

# Rastafarians

## *History, Beliefs, and Practices*

**Identity:** Originating in the ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica in the 1930s, a black liberation movement that spread throughout the Caribbean, Western Europe, North America and elsewhere (Africa, Australia, and New Zealand).<sup>1</sup> “Rastafarianism is a millennial religious movement that teaches the apocalyptic end of the present era, the judgement of Babylon (oppressive white society and religion), and the dawning of a new age of peace and love.”<sup>2</sup>

**Founders:** Marcus Mosia Garvey; Tafari Makonnen (Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia)

**Statistics:** 3000-5000 in the U.S.; worldwide, 1 million

**History:** The Rastafarian movement was originally inspired by the philosophy of Jamaican black nationalist Marcus Mosia Garvey (1887-1940).<sup>3</sup> Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s. He called for the return of blacks to Africa,<sup>4</sup> from their scattered, fragmented and “slave-mentality” existence among whites, to establish a superior African civilization separated from whites. The Rastafarian movement (whose participants are often called Rastas or Rastafari) officially began with the 1930 coronation of Crown Prince Ras (“prince”) Tafari (“creator”) Makonnen (1891-1975) as Emperor Haile Selassie (“Power of Trinity”) in Ethiopia (though he was not himself a Rastafarian). Central to the movement was the belief that Haile Selassie was the Messiah: “In Haile Selassie I/Ras Tafari many saw the Messiah, Christ returned, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, God incarnate.”<sup>5</sup> Leonard Howell, a Jamaican, taught that Haile Selassie’s coming was predicted in the New Testament book of Revelation (e.g., 5:5; 19:16<sup>6</sup>). In 1966 Haile Selassie visited Jamaica and was met by one to two hundred thousand people who had heard that God had come to visit them.

Although the Rastafarian movement was diverse and lacked central leadership, most groups of Rastafarians—located principally in Jamaica—advocated repatriation to Africa and worship of Haile Selassie’s divinity. Economically deprived, though generally nonviolent and passive, Rastafarians became increasingly politicized and involved in active resistance to the Jamaican government in the 1940s and 1950s. Walter Rodney, a Jamaican university professor, contributed to the spread of Rastafarianism in the Caribbean, starting the Black Power movement in 1968. Active resistance to white rule was violently repressed by the Jamaican government. In 1968 the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Christian) entered Jamaica and many Rastafarians were initially drawn to it. But because they could not accept certain Christian teachings, most withdrew from association with it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Partridge, “Rastafarianism,” in *New Religions: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>3</sup> Information in this section has been drawn, in part, from:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20060907005952/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/re/move/>

<sup>4</sup> In 1927 Garvey prophesied, “Look to Africa, where a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is here.” Quoted in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions*, ed. Larry Nichols, George Mather, and Alvin Schmidt (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 237.

<sup>5</sup> Partridge, “Rastafarianism,” 63.

<sup>6</sup> Rastafarians interpret Ps. 87:3-4 to mean that their god would be born in Ethiopia.

<sup>7</sup> See Leonard E. Barrett, Sr., *The Rastafarian* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 206-209.

In the 1970s the movement transformed to become a positive cultural force expressed in art and music. Its ideologies spread especially through the reggae music (a form of rock music<sup>8</sup>) of Bob Marley. When Haile Selassie died in August 1975 Rastafarians experienced a faith crisis, though some claimed that as God he was still present with them spiritually. Large numbers of Rastafarians emigrated to the U.S. in the 1970s. There are several branches of Rastafarianism. In the West the most important and most visible (also in U.S.) is the “Twelve Tribes of Israel” founded in 1968 by Vernon Carrington.<sup>9</sup> In the 1980s the movement became increasingly secularized, losing much of its ideology.<sup>10</sup>

**Texts:** Holy Piby (“black man’s Bible,” written by Robert Athlyi Rogers in 1928); Ethiopian Holy Book (*Kebra Negast*)

### Beliefs and Practices

Rastafarians have not developed a body of teaching or a belief system as such to which they commit themselves. For the most part, individuals work out their own religion, which tends to be syncretistic,<sup>11</sup> characterized by a variety of beliefs—though there are certain common themes (see next paragraph). Rastafarians believe that the Bible is a holy book, but not all of its contents are acceptable. The Bible, they hold, was originally written in the Amharic language (language of Ethiopia), but has been corrupted by various translations. Rastafarians hold the key to detecting corruptions and interpreting it properly.

