

The Rastafarian Movement in South Africa: A Religion or Way of Life?

Midas H Chawane
University of Johannesburg
Department of Historical Studies
PO Box 524
Auckland Park
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midasc@uj.ac.za

Abstract

Rastafarians object to the classification of their movement as a religion. Their objection is based on the belief that the movement is more of a way of life than a religion. This is in spite of the fact that the movement is grounded on religious principles which makes non-Rastafarians to view it as a religion. In order to understand the nature of the movement, it is important to define the concept religion in general and as understood by Rastafarians themselves. By looking at some religious movements, and how the Rastafarian movement is both similar and different to them, this paper argues that it is its religious character that makes the movement sustainable. Thus, this article looks at the principles underlying other religious movements such as Judaism, Christianity, African Traditional Religion, Black/African, and Liberation Theologies against those of the Rastafarian movement.

Keywords: Rastafarianism; Zionism; Judaism; Christianity; Liberation theology; Babylon.

1. Introduction

When Rastafari first emerged in Jamaica in the 1930's, it started as a dynamic religious movement which through time transformed itself into a movement that challenges prevailing social, economic and political orders. In spite of the fact that overtime it developed into a way of life for its followers, it retained its original character -that of a religious movement challenging and at times complementing other mainstream religions. This paper argues that although Rastafarianism is seen as a way of life by its adherents (i.e. determining their social, political and economic lives) its persistence is largely due to its religious nature. The social, political and economic lives of Rastafarians in South Africa (like anywhere where the movement exists) are mainly linked to their religious beliefs. This article also looks at the different facets of the movement and argues that despite its many facets, it is its religious nature that sustains its existence.

The main purpose of this paper is to establish how the movement is both different from and similar to other religious movements. This is done by looking at the circumstances under which the movement came into being in Jamaica and South Africa; its nature and belief systems; the extent to which the movement shares some fundamental principles with other religions; and major differences and similarities with other religious movements. In order to achieve these aims, it is important to define the concept religion, examine the nature and origin of the Rastafarian movement in general and in South Africa in particular.

2. Defining Religion

The difficulty of classifying the Rastafarian movement as a religion lies in the complexity of the concept religion itself. Coining an inclusive definition of the concept religion has presented a big problem not only for scholars, but for practitioners of religion and courts of law as well. As a result, there is a widespread disagreement regarding how the concept religion is defined. The complexity arises from the fact that such definition should, in the words of Idowu (1973: 69) apply to everything that is naturally and commonly called religion, to religion as a subjective spiritual state, and to all religions that have obtained objective historical comprehension. As a result, the definition differs from one field of study to another and between tenets and scientists. According to Harrison (2006: 132-152) the one reason why religion is so difficult to define might be because it is one of those concepts that do not refer to things possessing a single defining characteristic. For Harrison, religion is a complex concept used to refer to things sharing a number of features – and thereby exhibiting a number of “family resemblances” – not all of which need to be present.

The most popular definition is that which see religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church and all those who adhere to them (Swatos: 2003: 40). Another definition sees religion as a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, based on account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, institutions and practices. Applying the

above two definitions, it can be said that whether Rastafarians see their movement as religious or not will depend on their definition of religion. But when other aspects of the definitions are applied such as a unified system of beliefs and practices, Rastafari qualifies as a religion. Rastafarians' objection to classify their movement as a religion is that of institutionalizing religion into a church (Harrison 2006: 132-152), however, this cannot be true because in South Africa there are Rastafarian churches which are known as *houses* with branches in most townships (as is to be later seen). Explaining the reason for this rejection, Schleiermacher as cited by Harrison (2006: 132-152) believes that people mistakenly perceived themselves as non-religious because they reject formalized religious doctrines and official religious institutions. Thus lack of a formal religious institution cannot be a reason why Rastafarianism cannot be called a religion.

In advancing the argument that their movement is not religious, Rastafarians differentiate between spirituality and religion with some preferring to see their movement as a form of spirituality. Spirituality, it is argued is a network that connects human beings, thereby linking all humankind to the Creator, the universe and to each other (Afari 2007: 224). This spiritual network, they claim, is the original, authentic, pure way of life and cannot be described as a religion, theology or ideology, but the true essence of life determining our culture, true identity, nationhood and divine destiny. On the other hand, religion is defined as a 'fairly unified system of beliefs and practices which forms a single moral group known as a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque.' This in essence implies for Rastafarians that religion (together rules, rituals and regulation) is a man-made institution (Afari 2007: 224). This definition of religion is similar to the one proposed by Swatos above. Their rejection in classifying their movement as a religion is in the first place based on their definition of the concept but not in its (Rastafarianism) nature. However, looking at all definition of the concept it is clear that Rastafarianism possesses most of the qualities to be classified as a religion. In order to understand what Rastafarianism is, whether it is a religion or not, it is important to first understand its nature and origin.

