

## **Doubt from a Black Perspective**

**By Norm R. Allen Jr.**

I am currently reading the superb 2003 book *Doubt: A History*, by Jennifer Michael Hecht. Hecht has a brief section on Black nonbelievers from the Harlem Renaissance (pp. 435-440.) I did not see this fact remarked upon by any reviewers of the book. Nor did I notice that any reviewers commented upon the Carvaka movement of India or non-belief in China, as discussed by the author. Sadly, this is not surprising. Most White scholars and intellectuals continue to be hopelessly Eurocentric.

The author of *Doubt* also discusses *theists* that have expressed doubts about God. She includes Jesus as a great doubter, and could have included Mother Teresa as well. She does understand that where there is doubt about God, there is the possibility that doubters will reject a belief in God altogether. This is no doubt (no pun intended) why so many theists throughout history have tried to suppress religious doubt by any means necessary – including the use of torture and deadly violence.

I have been deeply influenced by religious doubters. Elijah Muhammad and other members of the Nation of Islam (NOI) used to teach that Christianity is “the White man’s religion,” forced upon Blacks in an attempt to make them easier to enslave. The NOI were highly critical of Christ’s teaching to turn the other cheek, and believed the teaching was ideally suited for making slaves passive. (Malcolm X said he did not even believe that Christ ever delivered such a message.)

Muhammad even had some explicitly atheistic ideas. He said that Christians could not demonstrate that God exists. He said that when human beings plant crops, the results do not spring magically, but come from the ground without any apparent divine guidance. Moreover, he claimed that the Black man is God, and challenged Christians to “show me your God. I can show you mine.”

The NOI and other Blacks were also critical of White Christ and Mary figures. If Christ was a dark-skinned Jew, why, they argued, were Christians worshipping White people with blond hair? Some Blacks reasoned that if Christians could not even get the image right, perhaps Christ was not divine, if he existed at all.

Malcolm said that White Christians and Black Christians worshiped the same God. He told one audience, “when he’s putting that rope around your neck, he calls to God and you call to God.”

The Black historian John Henrik Clarke regularly expressed doubt about Christianity and Islam in particular. He said that when he was a child, he realized that Mary, Jesus, the angels and everyone depicted in Heaven were White. Conversely, the Devil, demons and everyone in Hell were Black. He said he soon decided that when he died, he wanted to go to Hell to be with his people!

These kinds of doubts have led many Blacks to doubt the authenticity of Christianity; and some even doubt the existence of God altogether.

Many Black-centered historians have pointed to ancient Egyptian religious beliefs as the predecessors of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even the belief in one God was put forth by Akhenaton. Not surprisingly, many Blacks understand that if the three main monotheistic religions copied heavily from pre-Christian religions, it seems highly probable that there is no God, at least as conceived by most theists.

Many Black doubters have maintained that most Black people have to suffer on Earth and wait until after they die to find true happiness. Many Whites, on the other hand, seem to be enjoying their Heaven on Earth. Something just does not seem to be right about this scenario.

This observation brought about the popularization of the African idea that when Whites came to Africa, White people had the Bible and Black people had the land. But in the end, Africans had the Bible and *White* people had the land.

Similarly, the late great Nigerian musician Fela Kuti embraced indigenous African religion and harshly criticized the Christian faith. In the Broadway musical “Fela!,” the character playing Fela says that Africans used to control the natural resources of their continent. But when Whites came, they assumed control of the resources, and all Africans received in return were Christianity and gonorrhea!

Black doubters are not solely concerned about White supremacy and Black suffering. They have the same doubts as do other theists. For example, they

wonder, if God exists, who or what created God? The stock reply is that God has always existed, that he is the Alpha and Omega. However, as long as theists continue to lack strong evidence to back up the extraordinary claim that the possibly existent mystery God has always existed, they are simply committing the common logical fallacy of special pleading by maintaining that everything else must have a cause.

Seriously intellectually informed doubt should at least lead to agnosticism, some kind of deism, pantheism or panentheism among people that are reasonably well read in science, history, philosophy and comparative religion. There is no good reason, for example, why such people should believe everything they read in the Bible or Qur'an (whether literally or "figuratively.") For those that believe some or most of the theistic claims made in so-called sacred texts, the challenge is to find strong intellectual reasons for why those particular spiritual beliefs must have come from God.