

# *We Shall Not Overcome*

*Christianity and Black Oppression: Duppy Know Who Fe Frighten*, by Zay Dilette Green  
(Madison, New Jersey, 2012, ISBN 978-1479191451) 306 pp. Paper \$28.00

## A Review

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Zay Dilette Green is a Jamaican-born woman and the author of *Christianity and Black Oppression*. Her book might be the first full-blown critique of Christianity by an atheist from the Caribbean. (Seon M. Lewis from Grenada is the author of *From Mythology To Reality: Moving Beyond Rastafari*, an atheistic critique of Rastafarianism and theism in general. Both books were published in 2012.)

Green makes some fascinating analogies in her book. For example, she compares the oppression of Black people by White Christians to the oppression of the Dalits or “untouchables” under the Hindu castes system in India. The author points out that the major difference has been that Hindus have clearly acknowledged that their religion promotes caste discrimination. The Dalits are deemed morally inferior due to alleged sins in previous lives. Christians, on the other hand, have maintained that *true* Christianity is supposed to be all about equality for all people. In other words, Christian bigots are hypocrites of the lowest sort.

Humanists are strong advocates of reason, and rightfully so. However, Green notes that reasoning with advocates and beneficiaries of White supremacy has not worked. If a group has a huge economic and social investment in the oppression of other peoples, reasoning with the oppressor in and of itself is not likely to lead to complete freedom, justice and equality.

The analogy between the Hindu caste system and Christian-backed White supremacy fails in another major way. Though racism still exists in the U.S. and South Africa, Jim Crow and apartheid are dead. Legally, there are no more “Whites only” and “colored” signs, Blacks are no longer forced to sit at the back of the bus, etc. However, caste systems still exist in numerous nations. (Indeed, not long ago, I participated in a march against caste discrimination with members of the Nigerian Humanist Movement in Nigeria.) In the U.S., some civil rights activists used Christianity to end the system of racial segregation that Christianity built in the first place.

Still, Christianity continues to be a tool of Black oppression. Green writes about how many Black Christians, due to years of self-hatred, fantasize about being cleaned “white as snow.” Indeed, the author quotes Patricia J. Williams, author of *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, p. 198:

The Blackness of Black people in this [U.S.] society has always represented the blemish, the unseemliness, the barrier separating individual and society. Castration from blackness becomes the initiatory tunnel, the portal through which black people must pass if they are not to fall on their faces in the presence of society, fraternity, and hierarchy...Intellectual castration is a sign of suffering for the Larger Society's Love.... (p. 225)

What struck me most about Green's book is Black Jamaicans' obsession with skin color, hair texture, physical features, etc. Though this has been a problem among Blacks in the U.S., as Jamaican Black nationalist Marcus Garvey discovered in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was not as bad as it was in Jamaica. In Jamaica, the lighter-skinned Black people with relatively straight (or "good") hair and Caucasian features were the most admired. In the 1960s and 70s, many Christians considered it sinful to wear afros. Many Black Christian women were instructed to straighten their hair. The men preferred women with straight or wavy hair and light skin. Again, many African Americans will recognize this problem. However, in Jamaica, it has been much worse than in the U.S.

Green points out that the Bible Society of the West Indies, under the auspices of the American Bible Society, has demonized Black Jamaicans as violent. Yet they maintain the Bible gives victims of violence solace through passages in Psalms and other parts of the Bible.

Churches in poor Jamaican neighborhoods are magnificent buildings. Such is the case all over the world. For example, when I visited Ghana in 1991, I observed fabulous churches right next to dilapidated school buildings. In the Ivory Coast, the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro is the largest Catholic church on the planet, bigger than St. Peter's in the Vatican. It can hold 150,000 people standing. Yet the poor all around it continue to suffer.

Green is a living example of how churches divide families. When she was a teen, she joined a church of which her family did not approve. There was much family turmoil as a result. This was typical of many Jamaican families.

Moreover, Christianity has played havoc with Jamaican identity and culture. For example, Green writes on p. 283, "...playing classical music is sacred, playing the drums, dancing, singing folk songs is profane." Jamaicans have even been encouraged to change the way they speak in an effort to somehow get closer to God.

The author discusses the ways in which many Blacks (such as Louis Farrakhan, Black liberation theologians and others) compare the plight of Black people to that of the Israelites under the oppression of the Egyptians. However, Green shows that the analogy is utterly false because the Egyptians and the Israelites worshipped different gods; whereas Blacks and Whites worship the same Christian God. This is problematic to say the least. Indeed, as the late scholar William James would ask, how could we know that God is not a White racist? After all, Whites continue to have the bulk of the wealth, power, success, etc.

Green also notes that the Christian emphasis upon individual salvation makes it difficult for Blacks to unite and work together as a people. Though there have been many notable efforts by Black Christians to foster unity, too many Blacks have bought into quietist religious ideals and have been content to focus upon getting saved and saving the supposed souls of others. Similarly, as W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in an essay long ago:

"The theology of the average colored church is basing itself far too much upon "Hell and Damnation" - upon an attempt to scare people into being decent and threatening them with the terrors of death and punishment. We are still trained to believe a good deal that is simply childish in theology." (Reprinted from *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*,

by W.E.B. Du Bois, edited by Herbert Aptheker, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985, in my book *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, 1991, Prometheus, p. 117.)

The author is highly critical of missionaries. She notes that the fact that one is a missionary necessarily means that that person considers herself to be superior to non-Christians in many ways. For example, Christian missionaries consider African religions to be forms of superstition. However, Green wonders why African religionists cannot critique *Christianity* as superstition.

It is great to read two books from Caribbean atheists. May this be the start of something big.