3. Rastafari: Origin and nature

As documented, the Rastafarian Movement originated in the Caribbean island of Jamaica in the 1930's. The movement stems from the oppression and exploitation of black people in Jamaica and elsewhere. The main reason for its emergence was that Africans who were taken to America as slave found themselves in a foreign place without a common culture or identity (Chawane 2008: 154). The immediate reason for its emergence was in the 1930's when Haile Selassie who was to become their god was crowned king of Ethiopia. This coronation coincided with Marcus Garvey's prophesy when he told people to *look to Africa when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near*. From Jamaica, the movement spread to other parts of the world where people felt oppressed and exploited, and especially to those countries where there were people of African origin. Although Rastafari (movement) started as a religious movement (which makes some to see it as a religion) with a handful of supporters, it developed into a social, cultural and political movement that became more inclusive, attracting adherents from different ethnic groups and economic strata (Johnson-Hill,

1996:4). This implies that in addition to being a religious movement, it became a social, cultural and political movement. However, in spite of this development, it continue to maintain its religious character, which became the main reason for disagreement about whether it is religious or not.

The word Rastafari is derived from Haile Selassie's (the Ethiopian King) original name Ras (Ethiopian word for Prince) Tafari Makonnen who in 1930 was crowned as *His Imperial Majesty, King of Kings, Lords of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Light of this World, and King of Zion*. Haile Selassie was reported to be the 225th restorer of the Solomonic Dynasty (i.e. Biblical King Solomon) and to represent one of the oldest thrones on earth, more than three thousand years old (Bosch 1996: 7). For Jamaicans, the coronation reaffirmed the ancient roots of Ethiopia and its independent place in Judea-Christian religions which is a clear indication of the link between Judaism and Christianity (Napti, 2003: 3-39). This gives the Rastafarian movement its religious character. The coronation also gave the movement its political agenda, that of Pan Africanism and African Nationalism, which makes Rastafarians and other scholars to see it not as a religious movement but a political one. Johnson-Hill (1996: 4) supports this when he says:

By identifying with the new Black king, the powerless become powerful. Because Selassie was a Black emperor of virtually the only African nation to successfully resist colonialism, he evoked Black Nationalist sentiments and provided hope for an eventual triumph over racism.

Ras Tafari was the birth name of His Imperial Majesty (H.I.M as he is called by Rastafarians) Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, who is also the divinity (or head) of the movement with members regarding him as their Jah (God) and calling him Jah Rastafari (Gondwe 2000: 9). Thus, Rastafari can be taken to refer first to Haile Selassie as head of the movement. By seeing Selassie as God implies that Rastafarianism assumed its religious nature from its inception. The word Rastafari can also refer to the creed, religion, and movement or organisation. The word is also used to refer to the adherents as one Rastafari clearly put it during *reasoning* (see page 13 of this work) that *His followers shall be called by his name* (Chawane 2008: 122). In short, the word Rastafari is used to refer to either Haile Selassie, the creed, the movement itself or to the adherents.¹ The fact that the word Rastafari also refers to the creed or religion also confirms it as a religion.

The emergence and growth of the Rastafari movement in the Caribbean was a direct result of slavery, which had attempted to destroy efforts by slaves to forge their own cultural identity and their desire to be free. The movement was also the result of the desire to express an alternative form of religion and see a united and independent Africa. Rastafarianism is seen as a convergence of the heritage of the Maroons (blacks who resisted slavery in the Americas by escaping to the mountains), Ethiopianism and the emergent Pan-African movement. Rastafarian identity is thus understood as evolving out of cultural resistance — the lack of political freedom and opposition to an imposed slave identity and religion. This is the reason why adherents themselves and some scholars

¹ When referring to the movement itself, adherents are opposed to calling it (movement) Rastafarianism because it implies an ideology which in turn implies division, which they are opposed; hence they call the movement Rastafari.

view the movement as a way of life, a philosophy, or an ethical code (Simpson, 1985: 286-291).

There is widespread disagreement among scholars concerning the nature of the Rastafarian movement; that is whether it is religious or something else. Some notable scholars writing on Rastafarianism (such as Rex Nettleford, Barrington Chavennes and Jahlan Niaah) refrain from calling Rastafarianism a religion and argue that to do so the movement would be narrowly defined. These scholars prefer to define it as a creed, movement, tradition, way of life or a phenomenon. This is based on the fact that Rastafarianism as a movement draws on all indexes of culture known to mankind – language, religion, kinship pattern, artistic manifestations, political organisation, and system of production, distribution and exchange (Paper Presented in *The Inaugural Rastafari Conference*, 17 August 2010).

On the other hand there are those scholars who see the movement differently. These include amongst others Witvlei (1985) who describes Rastafarianism as a ‘liberation theology’ or ‘Black theology’, but differentiates it from other religions, which marks it as unique. Leonard E. Barrett (a Jamaican sociologist) as cited by Kebede and Knottnerus (1998), has described Rastafarianism as a messianist-millenarian cult (an assertion that Rastafarians refutes) and argues that:

Its messianism resides in the Rastafarians' faith in the divinity of the late Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. The Rastafarian movement, Barrett argues, is millenarian because of the followers' expectation that heaven will be "realized" on earth or more specifically in Ethiopia. From this perspective Ethiopia is awaiting the racial redemption of the black person from the shackles of Babylon, which, in their opinion, are those societies in which black people are held captive.

