

Rastafarianism



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When the word religion is brought up, many people have different perceptions on what that really is. Some view it as guidelines or commandments to follow for meeting paradise in the afterlife while others see it as a journey into exploring who they really are and why they were put on this earth. As for Rastafarians, they don't like to title their following as a religion, but more so as a lifestyle instead. The Rastafari movement was said to be founded in the early 1930's around the slums of Kingston, Jamaica. In this time, many of the people in Kingston were suffering from poverty, depression, racism and class discrimination along with many other people across the world. The people were in desperate need of hope for freedom from oppression and a return to the African homeland. The Rastafarians followed the teachings of Marcus Garvey, a prominent Jamaican man who felt strongly about leading the Jamaicans back to Africa. He believed that Africans were the true Israelites and that they had been exiled to Jamaica and other parts of the world as punishment. Therefore, he wanted to lead as many people as possible to "redemption" by returning to Africa. Garvey was an incredibly influential figure who felt passionately about black pride and restoring the integrity he felt was taken from the black race in the days of slavery. Garvey was even considered prophetic. In 1927, he encouraged the people to look towards Africa because a king would soon be crowned there. Like clockwork, in November of 1930, a man named Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned emperor of Ethiopia. He took the name Haile Selassie at his coronation, which meant "Might of the Trinity." Selassie also took the titles, "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and King of the Kings of Ethiopia." These were traditional titles given to Ethiopian kings that reflected the Old Testament emphasis of Ethiopian Christianity.

This coronation astounded many and it became clear to them that this was a fulfillment of scriptures in Revelation and Ezekiel, which discussed the triumph of the Lion of the tribe of Judah as well as the gathering of the people of Israel that were spread across the nations. This was also, more importantly, seen as a fulfillment of Garvey's prophecy. People who had listened to Garvey's teachings began to believe that Selassie was the messiah that had been predicated to free the people from oppression. They believed that this was the end of the punishment and that the movement back to Africa would then begin. Most importantly, they believed that Selassie was indeed the physical presence of God (Jah) on earth and proceeded to name the movement, Ras Tafari, after him. Although Selassie was highly regarded among Garvey's followers, Garvey himself was not a fan. He felt Selassie was an incompetent leader because of his defeat by the Italians and his acceptance of British assistance in order to regain his throne. Garvey even published an editorial about his disdain entitled, " The Failure of Haile Selassie as Emperor. " Meanwhile, Selassie defined himself as an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian and overtly denied any idea that he was a divine being, which came as a shock and disappointment to many. In a radio interview with Canada's CBC news in 1967, Selassie said, " I have heard of that idea [that I am divine]. I also met certain Rastafarians. I told them clearly that I am a man, that I am mortal, and that I will be replaced by the oncoming generation, and that they should never make a mistake in assuming or pretending that a human being is emanated from a deity." Shockingly, even this denial did not dissuade Rastafarians from believing the emperor was, indeed, divine. The Rastafari movement first became recognizable in Jamaica in the 1930s, when peaceful communities were

established in the Kingston slums. The movement was identifiable by a distinctive style of language, hairstyle, art and music. In addition to speaking their own language, Lyaric, Rastafarians also wear their hair in dreadlocks. They did this for many reasons including the biblical command not to cut one's hair (Leviticus 21: 5), the symbolism of the lion's mane, representing strength and the Lion of Judah, and for naturalness and simplicity, which were associated with Africa. In addition to their unique appearance and language, Rastafarians were distinguishable because of their pastimes. Followers could usually be found listening to or playing Reggae music, creating visual folk art, or smoking marijuana. Because most Rastafarians still resided in Jamaica instead of Africa, they were without a leader. That was until Leonard Howell emerged. He taught six fundamental Rastafarian principles: "(1) hatred for the White race; (2) the 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. " Due to the severity and inhumane qualities of these principles, Howell lost many followers as the Rastafarian movement developed. In fact, Howell was arrested by the Jamaican government in 1933 for his loyalty to the Ethiopian emperor instead of King George V. Because of this, along with other factors, the Rastafarians decided to remain leaderless and independent. So, what exactly do Rastafarians believe in? In general, Judaism and Christianity create the foundation for Rastafarian beliefs. There is a significant emphasis on the Old Testament laws and prophecies as well as the Book of Revelation. In addition, the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah are highly

regarded. Rastafarians believe in a Judeo-Christian God called Jah. They believe that Jah was manifested on earth as a black man (who they assumed to be Emperor Selassie). Although Selassie has long since passed, Rastafarians still consider him to be alive. They deem his death as a hoax and trust that he lives in protection awaiting the Day of Judgement. They refer to Selassie as His Imperial Majesty or H. I. M. (pronounced "him").

While most Christians and Jews believe in some sort of Heaven, Rastafarians do not believe in an afterlife. Instead, they consider Africa, called "Zion", to be a heaven on earth. True Rastafarians are supposed to be immortal, both physically and spiritually. They are referred to as "everliving". Another important Rastafarian notion is "I and I," which is oftentimes said instead of the phrase "you and I." It emphasizes the coherence between humanity and God as well as the equality of all humans. Although individual focus is considered to be an important concept in Rastafarianism, unity is equally significant. Rastafarians feel the need to stick together in order to overcome Babylon, which refers to the white power structure of Europe and the Americas. Rastafarians seek to resist Babylon because of its history of "cruelly enslaving blacks and continuing to hold them down through poverty, illiteracy, inequality, and trickery." The greed and conceit of Babylon is contrasted with the humble simplicity and naturalness of the Rastas.

