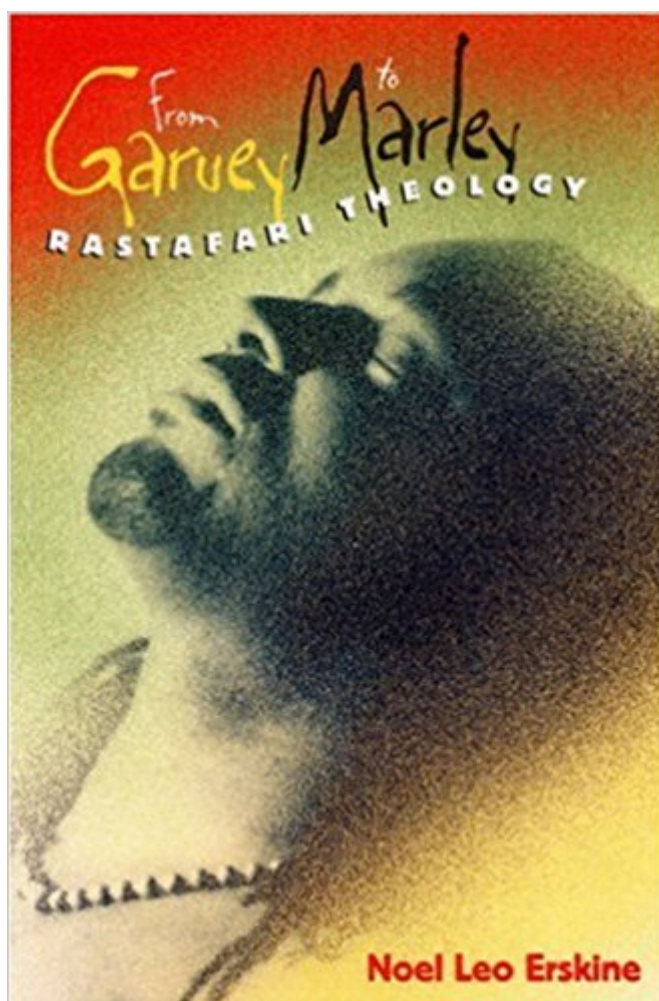


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From Garvey To Marley: Rastafari Theology (History Of African-American Religions)



Synopsis

This history of the theology and rituals of Rastafarianism features accents of the reggae rhythms of Bob Marley and the teachings and philosophy of Marcus Garvey, the black nationalist who motivated many of his fellow Jamaicans to embrace their African ancestral roots. Written by a trained theologian who was raised in the Jamaican village in which the Rastafarian faith originated, the book offers both a serious inquiry into the movement and the perspective of an insider in conversation with elders of the faith who still live in the village. Bob Marley, who died in 1981, is the best known and one of the most articulate exponents of the themes of race consciousness that provide the core of Rasta hermeneutics. The poet and musician also made the faith appealing to the Jamaican middle class, which had turned away from the "Back to Africa" message that Garvey delivered in the 1930s. Noel Leo Erskine isolates and defines the main tenets of Rastafarianism, which emerged toward the end of the 20th century as a way of life and as a new international religion. He includes biographical descriptions of the key players in the development of Rastafari theology, provides details of its organization and ethos, and discusses the role of women in the religion. He also discusses the significance of Ethiopia to the faith; practitioners view that country both as their homeland and as heaven on earth. Examining the religion's relationship to Christianity, Erskine relates the Rastas to 19th-century Native Baptist and Revivalist traditions on the island and to the black theology movement in the United States. The Rastas see the European and North American churches as representatives of an oppressive colonial class, he writes. The Rastafarian name for God--"Jah"--is derived from Yahveh, the God of the Hebrews, and members of the faith connect their struggle for dignity and solidarity in Jamaican society with the struggle of the oppressed Israelites. "Jah" and not the Bible is the decisive source of morality and truth for the Rastas. Clearly written, sympathetic, and at times critical, the book will be important in the fields of African, African American, and Caribbean studies, especially to the cultural and religious dimensions in each discipline.