Some scholars prefer to see Rastafarianism as a political movement with a religious component because of its emphasis on the ideology of Pan Africanism and African Nationalism. Kebede and Knottnerus (1998) argue that:

To simply define the Rastafari as a religious movement, however, is misleading. We suggest that the Rastafari is primarily a political movement with a very strong religious component. It is a collective enterprise whose political motivations and goals are intertwined with religious symbolism and interpretations.

4. Rastafari in South Africa

Rastafari was first introduced formally in South Africa on 28 December 1997 when Rastafarians from most South African provinces attended a gathering in Grasmere, south of Johannesburg. However, the ideological foundation was laid long before its formal inception. Its origin in South Africa can be linked to two important movements, namely Ethiopianism and Garveyism (Chawane 2014:93-114). These two movements were responsible for laying the foundation for Rastafarian religious nature. Ethiopianism is the notion that the modern state of Ethiopia fulfils biblical prophecy of the rise of a dominant nation as represented primarily in Psalm 68:31, interpreted to be a reference to Africa. This idea places Ethiopia either as symbolic or actual homeland and, therefore, functions both as a source of identity and a destination for repatriation for Africans living

outside of Africa. Garvey (or Garveyism) lays out an argument for the creation of a Black homeland, Ethiopia, Africa, Zion or heaven (Chawane 2014: 93-114).

Garveyism is the philosophy of Marcus Garvey, a descendant from the fiercely proud Maroons, who was born in 1887 in the town of St. Ann, Jamaica. At the age of fourteen he discovered that there were differences between human races, and he eventually became very conscious of his Jamaican roots which could be traced to Africa. For Rastafarians, Garvey was seen as the “Black Moses” who was to emancipate blacks from “Babylon” (oppression) to Zion (heaven). The word “Babylon” is derived from the activities of the infamous king of the biblical “Babylon” who, according to Rastafarians, inspired the Persian, Greek, Roman, British and American oppressive regimes (Chawane 2014: 93-114). Notions of “Babylon” are used in dialectical opposition to notions of “Zion” (Africa, Ethiopia or heaven), considered the authentic and holy motherland, referred to as the “Garden of Eden”, and the “cradle of all mankind”. “Zion” is perceived as the place, where all gather who haven’t accepted the wrong teachings of “Babylon”. It’s the point of intersection where Judaism and Christianity meet. “Zion”, according to Rastafarians, is God’s kingdom on earth (Chawane 2014: 93-114).

Consequently, Garvey is regarded as the prophet of the movement. Rastafarians are therefore inheritors of the thought world and cosmology of Marcus Garvey. Garvey can be regarded as an immediate contributor to an Afro-centric reading of the Bible that Rastafarians inherited. Garvey builds upon these ideas, and presents for Rastafarians a model of an African centred approach to biblical interpretation that starts with critical reflection upon the social and political conditions of persons of African descent (Chawane 2014: 93-114) . His Afrocentric interpretation of the Bible, his Ethiopianist vision and philosophy of blackness influenced Rastafarians (Davidson 2008: 46-60). The notions of Ethiopianism, Zionism, exile and return or repatriation as it appear in Rastafarian contexts; specific portions and concepts of the Bible is rhetorically inspired by Marcus Garvey’s thought. The usage of the word Babylon reflects the Rastafarian development of Garvey’s Afro-centric Bible readings and the advancement of a Black Zionism (Davidson 2008: 46-60). Garveyism laid the religious foundation on which Rastafarians were to build their world view because of its link with Zionism.

The ideology of Ethiopianism originated in the United States of America during the late 18th century with the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). The AME was formed in 1787 when Richard Allen broke away from the predominantly white Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in response to the more depressing aspects of Africans in the Americas. The new independent church movement was called Ethiopianism because its aim was to establish churches across the entire African continent. The term Ethiopia was used in the biblical context where Africans were referred to as Ethiopians (Chirenje 1987: 1-2). As in the USA, Ethiopianism in South Africa was the product of missionary teachings. Its roots were laid in 1849 by the Tswana chief Sechele who after his suspension from the London Missionary Society by David Livingston for refusing to divorce four of his wives. Sechele’s approach to Christianity was to use Christian and African religious practices to enhance the wellbeing of his people by interpreting the scriptures in the light of their experiences (Chirenje 2006: 16-17).

Though there were various other secessions from missionary societies to form Independent African Churches such as that of Nehemiah Tile in Eastern Cape and

Mbiyana Mgidi in Natal, the most relevant to Rastafarianism was the one on the Witwatersrand. There, a group of Christians and their ordained minister (Mangena Makone) who broke away from the Wesleyan Missionary Society in 1892 started Ethiopianism. Makone was not happy with what he perceived to be racial segregation within the church where whites and blacks were attending different conferences. He resigned from the Wesleyan Church and together with other disgruntled members formed a new religious organisation (Sundkler 1961: 38). They called themselves Ethiopians after the prophecy of African redemption in Psalm 68, which reads: *Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand unto God.*² In 1895, they met with the leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and in 1896; their church was formally incorporated as the South African arm of the AME Church (Campbell 1995: n.p.).

