



# Consciousness Development in Rastafari: A Perspective from the Psychology of Religion

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores a Rastafari perspective on consciousness development and relates this to developmental stage theories of consciousness evolution from the psychology of religion. The empirical material is from fieldwork on an online Rastafari community with global reach but run by a group based in Trinidad. The people on this particular forum align with the “spiritual, but not religious” trend in contemporary religiosity, which means they are more focused on interior questions of consciousness raising than on religious externals. This paper interprets empirical material from the dialogues on this forum in light of Rastafari theorist Dennis Forsythe. It compares this Rastafari theory of stages of consciousness, symbolized by the animals Anancy, lion, and lamb, to developmental theories of consciousness evolution. These are drawn from psychology and the psychology of religion (Maslow 1970; Kohlberg 1981; Fowler 1981; Gilligan 1982; Wilber 2007), which focus on preconventional, traditional, modern, pluralist, and integral stages.*

**KEYWORDS:** Rastafari, contemporary spirituality, consciousness, spiritual development, psychology of religion

*Emancipate yourself from mental slavery,*

*None but ourselves can free our minds.*

“Redemption Song,” Bob Marley.

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## AIMS AND SCOPE

Rastafari is a social movement and a new religious movement that originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century among Black Jamaicans and later spread throughout, and beyond, the Caribbean. It has been the subject of numerous academic studies, most interpreting the movement through the lens of religious studies or as a sociopolitical movement. The aim of this paper is to explore the interior dimension of consciousness development in Rastafari, based on online ethnography on the *Rastafari Speaks* Internet forum, a forum that aims to promote participants' personal consciousness development. The paper draws on the analytical distinction between "religion" as the external dimension of doctrines, rituals, and institutions, and "spirituality" as the interior dimension of self and consciousness. I explore how the spiritual and psychological meanings in the symbolism of the lion and the lamb represent a particular Rastafarian perspective that integrates sociopolitical and spiritual consciousness development. I analyze this in light of theories of evolutionary stages of consciousness in humanistic psychology and the psychology of religion (Maslow 1970; Kohlberg 1981; Fowler 1981; Gilligan 1982; Wilber 2007). This focus on Rastafari spirituality and consciousness development from a psychological angle may contribute to the anthropology of consciousness and provide important insights into the psychology of religion. It offers interesting empirical insights into claims about the distinction between humanistic and authoritarian religion made within the psychology of religion (Fromm 1950; Maslow 1970), and it adds a non-western perspective to stage theories of consciousness development (Fowler 1981; Wilber 2007).



## CONSCIOUSNESS DEVELOPMENT

Rastafari discourses of consciousness development speak of liberation from mental slavery and reflect an understanding of consciousness raising that encompasses both political and spiritual consciousness. Dennis Forsythe (1999, 4–19) presents a Rastafarian stage theory of individual consciousness development, progressing from mental slavery (symbolized by the spider, Anancy), where people have internalized the conventions of mainstream society; through a warrior stage with a critical politics (symbolized by the lion); and eventually to a spiritual consciousness of universal love and connectedness (symbolized by the lamb). Forsythe describes Anancy, lion, and lamb as symbolic models for inner transformation, a process of mental liberation and achieving knowledge of self.

This paper attempts to relate the Rastafarian three-stage theory to the stage theories of individual consciousness evolution developed in the psychology of religion (Maslow 1970; Kohlberg 1981; Fowler 1981; Gilligan 1982; Wilber 2007). These authors propose stage theories of individual moral development, stages of faith, hierarchy of needs, and consciousness development, respectively. I suggest that the above three Rastafarian symbols relate to Kohlberg's (1981) and Gilligan's (1982) three main stages of individual moral development, the pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional (see also Wilber 2007, 6–7), and to Maslow's (1970) needs hierarchy. In the pre-conventional stage, individuals are egocentric and concerned with the physiological and safety needs of the body and physical survival. Maslow notes that these needs dominate in socially deprived individuals, concerned more with the struggle for survival than with ethics. In the Rasta view, modern capitalist society turns humans into Anancy, fighting each other in an egocentric struggle for physical survival. Conventional individuals are ethnocentric, dominated by the mind, and concerned with belonging and esteem needs for roots, freedom, and recognition, as is the assertive Rasta lion. Post-conventional individuals are worldcentric, focus on spiritual needs, universal love, and values of the heart, as is the Rasta lamb.



#### DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERNET FORUM

The empirical material for this study is from a Rastafari Internet forum that aims to raise participants' consciousness and promote sociopolitical awareness, empowerment, and personal spiritual-psychological development through transformative dialogues called "reasoning" (discussed later) in Rastafari terminology. This forum is an insightful place to study consciousness development in a Rastafari context, not least because it leans toward post-modern spirituality rather than traditional religion. The *Rastafari Speaks* reasoning forum ([www.rastafarispeaks.com](http://www.rastafarispeaks.com)) is an Internet discussion forum run since 2001 by the *Self Empowerment Learning Fraternity* (SELF) based in the Caribbean island of Trinidad. The group that runs the forum also provides lectures, TV and radio programs, private counseling, and self-development workshops offline. The forum guidelines state that the aim goes beyond the intellectual and into the psychological dimension; it is "not merely the debates among the many interpretations of Rastafari, but the general development of people" (RastafariSpeaks.com 2002). The forum appears to be among the most sophisticated Rastafari forums in terms of content, including advanced discussions of racism and white privilege, African and eastern spirituality, natural and social science, and critical discussions of dominant western discourse and politics.