Although all Rastafarians are united in their primary beliefs, there are three main orders of Rastafarianism today. The first, and oldest, order is called the Nyahbinghi Order, also known as the Theocratic Priesthood and Livity Order of Nyabinghi. The word Nyahbinghi can be translated to mean "black victory." It was named after Queen Nyahbinghi of Uganda, who fought against colonialists in the 19th century. This is the strictest of the orders and

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it focuses mainly on the recognition of Selassie as the messiah, Ethiopia, and the eventual return to Africa. Another order of Rastafarianism is the Bobo Shanti. Prince Emanuel Charles Edwards founded Bobo Shanti in Jamaica in the 1950's. The word "Bobo" means black and the word "Shanti" refers to the Ashanti tribe in Ghana, from which this order believes Jamaican slaves are descended. Followers of the Bobo Shanti are oftentimes referred to as Bobo Dreads. Bobo Dreads are different from the people of Nyahbinghi in the way that in addition to worshipping Selassie, they also worship Prince Emmanuel as a reincarnation of Christ and embodiment of Jah. They, too, believe that Garvey was a prophet and they worship the three as a holy trinity. Their emphasis is also on the return to Africa, but they also focus on their demands for monetary reimbursement for slavery. Followers of the Bobo Shanti are easily distinguished by what they wear. They are oftentimes seen wearing long robes and tightly wrapped turbans around their dreads. They follow the Jewish Laws closely through the observance of the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. They tend to alienate themselves by living separately from Jamaican society and other Rastafarians, growing their own produce and selling straw hats. They often sell or carry brooms with them to demonstrate their cleanliness. The last of the orders is called the Twelve Tribes of Israel, named after the 12 sons of Jacob. Dr. Vernon Carrington, also known as Prophet Gad, founded this order in 1968. It is known as the most open-minded of the Rastafarian orders and members are free to worship wherever or however they prefer. Each member of this order belongs to one of the 12 Tribes (or Houses), which is determined by birth month and is represented by a color. Much like Nyahbinghi, the Twelve Tribes of Israel order is anti-racist and often preaches

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love towards all people. Although each order differs somewhat in customs and beliefs, all agree on the worshipping of Selassie and the importance of black freedom. Many Rastafarians, though, do not belong to any order, as the movement as a whole is loosely defined and organized. They do, however, observe many of the same practices. Rastafarians reject the use of alcohol because it is a fermented chemical that does not belong in the sacred temple of the body. They follow the biblical ideology that alcohol makes a person stupid. Although followers do not believe in the usage of alcohol, they do believe in the practice of marijuana. Rastafarians are perhaps most popular for their usage of marijuana, which grows abundantly in Jamaica. Rastafarians refer to it as ganja, the holy herb, lley or callie and believe it was provided by God. They found scriptural support, especially in Psalm 104: 14, which states, " He causeth the grass for the cattle and herb for the service of man." For most Rastafarians, marijuana's purpose was to be used as a source of unification by which all could join in perfect fellowship together with each other and with Jah. They felt that the use of marijuana freed up their mind, body and soul in a way that allowed them to better communicate with Jah and with each other in fellowship. In addition to religious use, Rastafarians also use marijuana for medicinal purposes, using it to heal a variety of ailments, including even the common cold. Marijuana is primarily used, however, during the two main Rastafarian rituals: reasonings and nyabingi. The reasoning is a small, informal gathering at which a group of Rastafarians smoke the marijuana and engross in discussion. The ritual begins when one person lights the pipe and recites a brief prayer while all other participants respectfully bow their heads. The pipe is then passed around the circle until all of the people have smoked and prayed. The

reasoning comes to a conclusion when the participants take leave one by one. The nyabinghi is a celebration held on Rasta holidays and special occasions. Many times, people dance at these gatherings. These dances can last for several days and tend to draw in hundreds of Rastafarians from all over Jamaica. Members of the celebration set up camp in tents on the land owned by the local Rastafarians. They sing and dance in the evening until the early hours of the morning and then rest and reason throughout the afternoon. There are several Rastafarian holidays on which these celebrations take place. Most Rastafarian holidays revolve around the events in the life of the beloved Selassie. The most important, and most often observed, celebrations include November 2 - the coronation of Selassie, January 6 — the ceremonial birthday of Selassie, April 21 - Selassie's visit to Jamaica, July 23 - Selassie's personal birthday, August 1 - emancipation from slavery, and August 17 - Garvey's birthday. Another practice of Rastafarians is to be somewhat visually united. The main visual representation of Rastafarianism is dreadlocks. Another uniting symbol, however, is the colors of red, gold and green. Red represents the triumphant church of the Rastafarians as well as the blood of the martyrs in the black struggle for liberation. Gold symbolizes the wealth of the African homeland and green indicates Ethiopia's beauty and lush vegetation. Black is often also included, indicative of the color of the Africans. Another important symbol is the Lion of Judah, which represents Africa and strength. The most fundamental Rastafarians follow a dietary law called Ital. Within this diet, followers are encouraged to eat only the food that is completely natural, not canned and free of chemicals and preservatives. This food should be eaten as raw as possible. Those that follow this diet follow the Old Testament exclusions of

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pork and shellfish, and most Rastafarians are vegetarians or vegans. Coffee and milk are also rejected because they are seen as unnatural. In conclusion, although Rastafarianism is referred to more as a way of life than a religion, it's still a group of people who have come together under the same beliefs and practices for the same ultimate purpose as many other religions; they believe in bettering themselves in order to have a closer relationship with their God and with their people. After a closer examination, it is evident that Rastafarians are more than just a group of people who wear dreads and smoke marijuana: they are a group of people who possess respect and love for both themselves and others. At the end of the day, we could all learn a thing or two from these people and their unique philosophies.