There are parallel practices that can be drawn between Rastafarianism and Ethiopianism as it appears in South Africa during the mid-1920s in the form of the Wellington Movement, which was the fusion of Ethiopianism and Garveyism. Wellington Buthelezi, who was a disciple of Marcus Garvey, had announced that a day of reckoning was at hand in which black Americans were coming to liberate Africans from European bondage. In Pondoland, Garveyism and the idea of Wellington combined with indigenous prophetic traditions and the activities of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of South Africa ignited a sweeping millenarian movement. Garvey's influence reached Wellington through a West Indian, Ernest Wallace, a representative of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (Edgar 1988: 159). Thus

Wellington did not initiate his movement in a vacuum since Garveyism had caught hold in Southern Africa after the First World War and its fundamental concepts - the emphasis on the creative capabilities of African peoples, the potential for unification of peoples of Africa and of African descent, and the hope of reclaiming Africa from Europeans - were well received by Africans (Edgar 1988: 161).

Like Rastafarians, Wellington preached in English, dressed in ministerial garb, and their meetings usually began with prayer, scripture reading and hymn singing. Their hymns reinforced the themes of African freedom and unity. The Wellington movement, like Rastafari:

Exhibited an ambivalent attitude toward Europeans culture. Europeans were to be driven away, while at the same time Africans were to share in their material wealth. Factories were to spring up overnight; clothing was to be distributed to everyone; Africans were to have their own government (Edgar 1988: 161).

The Wellington movement served as a springboard for the Rastafarian movement. In some senses, both Rastafarian and the Wellington movement are based on the fundamental concepts of a united and free Africa, and the rejection of European culture (but selectively) and the existing order of things.

² This Psalm is one of those that are always recited during Rastafarian congregation.

5. The Religiosity of Rastafarianism

The Rastafarian movement is grounded on the following religious rights:

1. It shall abide by the Bible (King James Version), Holy Piby, all teachings and speeches of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I.
2. The first Saturday of every month shall be the official day of worship for all houses.
3. The *holy herb* (marijuana) shall be used at all gatherings of Nyabbinghi³ Holy sessions.
4. No youth (under18) shall be permitted to smoke *ganja* unless used in another form with parental supervision.
5. All members must be married especially the Priesthood and those who live with the *Queen* (women).
6. Members of the Nyabbinghi shall not be persecuted or discriminated against for wearing dreadlocks, as it is a holy vow.
7. No polygamy is allowed in the House of Nyabbinghi Order.
8. No fornication is allowed (Constitution of the Nyabbinghi Order).⁴

Taking these religious rights into consideration, it is clear that Rastafarianism shares similar characteristics with some religious movements. A common characteristic that they share with some religious movements is the use of sacraments. The most silent feature of the Rastafari movement is the use of marijuana (*ganja*) as a sacrament. Marijuana is smoked⁵, used in baking *ganja* cakes, and to make *ganja* tea. The smoking of *ganja* started in late the 1930 when Howell established the Ethiopian Salvation Society, centred on the Pinnacle commune in Jamaica. From then, this practice has become the principal ritual of Rastafarians.

As a liberator of feelings and ideas, *ganja* has through the ages been, and continues to be, a great force in our cultures and civilisations, each of which has named it uniquely- *bhang* and *ganja* in India, *kabak* in Turkey, *takrouri* in Tunisia, *kif* in Algeria and Morocco, *maconha* in Brazil, and *Marijuana* in Mexico and the United States (Clarke, 1994: 46-47).

The above quote shows that the smoking of *Ganja* has been important in many cultures and through many civilisations. The difference perhaps between those communities and Rastafarians is that it is more central in the lives of Rastafarians than in any known community in history. *Ganja* features in almost every aspect of their lives. It is most importantly utilised for sacramental purposes as well as a ritual during the process of

³ The Nyabbinghi Order is the original and main Rastafarian sect that formerly exists in South Africa.

⁴ With the exception of rights 3, 4 and 6 which differentiate the Rastafari movement from other religious movements; all other rights are also applicable in other religious movements such as Christianity. The fact that even in the constitution of the movement the rights are called religious rights is the reason people from outside the movement classify it as a religion.

⁵ The smoking takes place during the process of *reasoning* which takes place during congregation. *Reasoning* is an *ad hoc* dialogue on virtually any topic, ranging from religion or the Bible, politics, education, social problems, ancient African history, current news, *ganja*, love and hatred – anything that the house may agree to discuss or that may arise from the congregation.

reasoning (Gondwe, 2002:10). The sacramental function of *ganja* in meditation is to lift up the spirit and to communicate with *Jah*. Rastafarians communicate with *Jah* by this medium. In this sense, it functions as incense that accompanies *ises* (praises) to *Jah*. They generally see it as an integral part of their belief systems in their daily experiences (Chawane 2014: 93-114). Rastafarians call it by different names, such as the *holy herb*, *hola (holy) ishence*, *kali*, *sacred weed* or just *weed* (Jahug, 1992: 9). The different names Rastafarians use to refer to *ganja* suggest its sacramental or religious function. Apart from the sacramental function of *ganja* (which they claim was given to them by *Jah*); it is for them an important barrier that separates them from “Babylon”.