The forum's primary aim lies in the *practice* of raising consciousness in a Rastafari context, starting with sociopolitical awareness of racism, which is seen as manifesting in people's online and offline interaction, creating an obstacle to realizing spiritual connection and unity. Moderators and core members encourage sharing personal experiences and challenge participants to examine their attitudes and behavior. This provides an opportunity for honest confrontations required for transformative inter-racial dialogues that lead to unlearning racism (hooks 1994, 105). Perhaps surprisingly, Internet forums may be a good place for inter-racial dialogue (McKee 2002). When physical characteristics are not visible, participants may become more aware of perspectives and consciousness. As Muata, a Black American participant, writes on the forum, "[T]his is a meeting place of the minds. Your color can't be seen here. So if your whiteness shows it's your reasoning, perspective, principalities [sic], consciousness etc. that reveals it."



#### PARTICIPANTS

The forum has global reach with about two hundred regular participants from all continents; about half of them identify as Black, mostly from the Caribbean and the United States. The other half identify as white, mostly from the United States, Europe, and Australia; the latter attracted to Rastafari by the global popularity of Bob Marley and other reggae musicians. Fewer than ten percent are Latin Americans and Asians. About ten persons, half of them based in Trinidad, are the forum's core members, administrators, and moderators.

Participants are asked to come as they are in real life, and fictitious personas are not accepted. However, some participants are more anonymous than others are. Moderators and core members have posted their pictures and biographical information. Casual participants may be anonymous in the beginning, but moderators and regular participants question their self-presented identities in conversations on racialized experiences. The forum explicitly discusses the challenges of anonymity. For example, a Black African woman called Kelani, a moderator who has posted her picture, comments, "How can we be really sure if anyone here is who they say they are?" and answers the question herself, "Being Black is more than just a physical appearance; it is a frame of mind. There is a way to tell who or what a person is on this board." In another study (Stokke 2005), I have analyzed dialogues on this forum where experienced members determine participants' racial identities by observing and questioning their perspectives and discursive behavior. In short, "race-conscious" participants read a person's racial identity out of their standpoint, experiences, attitudes, and assumptions shown in

their statements. This indicates that people with different skin colors have systematically different experiences and that these influence perspectives and consciousness, as critical race theorist Ruth Frankenberg (1993) writes.



## METHODS

This research is based on a combination of online ethnography and naturalistic observation on a public Internet forum. My original plan was participant observation, and I was open about being a researcher and had private dialogues with the group leader and some other people. However, as an outsider and newcomer, I found it difficult to engage the discussions, and soon after I started fieldwork, I learned from reading previous discussions that “listening” to (that is, quietly observing) the online reasonings was a more appropriate role than maximizing participation for a white male researcher trying to learn what was going on. As expected in a movement for Black empowerment, many Black participants on the forum expressed views familiar to me from the postcolonial critique of anthropology (McGrane 1989). They asked for empathetic listening and a willingness to learn rather than monologue and lecturing, from white participants. I shifted my method toward naturalistic observation with an aim to understand and learn from the inside perspective. Following this approach, my personal experience of online fieldwork on this forum—which consisted of a lot more observation than participation—turned out to be a transformative experience for myself and contributed to raising my own awareness of racism and white privilege, and later also my spiritual awareness. I immersed myself deeply in the online reasonings on a rational and emotional level. Although mediated communication is different from attending in person, we may identify and empathize on a deep emotional level with the characters of a film or novel. McKee (2002) suggests that honest confrontation on racial issues may be easier online than face to face, where white people tend to be more politically correct and Black people may hold back critical responses. She also says that online discussions provide good opportunities for learning, because participants can reread and analyze previous discussions. My fieldwork on this forum led me to study in-depth critical race theory (e.g., Frankenberg 1993) and African American literature (e.g., hooks 1994), and to address racial issues in my personal life with friends and family. As I increased my own awareness, I learned that the general white population has a very limited understanding of white privilege and Black experiences with racism. A deeper analysis of the process of unlearning racism can be found in Stokke (2005), as mentioned earlier.



#### BACKGROUND ON RASTAFARI

Rastafari is a new religious movement that originated in the post-slavery African diaspora in Jamaica in the 1930s, around the time of Haile Selassie's coronation as Emperor of Ethiopia. From the beginning, Rastafari was also an anticolonial social movement with a strong Afrocentric orientation, inspired by Marcus Garvey, who advocated for Black Caribbeans to return to Africa. A proud African country, mentioned in the Bible and never colonized, Ethiopia had a special status in Black consciousness movements. The crowning in 1930 of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, whose pre-coronation title was Ras Tafari, had a strong symbolic impact on the Black diaspora, promoted by the activist Marcus Garvey, and early Rastas interpreted it as fulfilling biblical prophecy: "Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God" (Psalm 68). Many Rastafarians believe in Selassie's divinity and still discuss the role of Selassie with a wide diversity of interpretations (Barnett 2005; Bedasse 2010; Middleton 2015). According to Spencer (1999, 33–34), they differ in their interpretation of Haile Selassie as an avatar of God (following Hindu influence) or as the resurrected Christ in kingly form (following Christian influence). I will discuss the various doctrines on Selassie in more detail in the next section.

Rastafari is a syncretistic movement containing reinterpretations of biblical symbolism, elements from Christian mysticism and Gnosticism, Caribbean survivals of African spirituality, Hindu influences like beliefs in karma and reincarnation, and parallels with Buddhism (Forsythe 1999, 93–98; Spencer 1999). The movement had a strong influence on Jamaican mainstream society in the 1970s and 1980s; it spread across the globe with the music of Bob Marley and other reggae artists, and subsequently declined as a social movement (Semaj 2013) while Black youth turned to hip hop culture. Charles Price (2009) found greater militancy among younger generation Rastas today, and Leahcim Semaj (2013) found that peace and love has given way to a more confrontational view in the last decade, parallel to Rastafari losing influence in Jamaican society. Many Rastafarians are individualistic and unorganized, and their religiosity takes various forms ranging from fundamentalist tendencies to contemporary seekers of postmodern spirituality.



