reality,” *ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>90</sup> Rex Nettleford, “Discourse on Rastafarian Reality,” *ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>91</sup> According to Diane J. Austin-Broos, “the Rastafarian figure, and his engagement with Haile Sellassie, emperor of Ethiopia and the re-incarnate Christ, subverts the master-servant relationship embedded in relations between the pastor and Christ, especially when those relations are infused with notions of a Euro-Christ and an African disciple.” See Diane J. Austin-Broos, *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 239. Obviously, such relationships can never be truly mutual; at worst they may be parasitical; following a notion derived from Orlando Patterson in his work on social death.

The challenge to see the Other person as created in the Image of Jah or the *Imago Dei*, to use the familiar Western term.

This communal/historical/eschatological task has evaded the West and humankind throughout its history. It was not the principal task that Europe set for itself five-hundred years ago. Nevertheless, if humankind and the world is to have a future, it is imperative that religious traditions, in the aftermath of the holocausts of the last five-hundred years be determined to forge a new global consciousness and sense of collective identity. It would seem that Rastafarianism, its thought and ideology, has much to say on this matter and cannot be left out of the discourse that will shape human direction and commitment for the coming millennium. There is no doubt that the music of Rastafarianism, Reggae, has already done much in this respect. But there is also the pressing need for serious study to be accorded Rastafarianism. Rastafarianism is by no means a phenomenon to be located in a museum.<sup>92</sup> The voice of Rastafarianism is the authentic voice of resistance. Perhaps the most enduring quote of a certain Caribbean politician could be, “kill one Rasta and another will take his place.” The Rasta is perhaps the one who is imbued by the Spirit that perpetually subverts “Babylon.” Some comments on Rastafarianism in relationship to religion and the study of religion are therefore apposite.

At the end of the twentieth century, and the millennium, religion has survived despite its demise pronounced by some of the most influential thinkers of the last couple hundred years. Perhaps there is something in religion that is irreducible and enduring. The survival of the religious phenomenon therefore calls for serious academic study as to the way religion is studied in the coming millennium. Rastafarianism can not be left out of such discussion because, if religion has anything worthwhile to say about life/living, and human existence Rastafarian thought on “livity” is of significant importance in shaping future religious conversation. There is a simple yet fundamental reason for this. Rastafarianism raises in a most profound way what W.E.B. DuBois saw as the pivotal question of the twentieth-century: the problem of the color-line. Because the twentieth century has not solved the “problem” it will also be the “problem” of the twenty-first century. Rastafarianism poses the millennial challenge to reform human relationships. The future of religion, both in practice and as an academic discipline will revolve on this “stone” in the next millennium.

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<sup>92</sup> Did Israel’s God not object to domestication in a temple?

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