Leonard E. Barrett, professor emeritus of religion at Temple University, has identified “six basic beliefs” that he regards as “uniquely Rastafarian”: “Haile Selassie is the living god; the Black person is the reincarnation of ancient Israel, who at the hand of the White person, has been in exile in Jamaica; the White person is inferior to the Black person; the Jamaican situation is a hopeless hell; Ethiopia is heaven; the Invincible Emperor of Ethiopia is now arranging for expatriated persons of African origin to return to Ethiopia; in the near future Blacks shall rule the world.”<sup>12</sup> Three concepts are central to Rastafarian belief: *Babylon*: term for white political power structure. *I and I*: an expression to explain the view that God is in all men. “The bond of Ras Tafari is the bond of God, of man. But man itself needs a head and the head of man is His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia.”<sup>13</sup> Rastafarians believe that “the Jesus spoken of in the Bible is Haile Selassie.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the judgment of self is primary in deciding religious matters. *Jah*: name for God incarnate in Haile Selassie. The “Trinity” is embodied in Haile Selassie himself, who is in fact both Father and Son. Rastas embody the Holy Spirit. Ethiopia is heaven on earth. All who believe in Ras Tafari, who is eternal, are also eternal.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup>See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reggae#Music\\_samples](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reggae#Music_samples)

<sup>9</sup>Partridge, 63.

<sup>10</sup>The *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Gale Research, 1999; 6<sup>th</sup> Edition) reports that many Rastafarians have complained that “many young Jamaican—Americans have adopted the outward appearance of Rastafarians (dread locks and ganja-smoking) without adopting Rastafarian beliefs and lifestyle” (852).

<sup>11</sup>Syncretism is the mixing together of different or opposing beliefs.

<sup>12</sup>Barrett, 104. The Rastafarian leader and preacher who represented the movement’s early views, Leonard P. Howell, summarized Rastafarian teaching with six fundamental principles: 1) hatred for the White race; 2) complete superiority of the Black race; 3) revenge on Whites for their wickedness; 4) the negation, persecution, and humiliation of the government and legal bodies of Jamaica; 5) preparation to go back to Africa; and 6) acknowledging Emperor Haile Selassie as the Supreme Being and only ruler of Black people. *Ibid.* 85. See <http://home.computer.net/~cya/cy00081.html>; <http://www.watchman.org/profile/rastapro.htm> The *Encyclopedia of American Religions* states: “As the Rastafarians matured, they adopted the perspectives of Black Judaism and identified the Hebrews of the Old Testament as black people” (852). On the basis of *Kebra Negast*, the Ethiopian national epic, Rastas interpret 1 Kings 10:13 to mean that the Queen of Sheba gave birth to Solomon’s child, and that the African people are the true children of Israel (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rastafarian>).

<sup>13</sup><http://home.computer.net/~cya/cy00081.html>

<sup>14</sup>Barrett, 106.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

Rastafarians historically have had no central organization or single leader. But they have organized themselves as the “House of Nyabinghi,” formerly split into two “houses” (House of Dreadlocks and House of Combsomes [those who used a comb]). Now only House of Dreadlocks run by an “Assembly of Elders” is in existence. But the organization is very loosely defined.

Rastafarian practices are also not very structured, but they do practice two types of rituals: *reasonings* and *bynghi*. “Reasoning” is an informal gathering, a small group of men who smoke the holy weed, ganja (marijuana), and engage in discussion sessions (called “groundings” or groundations). The pipe is called a chalice. The man who lights the pipe recites a prayer and it is passed around the group. *Bynghi* (short for Nyabinghi) is a holy day marked by a ceremonial dance held on special occasions—mostly key dates in Haile Selassie’s life—and in a tabernacle set up for this purpose.

Colors are significant (red, gold, and green) for Rastas. Red: blood of martyrs in Rastafarian history; Gold: wealth of the homeland; Green: beauty of vegetation of Ethiopia, the “promised land.” *Ganja*, marijuana or cannabis—which, unlike alcohol, is believed to open the mind to truth. *Ganja* is used as a sacramental herb for ritual smoking thought to aid meditation, and also for medicinal reasons.<sup>16</sup> The lion is one of the most prominent symbols, representing Haile Selassie, the Conquering Lion of Judah. The Rastafarian “moral code” includes adherence to Old Testament dietary laws. Rastafarians eat only what is called *I-tal* food (completely natural food and drink) and many devotees are vegetarians. Rastafarian heritage is symbolized by *dreadlocks*, a hairstyle of braided strands. Worn by many, though not all, dreadlocks came to resemble the lion’s mane, symbolizing strength, vitality, superiority and royalty. But various meanings are now attached to the practice, including defiance against society, and styles vary. Some Rastafarians refer to themselves as Nazarites (Num. 21:5).

Reggae music, which has gained popularity beyond Rastafari, often reflects the movement’s culture, teachings, and history.<sup>17</sup> Early musicians included names like: Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Prince Far I, Linval Thompson, Jahman Levi, Misty-in-Roots, The Congos, The Rastafarians, The Abyssinians, Culture, Ras Michael and the Sons of Negus, and Count Ossie. In the 1980s Rastafari teaching was expressed by prominent artists such as Burning Spear, Steel Pulse, Third World, The Gladiators, Black Uhuru, Aswad, Israel Vibration, and Bad Brains. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century religious sentiments of Rastafari are present in reggae music performed by people such as Capleton, Sizzla, Barrington Levi, Turbulence, Jah Mason, Pressure, Midnite, Natural Black, Daweh Congo, Luciano, Cocoa Tea, Richie Spice, and Damian Marley.<sup>18</sup>

## *A Lutheran Response*

Lutherans recognize that an evaluation of a movement like Rastafarianism must take into account the variety of individual beliefs present. However, it is possible to offer a Christian perspective on certain prominent features present in the movement.