#### RASTAFARI AS TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Although individual freedom and diversity in interpretation characterizes the movement, there are a number of "churchical" Rastafarian houses or mansions with distinct theological doctrines (Middleton 2015, 3–4). Rastafari

groups also reproduce the external features of organized religion, theological doctrines, rituals, and institutions, which have gained official recognition as religious denominations in a number of countries. Rastafari has won recognition as an official religion in Jamaica, and the well-established “mansions” of Rastafari like the Bobo Shanti, Nyabinghi, the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church, and Twelve Tribes of Israel have developed into organized church-like denominations distinguished by separate symbolism, organized theological doctrines, priests as religious leaders, and formal religious services. More generally, traditional Rastafari communities also display a hierarchy where Elders are respected as teachers.

Barnett (2005) discusses the significant differences between mansions. The most political and orthodox are the Nyabinghi, a term often translated as “death to Black and white oppressors” (Barnett 2005, 70). They see Haile Selassie as God and follow theocratic, Old Testament rules. Members wear dreadlocks and see themselves as militant anticolonial warriors. More religious than political, but also conservative and Afrocentric, the Bobo Shanti regard their founder Prince Emmanuel as Jesus, Marcus Garvey as prophet, and Haile Selassie as “the father” (Barnett 2005, 69). They wear turbans and robes and emphasize drumming, singing, and dancing in their religious services. Politically, they are patriarchal and believe in Black supremacy.

More spiritual than political, the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church does not believe Haile Selassie is divine, they locate Zion in Jamaica not in Ethiopia, and see Jesus as the living God embodied in all humans. They emphasize the sacredness of marijuana used during prayer. Finally, the more apolitical Twelve Tribes of Israel, where Bob Marley was a member, also started as a disciplined organization with clear practices and doctrines, including daily Bible study, sacred use of marijuana, and a belief in Selassie as the returned Christ. This mansion is more liberal in having no gender and racial distinctions, and its doctrines have shifted over time, away from the Afrocentric belief that Selassie is the returned Christ (although still seeing him as divine) toward a more universalistic and Christian orientation (Bedasse 2010).

After Selassie’s death in 1976, Spencer (1999) argues that Rastafari was at a crossroads between seeing Selassie as messiah and becoming a non-western Christian liberation theology. Although the two latter mansions discussed above reflect this turn toward Christianity, Forsythe (1999, 120), who focuses on the spiritual dimension of consciousness development in Rastafari, argues that although most 1970s Rastafarians identified with the symbol of the warrior lion fighting against *Babylon* (the west), a growing tendency focuses on spiritual self-development. Rather than approaching Christianity, he suggests that Rastafari is part of a global spiritual revolution (Heelas and Woodhead 2005).



#### RASTAFARI AS POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY

Many Rastafarians reject the doctrines, institutions, and hierarchies of traditional Christianity in a way that can resemble the “spiritual, but not religious” trend (Woodhead 2010, 37; Middleton 2015, 12). In *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religions Giving Way to Spirituality*, Heelas and Woodhead (2005, 2–35) discuss a shift in contemporary religiosity away from external authorities toward subjective experiences, human relations, and consciousness, related to a decline of traditional Christianity and growing New Age spirituality. The Rastafari movement reflects this shift in certain aspects, such as the rejection of traditional Christianity and the insistence that God is within as expressed in the Dread Talk concept of “I and I,” discussed later in this paper.

This universalistic and spiritual shift is reflected on the *Rastafari Speaks* forum, where some participants display the outward symbolism that identifies them as Rastafarians, others play down the outward symbolism and focus on the inward dimension, reflecting the trend identified as the “subjective turn” from religion to spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Woodhead 2010). Most forum participants do not emphasize whether individuals identify as Rastafari, or to which mansion they belong. With a possible exception of a few militant Black activists, they accept that Rastafari is open to white people who are willing to learn about Black experiences and unlearn racism. Many also play down or reject the divinity of Haile Selassie, as I will discuss in the section analyzing the warrior symbolism.

Although identifying a tendency to “reject traditional institutionalized forms of religion for a more individualized and experiential spirituality,” Woodhead (2010, 37) acknowledges that perhaps the majority of people who consider themselves spiritual also identify as religious. Instead of seeing religion and spirituality as mutually exclusive categories, I will use the concepts to make an analytical distinction between the external aspects of religious institutions, doctrines, rituals, and an external God, and the internal aspects of spirituality, the subjective, experiential, and inward looking. In any case, as Middleton (2015, 2) notes, “Rastafari is a religion with much to teach us about the nature of beliefs and practices outside of institutional life and power-driven establishments.”



#### ANALYSIS

In this section, I analyze empirical data in the form of quotes from the *Rastafari Speaks* website, in light of theories of consciousness development



from the psychology of religion and humanistic psychology (Fromm 1950; Maslow 1970), and developmental stage theories (Fowler 1981; Wilber 2007). Connecting the two, I use Forsythe's (1999, 4–19) Rastafarian stage theory progressing from mental slavery (Anancy), where people have internalized Babylon's conventions; through warrior (lion), with a critical politics; and eventually to spiritual consciousness (Iamb) of universal love and connectedness. The analysis is organized into the following themes: (1) mental slavery, (2) the warrior, (3) turning inwards, (4) an integral synthesis, and (5) reasoning as an epistemology for consciousness development.