By means of the holy herb which The Creator give man for meat, HIM servant separates himself from Babylon midst. Man purify man temple by burning this divine *Ishence* within (Jahug, 1992:9).

Its uses are very extensive because the purposes for which it is used are religious, spiritual and medicinal among others. The basis for its general use is Biblically substantiated by the following texts:

“He causeth the grass for the cattle, and the herb for the service of man” (Psalms 104:14)
“ . . . thou shalt eat the herb of the earth” (Genesis 3:18)
“ . . . eat every herb of the land” (Exodus 10:12)
“ . . . Better is the dinner of herb where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith” (Proverbs 15:17)⁶

They also defend their use of *ganja* by saying that it is even written in the book of Revelations 22 that *we must eat the fruit of the tree that bears fruit 12 times a year* (Pace Magazine, July 1995). Their justification of the use of *ganja* and the wearing of dreadlocks using the Bible gives the movement its religious character. Another unique feature of the movement is the wearing of dreadlocks⁷ by its adherents. At the same time, the fact that the movement is based on certain religious rights, qualifies it as a religious movement.

Rastafarians hold a different worldview. It is this different worldview that makes them feel that their movement cannot be classified under religion. They do not align themselves with any political party, social, religious or economic organisation.⁸ This in essence means that they not only object to the classification of their movement as a religion but also object to seeing it as a political, social or economic movement. The basis of this objection is that their worldview is a melting pot of ideas obtained from a variety of books and teachings that can be religious, social, economic or political (Chawane 2008: 134). Some of these books and teachings are based on African struggles for equality and they include among others, Haile Selassie, Marcus Garvey, Africa and Pan Africanism. Their political philosophy is largely based on Pan African ideology and ideas propagated by African leaders who fought against colonialism and the oppression of

⁶ Rastafarian Religion in <http://www.aspects.net/~nick/religion.htm>, p. 2.

⁷ Dreadlocks are thick matted thatch of hair and are the most visible mark of Rastafarians.

⁸ It is only recently with the formation of the African Union where they are represented by Ashantiwa Archer (who is a woman). Their responsibility within the Union is to advise on matters concerning African unity.

blacks. The most important of these are the teachings of Marcus Garvey. They believe in the idea of African unity, which is fostered through ideas of leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Malcolm X and Robert Sobukwe, who they consider great African warriors (Chawane 2008: 135).

However, like other religious movements, Rastafarians also congregate in an institution which they call a *house*. The difference with other religious movement is the way they congregate. They refer to their congregation as *groundation or grounation*. The word *groundation* is derived from the word 'ground' (also known as the *binghi*), which means the place where Rastafarian gatherings take place for spiritual purposes. The most important structure on the ground is a round tabernacle built following the Nyahbinghi Order guidelines, which are taken from the Christian Bible with twelve outer posts representing the Twelve Patriarchs, the twelve gates of New *Jerusalem*, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and the Twelve Apostles. At the centre, is the largest post of all which represents: *Ian'I Ivine Majesty* (Our Devine Majesty), that is, Emperor Haile Selassie I. The roof of the tabernacle takes the shape of an umbrella. At its centre there is an alter made of six outer-posts surrounding a centre post. This symbolises the Book of the Seven Seals, the Seven Golden Candlesticks (Constitution of the Nyahbinghi Order). This is evidence of the Judao-Christian influences.

The process of *grounation* is divided into three sessions, called *churchical or ises* (praises), *reasoning* and *governmental*. *Churchical* (as of a church session) is the first session of *grounation*; it is characterised by singing, drumming and dancing. As the words *churchical* or *ises* suggests, it is a sort of church sermon where Rastafarians give praises to *Jah*. The official opening of the first session is marked by the singing of the Ethiopian Anthem (a sign of its connection with Ethiopianism), followed by the recitation of Psalms 1, 121,122,133 and 24 (this shows the extent to which it borrows from Christianity), and the recitation of the Nyahbinghi Creed taken from the *Holy Piby* which is referred to as the Blackman's Bible (Chawane 2008: 132). After the completion of the creed, they all join hands in a circle and sing, after which everyone must sit. This is followed by the process of *reasoning*.

The fact that Rastafarians in South Africa congregate for spiritual purposes, give praises and recite the Psalms makes it more religious. Its religiosity is further confirmed by its relations with Judaism, and Biblical Ethiopia and Israel.

6. Rastafari and Judaism

Judaism is central to Rastafari belief. The connection between Rastafari, Judaism, Ethiopia and Israel can be traced back to ancient religious times. Rastafarians always equate their suffering during slavery with that of the Jews in ancient Egypt under Pharaoh. Rastafarians believe that most enslaved Jamaicans were taken from Ethiopia. The connection is further reinforced by many religious authorities and the Israeli government who consider the Beta (Falasha) Jews of Ethiopia as bona fide Jews. For many Jamaicans, the Black Diaspora is nothing but only a continuation of the Jewish Diaspora, of enslavement (Siwek 2005: 1-6).

