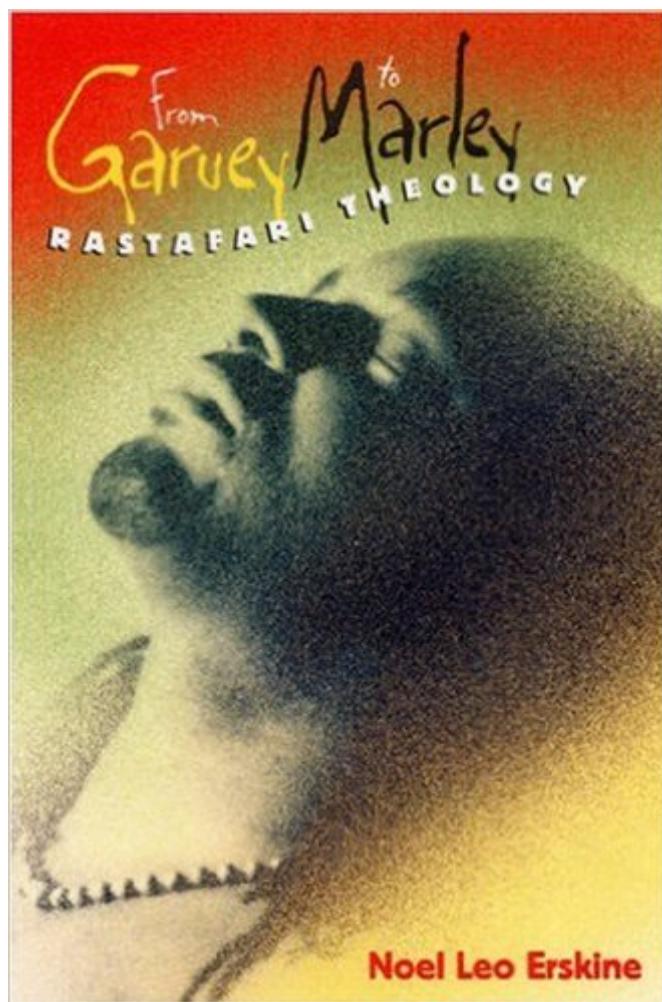


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From Garvey To Marley: Rastafari Theology (History Of African-American Religions)



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. 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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 "-l") 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.

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.

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