### *Mental Slavery*

On the forum, Kelani, a woman from Congo living in the US, writes, “Many Africans are still mentally enslaved. [...] their Eurocentric education have [sic] been devoid of anything positive about Africa and Africans.” Several other Black women join the discussion. Leslie from Trinidad writes, “I was one of those who hated my kinky hair and had it chemically done.” Ayanna from Trinidad, a core member of SELF, writes:

*As a child growing up I was surrounded by the feeling that lighter was better, that if the kink in my hair could relax just a teensy weensy bit, I would be more beautiful and maybe just maybe people would rush to play with my hair.*

Kelani writes:

*I used to get called names like “stupid,” “dirty” (as if I were a dog), “bwoa salite” in lingala [language spoken in the D.R. Congo], and “ugly” just because I wasn't light since most of my family bleach their skin.*

Black psychologists argue that through Eurocentric socialization, Black people internalize an inferiority complex (Fanon 1967), mental slavery (Akbar 1996), and falsification of consciousness (Wilson 1993). Wilson shows how Eurocentric history falsifies Black consciousness by making Black people unconscious of African history, a source for individual and collective confidence, self-esteem, and identity. Eurocentrism manifests in white body ideals, parallel to Christianity's image of a white Jesus and Black devil (Akbar 1996). Many Black people try to escape inferiority through whitening strategies like skin-bleaching and hair-straightening, or seek light-skinned partners so their children look more European (Fanon 1967; Cross 1991; Charles 2012).

The women on the forum critically analyze and reject this Eurocentric socialization. Kelani writes: “The concept of beauty of the uneducated and

miseducated African is inspired by Europe,” and, “The flaw in this state of mind is that it leads to self-hatred.” Ayanna reasons: “Almost universally we see the belief that “white is right,” forced down our throats by the American European dominated media.” Tyehimba, a Black man from Trinidad, also at SELF, adds that “After being bombarded with Eurocentric propaganda for hundreds of years, the effect of internalization is very deep,” but also suggests that “alternative forms of media such as this site” (Rastafari Speaks) can help people develop critical consciousness.

These examples point to the stage of Anancy in Forsythe’s (1999) theory of consciousness development, where Anancy—a spider in Caribbean folklore—symbolizes an actor who puts on a mask of outward conformity in order to survive and outsmart stronger individuals in a hostile environment. The title of Fanon’s (1967), *Black Skin, White Masks* alludes to changing one’s physical appearance to conform to western standards in order to gain material benefits in a postcolonial society. Although Anancyism may work as a survival strategy, Forsythe (1999, 105–108) writes that it is selfish and dishonest, and relies on impressing others to gain external praise and material wealth. It corresponds to what Wilson (1973) has described as “crab antics”—a society where individuals pull each other down to get ahead in the struggle for survival.

In psychological stage theories (Kohlberg 1981; Wilber 2007), this stage of consciousness corresponds to the preconventional stage, where individuals are egocentric and concerned with physical needs for safety and survival. Maslow (1970) notes that these needs dominate in socially deprived individuals, who are concerned more with the struggle for survival than with ethics.

### *The Warrior*

In this stage, the characteristic Rastafarian lion symbolizes Black empowerment and rejection of western conventions that mentally enslave them. On the forum, Muata, an African American, expresses the lion’s sentiment and writes in shouting letters:

GLORIFY AND SANCTIFY HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY HAILE  
 SELASSIE THE FIRST, KING OF KINGS, LORD OF LORDS  
 CONQUERING LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH. NYABINGHI I  
 ROYAL IMPERIAL PATRIARCHAL BLACK SUPREMACY STAND 4  
 IVER RASTAFARI BUN FIYAH, CRASH LIGHTNING AND  
 THUNDA FI BABYLON DOWNPRESSOR. SELAH

The above quote reflects the language of the orthodox and militant Nyabinghi and Bobo Shanti mansions, invoking Haile Selassie, the lion, the terms “nyabinghi” and “patriarchal black supremacy” as well as “fire and

lightning” against Babylon. This is a traditional Rastafarian practice of chanting down Babylon, an Old Testament-style verbal confrontation (Chevannes 1994; McFarlane 1998) against those identified with Babylon.

Black nationalism and Black Power (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967) represent modern counterparts of the lion’s militant call for Black empowerment. On the forum, Kelani writes:

*I will proudly claim that I’m an avid Pan-Africanist and dedicated Black Nationalist seeking first to uplift of African people [...] My allegiance goes first to my race. [...] The physical life is simply a competition [...] in this capitalistic world [...] governed by [...] white global supremacy [...] Fairness, equality and justice do not balance the scales of this Eurocentric dominated universe. [...] My wish is that all Africans focus on Black supremacy.*

Using secular, political language, Kelani also calls for “Black supremacy.” Core members of the online community hold that the lion’s assertive militancy is a necessary stage in consciousness development. Ayanna ascertains, “Sometimes one must lean completely to the left in order to re-balance the boat.” This is a sort of “strategic essentialism” (Fanon 1967; Spivak 1988); where Black nationalism is used as an antithesis to white nationalism as a dialectical stage toward pluralism. However, the replacement of white supremacy with Black supremacy simply reverses and replicates an ethnocentric conventional model rather than moving beyond to the post-conventional. The warrior stage comes in both traditional forms such as a belief in Haile Selassie’s divinity, and modern rational practices such as political criticism, and corresponds to the ethnocentric, conventional stage of consciousness development (Wilber 2007).

On the forum, core members go beyond the conventional ethnocentrism of traditional and modern lions, arguing that external saviors and nationalist politics stand in the way of self-development. Ayinde, a senior of the SELF community, sees Selassie as a symbolic inspiration but not as divinity:

*Selassie was [...] a symbolic inspiration to many [...] Christianized Africans whose only source of learning [...] was the Christian Bible. But not all colonized Africans took the Christian Bible literally, and certainly many did not think Selassie was divine. [...] Garvey used Selassie to inspire Africans about their own greatness and [...] never meant that Selassie was the new God for Black Africans. [...] Selassie was not the defining aspect of Rasta.*

Ayinde links the belief in Selassie's divinity to a traditional worldview, resulting from a lack of other knowledge than a literal reading of the bible. Forsythe (1999, 77, 89–90) writes that early Rastas represented an orthodox tendency of identifying Selassie as lion, a returned Christ who would liberate them and physically or symbolically bring them back to Africa. Stuart Hall (1985) and Paul Gilroy (1987) argue that Selassie's divinity is less important than the symbolic significance accorded to Africa and that Rasta spiritual orientation implies an inner transformation to throw off internalized inferiority.