Rastafarians' idea of Zion is taken from the Jewish concept of the Promised Land to which Moses was leading them. Like Jews, Rastafarians' allegiance is to King Solomon who is believed to have given a son (Menelik I), prince and heir to the spoils of

Judah to the Queen of Sheba. The relationship between Rastafari and Judaism was reinforced with the coronation of Selassie in 1930. It was further cemented by one of his majestic title which revered him as the *Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah*. Rastafarians emulate the Hebrew tribe in the way they wore a crown (dreadlocks)⁹ of their hair. They claim that their dreadlocks originated from the same source, the Nazarite Vows. According to the Nazarite Vows, in accord with God, the Nazarite grows out their hair and makes sure *no razor comes upon his head*, as it says in Numbers 6:1 (Siwek 2005: 1-6). The wearing dreadlocks is very central in the belief system of Rastafarians. In addition to the Nazarites of Judaism, there are several groups within nearly every major religion that have at times worn their hair in this fashion. These groups include the Sadhus of Hinduism, Dervishes of Islam and the Coptic Monks of Christianity, among others who also practice this hairstyle. The very earliest Christians may also have worn this hairstyle; particularly noteworthy are descriptions of James the Just, “brother of Jesus” and first Bishop of Jerusalem, who wore them to his ankles. This means that for Rastafarians dreadlocks are a symbolic religious practice. The most important purpose of dreadlocks for Rastafarians is aligned to the notion of divinity dwelling within them – symbolising a more spiritual self-declaration. (Chawane 2012: 163-188).

Some scholars such as Philip Potter, (the highly respected Caribbean theologian and ecumenist) see connection between Garveyism and Zionism (which together with Ethiopianism are the foundation of the movement). For him, Garvey lays out an argument for the creation of a black homeland, which he views as a form of Zionism (Davidson 2008: 46-60). Potter is supported by Hilaire de Souza of Dahomey in the paper, *Le Guide du Dahomey*, dating from October 15, 1921. De Souza is illustrative of the appeal of Garvey’s thought on his sympathisers and seeks to explain what in that time was being viewed as the ‘extremist theory of Marcus Garvey’. He characterizes Garvey’s thinking as a type of “Black Zionism”, which is widespread in certain countries, especially in the United States of America, and which preaches the return of blacks to Africa (Davidson 2008: 46-60). The connection between Garveyism and Zionism is also seen in one of the denomination of the movement who call themselves the *Twelve Tribes of Israel* existing informally in South Africa..

7. Rastafari, African/Black Theology and Liberation Theology

There are some scholars such as Witvlei who sees Rastafari as a religion, a form of a ‘liberation theology’ or ‘Black theology’. This is based on the fact that there are some parallels that can be drawn between Rastafari and the two theologies. The terms “African liberation theology” and “African theology” have been used interchangeably to denote the Christian theological reflection that is carried out in the exponential situation of the African people, a feature which they share with Rastafarianism (Gichaara 2005: 75-85). African theology emerged at the same time when African countries were becoming independent from their colonial masters and it was born out of African contextual experience, African vision of the world, and metaphysics (Gichaara 2005: 75-85).

⁹ Dreadlocks are thick matted thatch of hair that is allowed to grow down the shoulders in ringlets or plaits.

According to Gichaara (2005: 75-85), African theology is and takes into consideration the following:

1. Culture – wherein African culture and indigenous heritage religion/s are studied as a way of showing that African culture and the underlying African religious heritage are the raw material from which African spirituality is made.
2. Context of Religious Pluralism – in order to accommodate the many other religions brought about by a mixture of colonialism, trade and the onset of cultural fusion that has been the result of globalization.
3. Experience of Colonial Domination and the Subsequent Deliverance – where the Biblical stories of the enslaved Israelites relates to the sufferings of Africans during slavery and colonialism.
4. Postcolonial Situation of Political Domination and Material Poverty – where post-colonial Africa is characterised by material poverty resulting from both internal (such as oppressive post-colonial regimes) and external factors.

Unlike African theology which is a postcolonial phenomenon, Rastafarianism can be seen as a theology that existed before decolonisation and aided in preaching against colonialism. The parallels between the two theologies can be found on the major principles underlying each. These (parallels) are vivid with regard to principles 1, 3 and 4. Rastafari, like African theology, takes African culture and indigenous heritage as important foundations upon which spirituality is based. Another area of convergence is in the struggle against colonialism and slavery which they relate to the suffering of the Israelites in ancient Egypt. This is supported by Gichaara (2005: 75-85) who maintains that the biblical story of the children of Israel being held captive for over 400 years in Egypt resonates well with the African experience of colonialism. Both Rastafarianism and African theology are concerned with the prevailing condition of deprivation.