While individual Rastafarians may express belief in certain aspects of the Christian faith, Rastafarianism is not a Christian movement. It does not accept the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, as well as the core teaching of the Bible that Jesus of Nazareth alone—in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy—is the Messiah, the Son of God (second person of the Triune God) who became flesh and suffered, died, and rose again to save

<sup>16</sup>“Rastafarians believe marijuana cleans the spirit and body in readiness for prayers and communion both with God and with fellow man.” Martin Booth, *Cannabis: A History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 317.

<sup>17</sup>Reggae, according to Martin Booth, is “a form of folk music which now incorporates many of the facets of rock music” and “it may by default be said to be the music of marijuana, for a good number of lyrics are about traditional herbal medicine practice. The lyrics also “comment on black culture, history, politics and religion.” *Ibid.*, 319. See also Barrett, 194-97; 267-70.

<sup>18</sup>The information in this paragraph is taken from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rastafarian>

humankind from sin and death. The New Testament testifies to Jesus' own claim: "I who speak am he" [the Messiah] (John 4:26; see also Mt 1:16; Mt 16:16; John 11:27; 20:31, etc.). The Scriptures expressly warn Christians that in the period following Jesus' ascension and prior to His Second Coming many will claim to be Christs or divinely authorized representatives from God. Christians are exhorted to reject all such claims, however convincing they may seem (Mt 7:15; 24:4-5; 1 John 4:1-3).

A central theme in Rastafarian history has been the teaching of black supremacy, and even hatred of the white race. It must be recognized, however, that today Rastafarians generally do not accept the view of black supremacy as did early followers. In fact, modern Rastafarian sects such as the Twelve Tribes of Israel have rejected all forms of racism.<sup>19</sup> The Lutheran church likewise rejects all forms of racism. It believes on the basis of the Bible's teaching that God has *created* all human beings with equal value before Him, *redeemed* all people through the blood of His Son, who become one by faith in Him and live together without barriers between them, and *sanctifies* believers in Christ through the Holy Spirit that they might love all human beings in need, both in word and in deed.<sup>20</sup>

An authority on the Rastafarian movement writes, "The real center of the movement's religiosity is the revelatory dimensions brought about by the impact of the 'holy herb' [marijuana].<sup>21</sup> In Rastafarian practice the use of marijuana is viewed sacramentally as "the key to new understanding of the self, the universe, and God...the vehicle to cosmic consciousness": "Man basically is God but this insight can come to man only with the use of the herb. When you use the herb, you experience yourself as God."<sup>22</sup> Such a practice must be strongly rejected on at least two grounds (apart from the question of illegality). The Scriptures teach that they alone are the means through which God has promised to reveal specific knowledge of Himself and His acts, and of the human condition (2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; Ps. 119:105). To ascribe a revelatory function to a part of creation (in this case a plant and the altered state of consciousness that its use induces) is not only a sin of idolatry (Rom. 1:24-25); it is also a despising of God's Word. Second, God wills that His creatures, through Jesus Christ, come to Him in prayer, laying their needs before Him (1 Pet. 5:6-7). The use of drugs to escape the painful realities of life or to seek inner peace through enhanced meditation illustrates the kind of self-absorption to which our sinful flesh is prone (Gal. 5:19-21). Rather, our Lord urges us, "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glory me" (Ps. 50:15). Substance abuse harms the body entrusted to us by our Creator (cf. 1 Cor. 6:20) and must be avoided, as illustrated by the Bible's attitude toward drunkenness (cf. Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:18-20).

As noted in the previous section above, Rastafarian themes are present in music and art forms also in American culture. Most familiar is reggae music. As in the case of all such cultural forms and trends, Christians must exercise careful discernment, while at the same time giving a positive witness to Christian values.

## ***For Further Reading***

Barrett, Leonard E., Sr. *The Rastafarians*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Nichols, Larry A, George A. Mather, and Alvin Schmidt, eds. *Encyclopedia Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006 (237-39).

Partridge, Christopher. *New Religions: A Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 (62-64).

## ***Links and Websites***

<http://web.archive.org/web/20060907005952/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/re/move/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rastafarian>

<http://www.watchman.org/profile/rastapro.htm>

<sup>19</sup>See Barrett, 230.

<sup>20</sup>For a full discussion of the biblical principles regarding racism, with biblical support, see the 1994 report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on *Racism and the Church* (online at: <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/racism.pdf>).

<sup>21</sup>Barrett, 254.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 255.