On the forum, Tyehimba distinguishes between an external savior and self-development:

*Those that want to use the idea of a savior (other than oneself) or repentance as an excuse not to do the work necessary to reconcile with one's Higher self can do so, but natural law is accorded whether one is knowledgeable about it or not. [...] There is no shortcut around the hard work of constant character refinement and critical self examination. [...] In grasping history, reasoning, and examining every word, thought and deed, we can elevate ourselves beyond the prison of our own karmic creation.*

Tyehimba rejects the authoritarian model, referring to the higher self, karma, and natural law—concepts from eastern traditions characteristic in contemporary spirituality. Although belief in Selassie's divinity as an external savior is often seen as a defining aspect of Rastafari, the idea of a savior other than oneself contradicts the Rasta ethos where the spirit of God resides in each person, connected to a fundamental sense of equality where no one is the object of domination (Hall 1985).

The distinction introduced by Tyehimba between an external savior and self-development corresponds closely to Erich Fromm's (1950; see also Wulff 1991, 594–599) distinction between authoritarian and humanistic religion, which is similar to Woodhead's distinction between traditional religion and contemporary spirituality. Humanistic religion, according to Fromm, focuses on self-realization instead of on an external savior and obedience to external authorities. God is not an external authority but symbolizes powers that can be realized in human lives. Self-realization means overcoming the ego and realizing God within, achieving oneness through love, humility, reasoning, and mystical experiences. It derives from inner, subjective experiences of divine qualities in oneself and of others' characters, not from submission to dogmatic authority. In the discussions on the forum, the warrior (lion) positions of Muata and Kelani express the authoritarian tendency, whereas

Ayinde and Tyehimba reflect the humanistic tendency. In the next section, we will see how Kelani shifts her perspective.

### *Turning Inward*

Earlier, Kelani expressed a militant call for black supremacy to counter white supremacy, saying that physical life is simply a competition. Ayinde responds with a call to turn inward:

*Suffering only continues for many because they view the world the same way as their oppressors [...] play by their bogus rules and definitions [...] Eurocentric false values [...] Individuals can free themselves from this so they can [...] motivate many others to change and that is how change spreads [...] by example as we interact with each other and act on realized truths.*

Kelani later responds,

*I took the time to think about [it] from a new perspective. [...] Depression, pain, suffering, and pride destroy the love we should have for one another [...] as each of us mistakenly assume that the physical world and bad things are the only reality, the ultimate truth. [...] Without a cosmic consciousness [...] we [...] inevitably hurt ourselves [...] continuing confrontation without resolving our own trauma and emotions.*

It appears that Kelani shifted her perspective by turning inward, raising her consciousness from political struggle in the physical world to a more spiritual perspective. In Fromm's (1950) terminology, Kelani's view shifted from authoritarian to humanistic. Fromm writes that both tendencies are present in each individual in both eastern and western traditions, and prevailing social norms determine which becomes dominant. Although the humanistic tendency is more explicit in Buddhism, authoritarian religion dominates in western culture. From a psychological perspective, Fromm argues that authoritarian types, alienated from themselves, project their best human qualities of love, wisdom, and justice onto God, and believe they can recover their humanity only through the mercy of God as an external savior. Authoritarian religion centers on the ego, preoccupied with survival, power, and possession, expressed through aggression and prejudice. Fromm integrates a critical Marxist-inspired perspective in his analysis, arguing that the humble and dispossessed early Christians, following the teachings of Jesus, were humanistic, but Christianity became authoritarian when it became the Roman empire's religion. Authoritarian religion prevails today under

industrial and market capitalism with its alienating values of work, profit, competition, and power. As we have seen, Fromm's perspective is similar to the Rastafari view.

Kelani's new worldview corresponds to Hay's (2007) relational consciousness, breaking the illusion that each individual is alone in a materialist world and instead realizing that we are all connected spiritually. Relations with the inner self, connectedness to nature (including all people), love, and cosmic consciousness characterize contemporary spirituality (Woodhead 2010). Ayinde writes that developing spiritual consciousness means to:

*[R]each harmony with your self and by extension all of humanity [. . .]  
Developing a good relationship with your inner self is a prerequisite to  
knowing your inner connectedness to all of nature which includes all  
people.*

Ayinde associates spirituality with harmony and connecting with the inner self. The connection with the inner Self is a key idea in Rastafari, expressed in the concept of "I and I," which asserts the human subject and the higher self, signifying the speaker's sociopolitical and spiritual self-empowerment. It reflects that Rastas perceive themselves as active subjects rather than passive objects (Edmonds 1998a) and that the principle of divinity inheres in each individual (1998b). "I and I" replaces "I" as singular pronoun, referring to a unity of the speaker's ego and spiritual self, manifesting the "the first-person reality of conscious Self" (Forsythe 1999, 94), a spiritual orientation similar to Hinduism where it is expressed in the greeting namaste: "the God within me greets the God within you." "I and I" reflects a fundamental philosophical concept of the movement: recognizing the divine spirit within themselves, some Rastas express a typical postmodern claim that they have no need for teachers or priests to tell them what is right. Rasta epistemology holds that self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge and truth is equally accessible to all, as they derive knowledge of truth and moral guidance from the God within (Edmonds 1998b).

This subjective focus on the Self in postmodern spirituality is often taken as a rejection of real-world politics, a view that can be seen in the Rastafarian terms "re-lie-gion" and "poli-tricks." These are characteristic of Dread Talk's symbolic deconstruction of the English language and reconstruction of symbolic meanings (Pollard 1994). New Age spirituality is usually associated with postmodern characteristics, the subjective, pluralist, relativist, eclectic, and a concern with symbolic interpretation; although Woodhead (2010) argues that perennialism—an integral characteristic—is more important than eclecticism in contemporary spirituality. From an integral viewpoint, Wilber (2007) criticizes the excessive subjectivism and antirational tendencies, which he calls

“boomeritis”—the narcissistic *nobody tells me what to do* attitude of the individualist boomer generation. New Agers assert subjective alternatives to modern discourses, parallel to Rasta lions asserting Black alternatives, both aiming for pluralism and relativism rather than for the universal.