Liberation theology emerged in the Latin American context during the late 1960s, and emphasizes that Christian action and church structures must function in the human reality of oppression and liberation as expressed by Gustavo Gutierrez and Juan Luis Segundo, two of the original architects of liberation theology (Soares 2008: 226-234). Liberation theology is defined as a form of religion which offers economic and political salvation to its adherents in the here-and-now. Thus, like liberation theology, Rastafarianism is also concerned with the political and economic aspects of life. However, the concern of liberation theology with political and economic issues does not make it something else than a religion. The main aim of liberation theology is to transform society through social action and on the basis of the Christian message of justice, peace, and love. Liberation theology calls the churches to become a model of the pattern of relationship that it seeks to establish in the world. It challenges all churches to refute the dehumanisation of blacks and all oppressed peoples within their communities as they assist the oppressed in the struggle to obtain full freedom and equality in society.

As propagated by Gutiérrez, this theology is based on the following principles:

1. Liberation theology arises out of believers' outrage and protest against injustice, and a commitment to transforming it towards justice, freedom and dignity.

2. They emerge as a result of the struggles of communities of marginalised people for dignity, life, land and for liberation, understood in the light of God's word.
3. Liberation theologies are usually articulated by people who have chosen to be in solidarity with the marginalised (Solberg 2008: 310).

Taking the above principles into account, it is obvious that the Rastafarian movement shares all the principles articulated by liberation theologies. Both Rastafarian and liberation theologies fight against oppression and for liberation of the oppressed. However, in Rastafarian liberation discourse the usage of the term "Babylon" is distinct from the exodus motif normally associated with theologies of liberation. The Rastafarian usage of the term can be traced back to Marcus Garvey's notion of a "Black Zionism" that pictured "Zion" as a place of restoration. Thus, in its usage the term "Zion" serves as the foil for "Babylon" and in many instances the two contradictions are paired. Amongst Rastafarians, "Babylon" signifies the evil empire; any place outside of Africa as "Babylon", and the British Empire as "Babylon" with "Zion" as its counterpoint (Davidson 2008: 46-60).

The Rastafarian movement is grounded upon similar principles as those articulated by both African and liberation theologies. Though Rastafarians see their struggle as a movement from "Babylon" to "Zion", they all see salvation as something that should be attained on earth, i.e. they are concerned with the here-and-now. What can be said is that the Rastafarian movement, as already indicated, incorporates the principles of both African and liberation theologies but goes beyond by embracing additional principles which make it different from these theologies.

8. Rastafarianism and Christianity

There are identifiable similarities between Rastafarianism and Christianity especially in the use of the Bible and hymns that they sing during congregation. Though Rastafarians share some important features with Christianity, they don't see eye to eye with Christians especially with the coming of Jesus Christ. It is their criticism of Christianity that makes them to adopt a negative attitude against Christianity and religious movements in general. Expressing an opinion about the coming of Christ, a member of movement quoting Mutabaruka (an international acclaimed Rasta poet) during his South African tour said:

His father sat on the rocking chair and waited for Jesus to come and never come. His mother sat on the rocking chair in the veranda waiting for Jesus to come and never did. And now he is doing the same, waiting for the same Jesus (Chawane 2008: 136).

Religion itself comes under fire apparently for its rigidity and human limitations, particularly Christianity. It is because of its Christian teaching that the Bible is sometimes rejected.

The cross is a symbol of death, hence it is found everywhere symbolising death (on graves or cemetery), the swastika is taken from the cross, symbolising the four corners of the world. Religion should not be confused with spirituality. Religion is a set of rules drawn up by human beings. The same cannot be said about Rastafari, our movement thus

cannot be seen as a religion because it talk about astrology, politics, culture, the cosmic world, mind, body and soul that is why it is above religion (Chawane 2008: 134).

This opinion is further qualified by Rastafarian Priest Binghi Bunny who explains the major difference between Rastafarianism and Christianity. He says that Rastafarianism is not a religion because religions are created by men to enable them to control others. Amongst other tools which try to control people, Christianity, especially the so-called the Holy Bible or King James Version became the most successful in doing so. Another generally held opinion amongst the Rastafarians is that Christianity is a white man's creation that teaches blacks that God is a white man, Jesus is white and all the angels are white, while Satan is black (Pace Magazine, July 1995).

While Rastafarians share some characteristics (i.e. the use of the Christian Bible and songs) with mainstream Christian religions, it also rejects traditional folk and Christian missionary legacies. They are opposed to Christianity because they believe that its emphasis on otherworldly matters is intended to pacify and control people. For this reason, they describe Christianity as a "death worshipping"¹⁰ religion (Johnson-Hill 1996: 3-4). In spite of their rejection of Christianity, the Bible seems to be central in the way they interpret the world around them, although they do not want to accept it. It would be true to say that the Bible is simultaneously rejected and accepted. Three opinions became clear during observation of *reasoning* concerning the question of the place of the Bible within the movement. For some it should not be used at all because there are other books that can be used. Some of those who believe in this view even suggest that they should *bun* (burn) the Bible, a slogan usually used when speaking against its use. Responding to the question of whether to use the Holy Bible or not, one Rastafarian observes:

The Bible is not holy for *In'I*, that they should look for other books that are relevant. In using the Bible, they should be able to differentiate between what is wrong and what is right because many things were added and left-out when King James came with his own version. The Christian Bible has been copied from other books such as the *Kebra Negus*, which is the earliest Ithiopian Bible and, which is the oldest Bible on earth. The Bible is therefore not very important to us and we should instead use writings about African history (Chawane 2008: 132).

