

I am a writer called Benjamin Zephaniah. My full name is Benjamin Obadiah Iqbal Zephaniah. For me, this is significant because it reflects the Muslim and Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Like the hair of Lord Shiva, the Hindu god, my hair is matted in 'dreadlocks' (or *jata*). I also practise Tibetan meditation. What religion am I? In a sense I am all of the above. But ask me what I am and I will tell you that I am a Rastafarian. It is impossible for me to speak about Rastafarianism without talking about politics. After all, Ras Tafari was the original name of Haile Selassie I (1891–1975), the last emperor of Ethiopia. It is also impossible to talk about Rastafarianism without referring to the fact that I am black. That said, you don't have to be political or black to be a Rastafarian.

My full conversion to the faith happened when I was seventeen years old. It was a matter of life, death, and freedom. In the mid-1970s I was one of the many forgotten, unemployed, first-generation black youths who roamed the streets of London, unable to see a future, and carrying a feeling of hopelessness. Not only did we have a hopeless future, we were also told that we had a past that started with slavery. The education we were receiving seemed to suggest that black people were incapable of controlling their own destiny. Suddenly Rastafari changed all that. Here was a faith and a movement that pointed to the long, and often glorious, past of black people. It gave me pride in being black and, most importantly, it taught me that there is nothing wrong with seeing God through black spectacles – from the perspective of a black person.

I stopped walking the streets with my head held down. My head was held high, and there was a spring in my step. I now knew that my roots went back much further than Jamaica, and I started to look towards Africa. Rastafarians recognize Africa as the home of humanity, Ethiopia as its capital, and Haile Selassie as being directly in the line of Solomon. All this symbolism helped me to stand on my own feet. But most importantly, I was made aware that I could find Jah (as Rastafarians refer to God) by looking inwards. I learnt how to read any of the many holy books, or any scientific book, and apply my own intelligence. I learnt that rituals may be of some use, but that there is a way to find a direct line to Jah through meditation and inner peace. I was no longer concerned with understanding the world, I was now able to 'overstand' it. For the Rastafarian, to overstand is to apply your mind to a subject, and discern a greater meaning than the obvious one. Again, in seeking to understand a person, one overstands when one truly empathizes with that person. In other words, overstanding goes beyond basic understanding.



Rastafari is a form of black liberation theology. Although we say that we shall be liberated in heaven, Rastafarians insist that we must also be liberated here on earth. Rastafarian liberation theology has no party manifesto. It is not political in that sense. Rather, it is about social responsibility; and, if that means speaking out about the misuse of power in society, then so be it. I see it as my duty to take a stand, and to help those who are struggling to help themselves. Rastafari has given purpose to my writing. I am a scribe of Rastafari, bearing witness and writing the third testament. I am full of this sense of purpose. In interviews I have no problem answering that often asked question, 'What is the poet's role in society?' The number of books I sell, or my popularity, is of little importance to me.

Making sure that what I write is written is far more important. Having said that, I do not believe that it is our job to preach. Rastafarians are not out to convert people, which is why I and many other Rasta writers don't write Rasta poetry. Rather, it is poetry about the world; poetry for the body and the soul; poetry for every body and every soul. I have found my role in life, and I am perfectly content with it. I have no great ambitions. My only ambition would be to do what I do better, and do more of it.

Many Rastafarians live in communes. However, while it is certainly good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity, this is not always possible. I do not live in a commune. Although it would be very difficult for me to live a communal life, fortunately Rastafari has taught me to be at ease with my 'self' and not to fear silence, darkness, or solitude. Although I work for and celebrate the community, and value my relationship with others, there is also a great sense of liberation in not relying on the congregation to find strength. Nor do I feel the need for a building as a centre of worship. Jah is always with me. To be precise, Jah is part of me. So I have no real need to look outward for Jah. To find and worship Jah, I must look within.

I used to be very critical of Rastafarians who had children that did not wear dreadlocks, and worse still of those who did not raise their children as Rastas. I thought that if mummy and daddy were Rastas, baby should follow. But I have come to realize that it is up to me (the parent) to live a good life and be a good example to my child. My child should freely want to become a Rasta because of what he sees in me. I have found my spiritual path, and my personal relationship with Jah means a lot to me. So if my child does not become a Rastafarian, but is nevertheless influenced positively by me, I still feel that I have done well before Jah – I am still doing the work of Jah.

When it comes to religious practice, I focus on compassion, which I extend to every living thing. This means there are many practices I won't take part in. I am opposed to violence and war – except in selfdefence – and the manufacture of arms. I will have nothing to do with a trade that relies on the unfair exploitation of workers or forced labour. I am also a vegan. Not only will I not eat animals – I will not even wear leather products, unless there are no alternatives. To do so, I believe, would spoil my meditation, and disturb my communion with Jah. Although I do understand that there is a time to reap and a time to sow, a time to heal and a time to kill, and so on, Jah tells me that such a time is not now. When I feel that every animal is my friend, I find that I have a direct connection with the earth, nature, and even that most abstract of things called 'the universe'. I have learned that to have a direct relationship with Jah and with creation makes for a contented guy who is at ease with his 'self'.

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