### *An Integral Synthesis*

At the lamb stage, Rastafari seeks universal truths through the integrative epistemology of reasoning, which includes the rational, pluralist, and integral, and recognizes the partial truths of a plurality of traditional, modern, and postmodern views. The following post by Ayanna indicates an integral synthesis of simultaneous political struggle and spiritual self-development:

*We should all accept personal responsibility while challenging the system. [...] All change must come from people, from within themselves. That is why we always begin with examining attitudes and doing the necessary work to refine characters and not go blowing up multi-million-dollar corporations.*

*That is in itself why so many revolutions fail. People hardly ever stop to look at themselves while correctly blaming “the system.” It is comfortable I suppose to blame others and to blame nameless faceless entities; much more so than the hell of realizing that the essence of the system stares right back at you from the mirror.*

Ayanna says that while people struggling for social justice correctly blame the system, they need to liberate themselves from their own internalized evil. As Jesus said, “Take the plank out of your own eye,” before fighting external evil. Ayanna reasons that the struggle for social justice starts with improving one’s personal ethics, similar to the Islamic distinction between the “little jihad” (external struggle for justice) and the “greater jihad” (internal effort to become a better person). Also, in West African cosmology, the struggle between good and evil is internal rather than as separate external entities like heaven and hell (Austin-Broos 1997).

Rastafari argues that individuals need to liberate themselves psychologically before changing political structures and focus on symbolic resistance for social change (Hutton and Murrell 1998). Seeking to change sociopolitical structures through consciousness raising, Rastafari resembles other new social movements that reject the modern instrumental logic and aim for self-development and self-realization. Combining a critical politics with personal ethics, they argue that a change in consciousness precedes social change: racism, sexism, and capitalism are immoral behaviors resulting from a culture that promotes false values.

An integral and universalistic view is expressed by Ayinde in a reasoning about Black Nationalism and Martin Luther King's statement: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Ayinde goes beyond the ethnocentrism of Black Nationalism:

*Many 'informed' Africans [...] think that any view that is different to their own, however legitimate, is an enemy to our struggle. [...] Black first, as a call to move away from superiority and inferiority complexes, [...] is a universal call that [...] have stimulated all manner of people to [...] Rasta. I deal with people on the basis of their character first. [...] A person's willingness to learn and adjust is far more important than [...] racial considerations.*

Ayinde emphasizes that Rastafari is a universal call not exclusive to Black people. Although character matters more than their racial identity, addressing racism is a prerequisite for character development. Sociopolitical consciousness raising and Black empowerment are prerequisites for spiritual consciousness raising and universal love. Although Rastafari promotes universal love, it remains critical, discerning and evaluating people's conduct, as Ayinde points out:

*This does not mean that we have to work with everyone without discerning and evaluating their conduct [...] only work with those who [...] have demonstrated commitment not only in words but also in deeds. [...] The underlying reason for addressing racial issues is to discern the character of people.*

A critical political consciousness translates into ethical conduct in interpersonal relations, suggesting a synthesis of lion and lamb: the path to universal love goes through Black empowerment. Racism and internalized attitudes of white superiority are character flaws that need transformation to realize universal love. Rastafari emphasizes connecting words and deeds, linking knowledge and ethics in what core members call character development. The view expressed by Ayinde does not simply reject previous stages but encompasses them, like Wilber's (2007) integral stage does.

About spiritual development, Tyehimba writes:

*An important part of spiritual development that is the authentic path of the Rastafarian is refining character and checking one's actions, one's thoughts, one's words for flaws and having the humility to recognize and to work on them.*



This expression of Rastafari's focus on spiritual development reflects a universalistic and syncretistic attitude combining eastern and western mystery traditions that parallels contemporary spirituality. Woodhead (2010) and Aupers and Houtman (2010) argue that a common characteristic of contemporary spirituality is perennialism—"the belief that the diversity of religious traditions essentially refers to the same underlying spiritual truth" (138). In New Age spirituality, seekers believe in universal spiritual truths but choose individual paths, combining, for example, theosophy, Gnosticism, Christianity, Buddhism, or humanistic psychology. In the west, individuals often become spiritual seekers because they experience identity problems, feeling alienated in modern society. Even more so, Black people who became Rasta experienced alienation and identity problems as racialized others in a society where God was considered white (Price 2009).

Although it shares certain characteristics with contemporary spirituality, its integrative synthesis of spiritual development and critical politics for Black liberation, which is emphasized on this forum, is among its most insightful aspects. From the standpoint of the post-slavery Black diaspora in the Americas, who faced alienation from western modernity and resulting postmodern identity problems earlier than many Europeans did (Gilroy 1993), Rastafari's rejection of traditional and modern western ethnocentric conventions goes beyond many New Agers' rejection of external authorities. Rastas typically reject both "re-lie-gion" (conventional Christian churches) and "poli-tricks" (modern politics), and integrate sociopolitical criticism and spiritual development, seeking to raise consciousness in both dimensions.

