

# *Humanism and People of Caribbean Descent*

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

When I started out as the first full-time African American secular humanist activist traveling the world to promote humanism, skepticism, freethought and non-theism in 1989, the task appeared to be quite daunting. Since then, I have played a role in increasing the numbers of African Americans coming out of the closet and announcing their non-theism. Moreover, by the time I left African Americans for Humanism (AAH), the organization I founded, I had helped to establish and/or strengthen over 70 humanist groups in about 30 African nations. Furthermore, I had made contacts with Black humanists in the Netherlands, England, Brazil and Canada.

However, it did not seem that there would be much interest in humanism among Blacks of Caribbean descent. There always had been *some* interest there, however. When he was an adolescent, Claude McKay, who would go on to become a major poet of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, founded a group of young agnostics in his native Jamaica. His much older brother, U. Theo, greatly influenced his views on religion.

U. Theo and Claude were not the only Black Jamaicans embracing rationalism, however. On the contrary, there were many Black Jamaicans that were members of England's Rationalist Press Association (RPA) during the early part of the twentieth century. According to leading freethought scholar Bill Cooke's entry on the RPA in Tom Flynn's *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, "The Rationalist Press Association (RPA) was one of the most significant freethought organizations of the twentieth century." (p. 630)

There was a humanist group in Haiti during the 1990s, but they mysteriously disappeared. During the next decade, another group of Haitian Freethinkers formed. The group experienced hardship when the nation was hit with a massive earthquake on January 12, 2010. Yet they persisted, and even stepped up their charity efforts to help earthquake victims with solar cookers, water, food and other items.

On the same island of Hispaniola lies the Dominican Republic (DR). The DR is largely Catholic. However, increasing numbers of people in the nation are nonreligious. There is much opportunity for the development of secularism there, and I have made plans to work with secularists there to promote non-religious ideals.

In 1992, while attending a congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in Amsterdam, I met Frank Arion, one of the leading authors in Curacao, the Netherlands Antilles. Arion founded the first humanist primary school in Curacao, the Kolegio Erasmus (which means the "Cap of Erasmus" in Papiamentu, the language of Curacao.) Arion led the drive that brought about the establishment of the Konsenshi Humanista ("Humanist Conscience") to promote humanism throughout the nation. From 1992 until my departure from the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in 2010, I regularly sent literature to the organization to help them achieve their goals.

Today Caribbean non-theists are rising impressively. David Ince, of the Caribatheists, is originally from Barbados. Prior to my departure from CFI, I was working with a woman named Elayne Jones, also from Barbados. We were planning to have a conference in that nation. Mr. Ince is reaching out to atheists from all over the Caribbean, and the Institute for Science and Human Values supports his aims and objectives. The blog is at <http://www.caribatheist.blogspot.com>

There is another group called the Caribbean Freethinkers Society. This organization consists of Caribbean atheists, freethinkers, humanists, skeptics and others, and they are on very friendly terms with the Caribatheists. There is an excellent Caribbean freethought podcast and a Website at [www.freethinkingisland.com](http://www.freethinkingisland.com)

There are other humanist groups throughout the Caribbean. For example, the Trinidad and Tobago Humanist Association is a member of the IHEU. Furthermore, the London Black Atheists have some members of Caribbean descent. Their site is <http://www.meetup.com/London-Black-Atheists>

Perhaps the most encouraging development among Caribbean atheists is that there are now at least two books out by Caribbean atheists promoting atheism. One is by a Jamaican woman named Zay Dilette Green, titled *Christianity and Black Oppression: Duppy Know Who Fe Frighten* (Kings-SVG Publishers, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, 2012.) The other is by a man from Grenada named Seon M. Lewis. The title of his book is *From Mythology to Reality: Moving Beyond Rastafari* (Lulu Enterprises, Raleigh, NC, 2012.) Lewis, aka the Spiceislandatheist, has a blog at [www.spiceislandatheist.blogspot.com](http://www.spiceislandatheist.blogspot.com) I will comment on both of these books in future columns.

There have been many great Caribbean humanists. Indeed, I have written about many of them, including anthropologist Joel Augustus Rogers (Jamaica) and Marxist theorist C.L.R. James (Trinidad). A little-known though highly impressive humanist of Caribbean descent is Linton Kwesi Johnson, a major poet from England. He was born in Jamaica on August 24, 1952. His biggest fans are Jamaican immigrants in the United Kingdom. He was a member of the Black Panthers, a radical secular group that promoted “revolutionary humanism.” Johnson rejected Christianity. He then moved to Rastafarianism, and then became an agnostic. He has been a harsh critic of the Nation of Islam (NOI). He has poetry published in the Penguin Modern Classics Series, and is only one of two living poets to be thus honored.

The future of humanism among people of Caribbean descent has never looked more promising. The Institute for Science and Human Values will continue to do everything possible to help make that future bright.