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Customer Reviews

...point[s] out the degree Rastafari has given Jamaica a transformative religious practice and bring[s] Christianity into contact with that practice. -- New West Indian Guide --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"No other book surpasses Erskine's skill in demonstrating how the Rastafarians gradually grew from a small band of social outcasts to a world-renowned movement that presently symbolizes Jamaica's cultural values in much of its global publicity."--Peter Paris, Princeton Theological Seminary
"Brings theological reflection to Rastafarian religion in an intriguing and creative manner. A religion that has often been misunderstood is mainstreamed and taken seriously by a Jamaican-born theologian who takes both culture and history seriously."--Linda E. Thomas, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
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As a political conservative, I found Noel Leo Erskine's introduction to the Rastafari religion both enlightening and challenging. Enlightening because it makes intelligible a set of beliefs that had hitherto seemed bizarre, challenging because the Rastafari religion is dead set against many of my own beliefs, not to mention my personal lifestyle and social position. (I am a comfortably middle-class, middle-aged, white American male, a meat-eater and consumer of alcohol.) I have of course been aware of Rastafarianism for many years, but only recently have I taken a closer look at its history, beliefs, and practices. Among those beliefs that had previously seemed utterly crazy was the idea that Emperor Haile Selassie was/is the second coming of Christ and literally God incarnate. I had asked myself how any sane person could believe this. But, on reflection, it is now not so hard to see. Ethiopia has a long tradition both in history and legend as a center of a mystical form of Christianity and as a center of an African dynasty with its roots deep in antiquity and with fascinating Biblical connections going back to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. When Haile Selassie (Ras Tafari) ascended to the throne in the 1930s, his celebrity spread to the Caribbean, where Leonard Howell and others saw him as the realization both of Biblical prophecy and of a more recent prophecy, attributed to Marcus Garvey, that a great leader would emerge in Ethiopia as a signal to Blacks around the world that the time of their deliverance was near. Although Garvey did not personally view Selassie as literally God incarnate, he did see him as the embodiment of Black aspirations and as in some sense a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. The divinization of Selassie was left to Howell and the later Rastas, and the transition of Selassie from Emperor to God is now not so

difficult to see. It is hard for whites such as myself to appreciate the extent to which Blacks perceived Jesus as a specifically White Jesus, as a White God and a European God. But such an attitude is totally understandable when one considers that the Christian religion was implicitly and explicitly associated with European colonialism and American racism. So the need of Blacks for a Black God, a Black Christ, is not so hard to understand, and the selection of Haile Selassie, bathed in the warm glow of Ethiopian mystery and Biblical prophecy concerning Ethiopia, was as likely a candidate for divinization as any. Some will say that the Rastas' Biblical exegesis is erroneous, that it is based on incorrect readings of the Bible, and that these readings are arbitrary and self-serving. But the very same thing could be said about the origins of Christianity or any religion. Obviously Jews think that Christians have misused Biblical prophecy, and both Jews and Christians will claim that Islam has distorted the Jewish/Christian Bible. Many scholars today believe that Jesus never claimed to be God, and that this belief evolved over time, contrary to Biblical passages which seem to deny that very doctrine of the Trinity which later became Christian orthodoxy. One may ask the question: in their heart of hearts, do Rastas really believe in the divinity of Haile Selassie, or is it rather an expression of a contrarian mentality, i.e., you (Christians) have your White God, so we will create our Black God. Is the Divinity of Selassie a deliberately crafted Myth of God Incarnate, a Myth believed more with the heart than with the head? Does the Divinity of Selassie serve as a symbol of the Divinity of all men, or in this case the Divinity of the Black man? Only Rastas can answer that question. Erskine explores the history of Rasta and of the various Christian and quasi-Christian religious movements that have flourished in Jamaica over the years. He discusses their various beliefs, their outstanding personalities, and their role in the various rebellions and uprisings that have marked Jamaica's slow and erratic march towards justice and equality. He discusses the Rasta ethic of naturalness, the use of marijuana, the vegetarianism, the avoidance of alcohol, the "leaderlessness" of the movement, its attitude towards women, its music, and its suspicion of politics, ALL politics. Despite the political nature of much Reggae music, Rastas in general eschew politics and are therefore vulnerable to the critique that they are escapist and incapable of being agents of social change, despite their enormous influence in the popular culture of Jamaica and worldwide. This latter point dominates much of the latter part of the book, and this includes a critique of Rasta "quietism." Much of the Rasta social critique sounds a lot like Marxism, but the heart of Rasta is far from the crude materialism and authoritarianism of orthodox Marxism. The challenge for Rasta is how to be socially engaged without adopting the more negative qualities of "Babylon" (mainstream Western society), and Erskine makes some tentative suggestions along these lines towards the end of the book. The Rasta religion and way of life is alternately charming,

beautiful, menacing, and exasperating. If these various expressions can be harnessed in a productive manner that remains true to its roots, Rasta may one day be the force for real social change that it hopes to be.