#### *Reasoning as an Epistemology for Consciousness Development*

On the forum, Ayinde explains reasoning as a method for consciousness development, an epistemology for self-realization:

*Reasoning is about the realization of higher truth and requires honesty and willingness to question one's own perceptions. Conscious development means becoming conscious of one's self and realize [sic] oneself in the world.*

Traditionally, consciousness development is a process of getting in touch with one's inner self through meditation, accompanied by chanting, drumming, and herbal smoking, whose psychoactive effect is believed by many Rastas to be helpful for meditation (Forsythe 1999). In the "yards" in Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, Rastafari reasoning is a discussion, often accompanied by smoking herbs, chanting, and drumming. It can be understood as the public performance of a ritual, as Chevannes (1994) writes, a drama

centered on words, reflecting the *nommo*—an African philosophical concept where language acquires a power on deeper levels than the literal meanings of words. On the other hand, it can be seen as discourse. Carole Yawney and John Homiak (2001, 263–264) describe reasoning as “a form of collective and visionary discourse in which individuals explore the implications of a particular insight, which could be based on subjects as diverse as a Bible passage or an event in the day’s news,” which goes on until consensus is reached. In the absence of accompanying ritual elements like ganja and drumming, Internet reasoning continues to use the discursive and epistemological principles from reasoning in the yards. It adapts them to an online dialogical practice aimed at searching sociopolitical and spiritual truths, which requires participants to show in-depth knowledge of various topics including politics, history, theology, and spirituality, with the specific purpose of consciousness raising and self-development. We have seen that Black empowerment, rejection of western society, and African spirituality are aspects of consciousness raising in both settings.

As a transformative dialogue, reasoning goes beyond modern rationalist knowledge construction and recognizes human subjectivity. It is not intellectual debate but requires personal involvement, honesty, and integrity. It replaces dominant western positivistic knowledge construction and authoritarian education with a critical dialogical epistemology resembling Freire’s (1996) pedagogy of consciousness raising (Murrell and Taylor 1998). Combining insights from Fanon (1967) and Marxism, Freire suggests that organic intellectuals articulate collective experiences and provide alternative interpretations to promote critical consciousness. Although not explicitly spiritual, Freire’s emphasis on love and transformation has spiritual foundations (Boyd 2012).

Rasta epistemology sees truth as equally accessible to each and conceptualizes knowledge as forever incomplete. As a never-ending process aimed at elaborating intersubjective truths (Edmonds 1998b), reasoning is the Rasta way of constructing knowledge through constant evaluation and re-evaluation of personal experiences and general knowledge claims. Rasta epistemology seeks to bring being, knowing, and doing into alignment (McFarlane 1998). The phrase *who feels it, knows it* (Forsythe 1999) reflects that knowledge is validated by experience, as opposed to abstract rationalism. Emphasis on personal integrity and responsibility indicates that the value of knowledge lies in practical application: persons are expected to translate knowledge into action. Criticizing western separation of thinking and being (Gilroy 1993), Rasta epistemology resembles Collins’ (2000) Black feminist epistemology: lived experience and connectedness validate knowledge, morality is integral to theory, personal accountability and responsibility is required, and truth is arrived at by reaching consensus through dialogue. According to Collins, the

preference for connectedness and dialogue for methodological adequacy are rooted in an African tradition where people become more human and empowered primarily in the context of seeking harmony within a community. Its philosophy is a practical guide to conduct and attitudes rather than a doctrine in the western rationalist sense (Hall 1985). Rastas cannot monopolize truth, as knowledge is constantly reinterpreted in pursuit of more and more clarity (McFarlane 1998). Reasoning thus goes beyond relativism and subjectivism, as it aims to discover universal truths through integrating the partial truths of individual participants. In this sense, it corresponds to Wilber's (2007) integral stage.



#### THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

In Forsythe's (1999) theory, Anancy corresponds to Kohlberg (1981) and Wilber's (2007) pre-conventional/egocentric stage. The Black diaspora is under pressure to socialize into and internalize conventions of traditional Christianity and modern capitalism, but are at the same time excluded from these western ethnocentric conventions. The western system, Babylon, turns them into Anancy: selfish, greedy, and dishonest; lying to impress others; and obsessed with external praise and material wealth (Forsythe 1999, 105–108). Anancy symbolizes a wolf in sheep's clothing, an actor who plays roles of outward conformity in order to survive in a hostile environment (Forsythe 1999). In Caribbean folklore, Anancy depicts a spider using trickery and deceit to outsmart stronger animals (Edmonds 2003; McFarlane 1998). Behind a mask of conformity (Scott 1985), enslaved Black people engaged in cultural resistance, practicing African rituals under the guise of Christianity, and developed ways to minimize work effort, which still influence African American work ethic under modern capitalism (Akbar 1996). Individuals struggling for survival resist all others in a cutthroat competition, characterized by Wilson (1973) as "crab antics," leading to a society where everyone is trying to pull each other down.

At the warrior stage, the lion is a key Rastafarian symbol, drawing on biblical references to the lion of Judah, a title used by Haile Selassie. The Rastafarian lion breaks with traditional and modern western conventions, and self-consciously reconstructs alternative versions of a Black messiah and a Black nation, which reverse and replicate the conventional ethnocentric model. The Rastafarian lion symbolizes a militant warrior fighting Babylon with heart and emotions. They reject Anancy's dishonesty and lack of moral integrity (Edmonds 2003), and identify it with mental slavery, having internalized the values of oppressive society—similar to the Marxist concept of false consciousness. Forsythe (1999, 111–114) interprets the lion orientation with the

Old Testament, whereas the lamb reflects a New Testament orientation. Along with outward symbols and rituals like dreadlocks, dread talk, and smoking herbs, the lion represents a new consciousness and identity, confronting and breaking with Babylon.

The lion is an essential stage on the Rastafari path; it lays the foundations for the lamb, which is a transformed lion, or a synthesis between lion and lamb (90). The lamb is spiritual, practicing universal love and wisdom (115–117), and represents the higher self. It draws on New Testament symbolism, where Jesus is described as a lamb. In this stage, there is less emphasis on external symbols and rituals, and herbs smoking is replaced by a “natural high” (127). This stage is characterized by self-knowledge, self-awareness, and spiritual consciousness (94–95).