Here the St James version is the one being rejected under suspicion that it has been perverted by English influences. According to Afari (2007: 222) Rastafarian experience with Christianity is a contradiction in terms, since Rastafarians found scriptural evidence, solace and support for their faith in the same Bible used by Christians. He goes on to say about the contradiction that while it might be inaccurate to say that Christians are Rastafarians, it would be equally inaccurate to say that Rastafarians are non-Christians. In fact as the children of Christian Emperor Haile Selassie it is accurate to assert that Rastafarians are the children of Christ, Orthodox Christianity and the Bible (Afari 2007: 223).

Another link between Rastafarianism and Christianity can be found in the songs they both sing during congregation. Most Rastafarian songs (or chants as they call them)

¹⁰ By "death worshipping" Rastafarians see Christians as worshipping dead people such (as Jesus Christ) as opposed to Haile Selassie who they call a living God. As already indicated, Rastafarians are of the opinion that Christianity is "death worshipping" because of the cross which is a symbol of death which they do not believe in (i.e. death) but instead believe in the reincarnation of the soul.

that are sung during congregation are taken from Christian songs. Originally, there were about 133 Rastafarian chants. This number has been growing. Talented and inspired members of the faith created them during the early days of the movement. The *Sankeys* (Rastafarian hymnbook) and African American spirituals were re-written and their beat rearranged to fit the philosophy and the heartbeat of the Rastafarian ceremonies (Jahug, 1992: 7). Chants taken from Christian hymns were also tailored to fit Rastafarian belief system (especially those that praise Haile Selassie). That is why some chants refer to personalities in the Bible, such as Moses and Aaron, amongst others. Different types of chants categorised by Rastafarians themselves are sung, for example, chants for redemption, revival, *ises* (praises), judgment, repatriation, love or togetherness, burials and sanctifications (Chawane 2008: 122). Redemption songs are also called liberation or emancipation songs; they call for the destruction of “Babylon”. The concepts of redemption, giving praises, revival, judgement, reparation and love are all derived from the Christian Bible.

Revival chants, according to Rastafarians, are spiritual and remind them of their past and the main aim of Rastafarians which is to go to “Zion” (repatriation) and the triumph of “Zion” over “Babylon”. Revival chants are also about the past glory of Africa, Ethiopia or black people. Some chants are also meant to provoke self-reflection with overtones of Judaeo-Christian practices relating to self-sacrifice, introspection and repentance. The only difference between Christian and Rastafarian chants is that Rastafarian sometimes tends to emphasise the political aspect of human existence (Chawane 2008: 123).

The most common features between Rastafarian and Christian religion are that they both congregate and believe in the use of sacraments. The difference is only in how they go about congregating and the type of sacrament they use. Unlike in Christian churches where the priest stands on the pulpit and preach to the mass, Rastafarian gatherings take the form of what they call *reasoning* during which members are encouraged to ask questions and the priest only act as a facilitator. Rastafarian congregation takes a form of discussion, and question and answer session. *Reasoning* thus becomes an *ad hoc* dialogue on virtually any topic, ranging from religion or the Bible, politics, education, social problems, ancient African history, current news, *ganja* (marijuana), love and hatred or anything arising from the newspapers and other written material. *Reasoning* entails critical reflection on Eurocentric ideologies and evils that are manifest among humankind (Chawane 2008: 131). The main aim of *reasoning* is not to give answers to questions that may arise but to share information about a certain topic. In this way *reasoning* becomes open-ended. Thus, like other religious organisations, Rastafarians do congregate, which is one of the characteristic of a religion.

While Christians use wine as their sacrament, Rastafarians, as already mentioned, use *ganja* as their sacrament. In spite of its religious foundation and similarity with other religious movements, Rastafarians generally are against classifying their movement as religious. This is the reason they don't want their movement to join the South African Council of Churches. On the other hand, when fighting for the legalisation of *ganja* they argue from a religious reason that freedom of religion is one of the principle enshrined in the South African constitution (Chawane 2008: 170).

9. Conclusion

It is clear that the question of whether Rastafarianism can be described as a religion or not is a controversial subject with both scholars and Rastafarians themselves harbouring differing opinions. When looking at the definition of the concept religion, it does not exclude Rastafarianism. Considering that there are remarkable similarities between Rastafarianism and other religious movement especially Judaism and Christianity, it can be concluded that Rastafarianism possesses enough features to be called a religious movement. The fact that Rastafarianism is concerned with the economic and political aspects of human existence does not disqualify it as a religion, considering that both African and liberation theologies are concerned with similar issues but they are still classified as religious movements.

Most aspects of Rastafarianism such as dreadlocks, the use of sacrament, the concept of Zion and Babylon, its association with Zionism, Haile Selassie and the Solomonic Dynasty all makes it more of a religious movement. What makes Rastafarianism a religious movement is that it is grounded on religious principles that they share with other religious movements. What can be said thus, is that Rastafarianism is a religion that concentrates not only in the spiritual lives of its adherents but also their history, political, social and economic lives.

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