Book is amazing

Having read a couple of books on Rastafarl, it shows that this one - originally written in 2004 - was written by an Afro-Jamaican for once, not an Anglo-Western. However, it also shows that it was not written by a Rastafarl. To begin with, expressions (and lacking capital spellings of "-I") such as "Rastafarianism", "Rastafari belief and doctrine", "Rastafarian" and "Rastafari church" obviously demonstrate that the author, as an "expert", intended to distance himself from Rastafarl, not respecting that some of these blunders most likely are insulting to Rastafarl or at least incorrect. In fact, Noel Leo Erskine served as a pastor in a church. The wellcome part of the book is its embedment of Rastafarl in the entire colonial religious-historical context (i.e. the religious liberation movements from the start of transatlantic Jamaican slavery leading up to Rastafarl), including the neo-colonial economic power structures. The focus on Marcus Garvey is indeed dominating, also on Bob Marley. Which would not have been this intense with a Rasta author, who would have elaborated more on Leonard Percival Howell and Haile Selassie-I, both of whom of course are included in this book, yet rather marginally by comparison. Also the appreciation of Rastafarl and the occasional statement that non-Rastas should learn one or the other thing from Rastafarl is a positive facet of this book. To my amazement, on the other hand, the author seems to have missed a more thorough overstanding of Rastafarl in quite a few instances. Though it is true that in the beginning Black Rastafarl preferred a non-mingling attitude towards white skinned, ever sin-ce it isn't so much about the whiteness of the skin, which gets rejected, but the whiteness of the mind, which may inflict ANYONE. Of course, white skinned are more likely to get conditioned white, yet ALL of I-and-I (us) descent from Ethiopia. So, Rastas are cautious and embracing at the same time. "Rastas refuse to cover their locks, while they insist on women wearing a covering" (p.111). Monolithic treatment of Rastas is always problematic. The author makes the above point also specifically for the Bobo Rastas. Which amazes me, as the Bobos (and some other Rastas) I know usually wear locks coverings in public, i.e. ALL of the I-n-I (them), irrespective of "gender". While in "orthodox" groups, the above quote rings true, most certainly this is not the case among modern Rastas, especially on a global scale. In fact, there are very much matriarchally inclined Rastas, especially in Africa and also some Rastas who do not believe anymore in the construct of

gender-separation at all, i.e. overtaking the author in terms of "women's" liberation. Even though the author describes all the elements necessary to potentially understand the concept of "I-n-I consciousness", he fails to fully succeed in it, e.g. when referring to it as "at its best is still steeped in individualism" (p.129). While the individual mind is most important for specific functions, individualism as such ("-ism" = belief in, doctrine of) is the diametrically opposed concept to "I-n-I". Initially, the return to Africa was intended quite literally. Reading this book, one gets the impression, the most important shift to metaphor never happened. Today, it is about the return to Ethiopia or rather "Ithiopia". Which may be described as an Ithiopian mind bubble anywhere in Babylon, irrespective of geographics. It is about turning Babylon into Ithiopia, at least for the Rasta living in Babylon. By the way, colonial induced systems in Africa may be Babylonian as sick. Some Rastas do not believe in the construct of continental separation anyway. (At this point, I would like to add that "Ethiopia" as a term for a country isn't that old. Previously, it was used as a synonym for Africa, something the author doesn't clarify in certain historical contexts. The country's previous names include Abyssinia and Axum.) So much for not quite understanding Rasta concepts and/or neglecting the evolutionary processes of progressing concepts of various Rastas via reasonings. Which is a most important aspect of Rastafari in contrast to many other branches of religion, which instead are bound down by dogmas and hierarchy. The further one reads the book, the more critical the author gets. Rastafari are supposed to challenge each other; I-n-I most certainly challenge anybody else; I-n-I can take it to get challenged. I-n-I will not feel challenged all too much by this book, but rather criticized, which is a difference: I-n-I see that the author doesn't understand yet some things, otherwise he wouldn't think, his criticisms are really challenging to Rastafari (who on purpose know better in these specific instances). In some of these cases, the author clearly crosses the line of acceptable attempts of challenges. Let's begin with the more harmless "challenges": The author claims Rastafari would approach colonial exploitation inadequately in order to change it. In context that almost sounds as if that prevailing situation of colonialism would be the Rastas' fault. I may remind that obviously, by that logic, EVERYBODY approaches that inadequately, including the author, as in the short term at least, nothing really changes. Later, he specifies his challenge that Rastas should participate in the creation and administration of laws in order to change things and to build the nation. He even goes on to aver, for the Rastas' failure to get involved in politics and the government, Rastafari would be an un-African religion. I will go into that briefly only: Nationalism is a construct. A quite recent one, by the way, only a few centuries old. Originating in Europe and the European-ruled Americas. Most certainly, it is not African. In fact, especially in Africa, those most artificial nations of them all are a major problem, not even mentioning that the nation construct is