At the lamb stage, according to Forsythe (1999), Rastafari is a modern manifestation of ancient universal mystery traditions. Rastas hold that humans can become God without an intermediary and achieve Christ consciousness, integrating apparent opposites like Marx and the Bible. A characteristic that unites the highly differentiated phenomenon of contemporary spirituality is a focus on the authority of inner, subjective experiences instead of external authorities—both secular/rationalistic and traditional religious authority—and a holistic concern with body, mind, and spirit, seeing the Self in relation to the universe.

Contemporary spirituality shares a focus on the subjective and holistic, self-realization and consciousness raising with secular counseling, therapy, alternative medicine (Woodhead 2010, 38), and humanistic psychology. It is about reconnecting with the inner divine self holistically connected to everything; it is influenced by eastern traditions, which see salvation as coming from within, in contrast to conservative Christianity’s belief in an external savior, as we saw in the discussion of Haile Selassie’s role. The key concept in the Rasta language, “I and I,” reflects such an understanding of God within. Within contemporary spirituality, some strive for sociopolitical change (a major focus of Rastafari), whereas New Agers focus more on individual self-development (44).

In humanistic psychology, Fromm (1950) and Maslow (1970) describe self-realization as the highest stage characterized by self-knowledge, integration, and universal love. Individuals at this stage often have mystical experiences, which Maslow calls peak experiences. Although these are transitional states, he suggests they may lead to enduring high-plateau experiences, a stage of consciousness in Wilber’s (2007) sense. Both Maslow and Pratt take a perennial view: Maslow sees these experiences as universally available natural mystical experiences, which are primary to the paraphernalia of organized religion whose authorities reduce mystical experiences to dogma and ritual. Pratt (1907, 22–23) suggests that although mystical experiences take diverse

forms, they are unitary across all faiths, linking us to our past and connecting with a natural wisdom. He writes that affective faith based on inner experience replaces traditional faith's uncritical acceptance of authority as well as the countless dogmas of modern rationalized religion (Wulff 1991, 506), corresponding to the Rastafarian preference for the "natural mystic" over "ism schism," to borrow Bob Marley's words.

In the psychology of religion, according to Fowler's (1981; see also Wulff 1991, 399–401) stage theory, conventional conformist individuals take for granted and internalize the ideology of prevailing authorities. Modern/rational individuals reflect critically and abandon reliance on external authorities, no longer taking religious symbols literally, but assimilating others' perspectives to their own limited worldview, as western modernity does. Conjunctive faith corresponds to postmodern pluralism, realizing relativism. Individuals go beyond reductive criticism and adopt a "second naïveté," reengaging with spiritual experience beyond or prior to symbolic discourse. Universalizing faith embraces the world community and is committed to justice and universal love, as seen in individuals like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.



#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Rastafari's critical insistence on Black empowerment and liberation from mental slavery as a necessary stage in spiritual development corresponds to the dialectical stages of psychological theories of consciousness evolution, moving from pre-conventional through conventional to post-conventional (Kohlberg 1981; Gilligan 1982) or from pre-rational through rational to trans-rational or integral (Wilber 2007). Rastafari's intermediate stage, the lion, represents a self-conscious struggle for pluralism by symbolically asserting alternative African religious and political identities, fulfilling needs for belonging and esteem (Maslow 1970). After reversing and opposing western ethnocentric conventions, they move on to integrative universal spirituality (Wilber 2007). The lamb's ethics of peace and love (McFarlane 1998) reject Babylon's competitive individualism but incorporate the lion's uncompromising integrity (Edmonds 2003). It represents an integral stage of consciousness (Wilber 2007), which goes beyond postmodern pluralism as it does not reject earlier stages but integrates their partial truths. The integrative epistemology of reasoning seeks universal truths by recognizing a plurality of partial perspectives, including those of traditional religion, modern critical reflection, and a post-modern pluralism of perspectives. Aware of the power of symbols, they recognize empirical realities and questions of truth. Rastafari knowledge claims must be reasonable, preventing them from becoming dogma, thus avoiding

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF THE STAGE THEORIES DISCUSSED, DRAWING ON WILBER'S (2007) SYNTHESIS

	<b>Kohlberg/Gilligan's moral development</b>	<b>Maslow's needs hierarchy</b>	<b>Fowler's stages of faith</b>	<b>Wilber's stages of consciousness</b>	<b>Forsythe's character development</b>
1	Preconventional/egocentric (body)	Physiological	Intuitive-projective	Archaic	Anancy/mental slavery
2		Safety	Mythic-literal	Magic	
3	Conventional/ethnocentric (mind)	Belonging	Conventional	Traditional-conformist	Lion/warrior
4		Self-esteem	Individual-reflective	Modern-rational	
5	Post-conventional/worldcentric (spirit)	Self-realization	Conjunctive-pluralist	Postmodern-pluralist	Lamb
6			Universalizing	Integral-holistic	

uncritical romanticizing of the preconventional and instead representing a trans-rational stage.

Rastafari's integral synthesis of critical sociopolitical consciousness and relational spirituality and ethics resonates with Hay (2007) and Bauman (1989). In *Why Spirituality Is Difficult for Westerners*, Hay (2007) understands spirituality as a universal and natural relational consciousness upon which ethics and religion are socially constructed. Hay and Nye (2006, 169) argue that, "secularist assumptions about the nature of reality have invaded the consciousness of almost all of us who live in the Western world," suppressing our spiritual awareness. Empirical research (Sprague 2005, 41–51) finds that dominant group members often have a detached consciousness, whereas people experiencing spiritual connectedness show increased ethical awareness (Hay 2007, 16–17). In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman (1989) argues that a relational ethics issuing from the self can resist the dehumanizing forces of modern instrumental rationality, which reduce human life to a struggle for survival. Developing moral responsibility requires political disagreement, disobedience of social conventions, and insistence upon an autonomous self with uncompromising integrity, which demands to be different while appealing to universal ethics.

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