inherently most problematic anyway. The global ways of organizing government and the concept of political struggles (of parties, systems and other separations) are European failures. They are not traditional African ways of functioning democratic organizing ways. Please do not blame Rastas for the failure of those Babylon systems. These are not reformable in a sense of ever fully functioning. Feel free to listen to I-n-I thoughts and use them to translate them as band-aids for your systems. Life will get a bit better then, not more. Thanks for the invitation, but do not attempt to persuade I-n-I to engage in Babylon government politics. Most certainly I refuse to tolerate non-Rastas meddling in Rasta religion. The author criticizes Rastas for venerating a "foreign" God, an African God. Instead, I-n-I should venerate a Jamaican God. That is nationalism as bad as it gets. A god for every country?! That even means to leave monotheism. It means to sever from Africa. It means that Rastas would have INVENTED Haile Selassie-I as divine instead of SIGHTING H.I.M. as Jah, if it is suggestable that I-n-I should now arbitrarily pick another one from Jamaica. On what basis exactly? Dear Noel Leo Erskine, please feel free to do, what I-n-I can't stop you from, but leave I-n-I out of that! With that suggestion of yours you are not only blasphemous, but disrespectfull to I-n-I Rastafarl, rendering I-n-I religion arbitrary, an illusion and thereby void. It also means to separate/splinter Rastafarl, as in accordance with your suggestion, Rastas in all countries would venerate a different national god. By the way, your description of the Rasta concept of Jah is flawed anyway. There are variated concepts around, none really matching the author's words. The author falls for an inherent mistake: He's writing a book about a world religion, yet as if it was completely limited to Jamaica. That is utter non-sense on so many levels, I won't even begin here to elaborate on that. Also, it isn't as easy to write about Rastafarl theology as it is with most other branches of religion, which have dogmas, hierarchies, maybe centralized power structures. Rastafarl, even if looked at in the lacking Jamaican context only, is more like a tree with many branches. Monolithic descriptions, more or less applicable to other world religions (or their branches), simply distort any picture of Rastafarl, even if written by an authentic Rasta. Do not forget that today more Rastafarl live outside Jamaica than in Jamaica. The book provides for a lot of good information I appreciated. Yet, it doesn't overstand some issues. And it doesn't go as much into theology concepts of Rastafarl - which would have to be variating - as I hoped, it would. All the criticism the author hurls at Rastafarl are dealt with by various theological answers, having resulted from reasonings. Even their existance gets completely ignored in this book, only because they are not applied/known by all the branches of Rastas. In other words, for general information, especially the historic one, this book is worth to get read (including Rastas), even if you have read other books on Rastafarl before. Non-Rastas should be carefull not to take anything in this book at face value.

Alas! A full length monograph on the theology of the only world religion having its genesis in the twentieth century. The writer of this important pioneering piece-Dr Leo Erskine-sees his work as a continuation of the earlier "Deconolizing Theology" in which themes of struggle and salvation are explored. From "Garvey to Marley" develops these motifs against the back drop of Rastafari reflection on bibliology, Christology and redemptive eschatology, with H.I.M. Haile Selassie as the focal point. In reading this book, one could very easily get the impression that it was written by an insider. This is how much the author's 'Jamaicaness' and understanding of the movement dominate; and this is how much his empathy with the Rastafari agitation for liberation from "Babylon" shines through. My only disappointment is that the author did not interact with the programmatic work of Barbara Blake Hannah--the first Rasta to have put pen to paper on the movement. But otherwise Dr Erskine has done an excellent job in outlining the beliefs and praxis of Rastafari which have so far resisted any attempt at systematization. Erskine's latest book is a must read for all students and scholars of Contemporary Theology. It comes complete with a helpful glossary of Rastafarian terms.D V Palmer

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