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David Walker and other Dead Prophets

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What do David Walker, Jesus, Kahina of the Mahgreb, Dona Beatrice of Kongo, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X have in common? They were Africans of change. They were Africans not afraid of criticism. They were Africans who stood up to their present day challenges. They were Africans who confronted Europeans and their morals, their Christianity, and their imposed sense of superiority. These leaders, prophets, revolutionaries had faith in a God, a supreme being, that was unshakeable. They constantly questioned the morality and the professed Christianity of the Europeans. This group of prophets put to the test the 'ultimate religion' and dared to call it a farce; dared to call its followers hypocrites. The prophets called into question the Europeans' societal values and their imposed sense of superiority by continuing to question from whence came all of this power? They dared to threaten the Europeans with physical and spiritual violence. It is because of these stances of confrontation and because of their fight for freedom and justice that these prophets were repaid with injustice. In this paper I will give instances of all these positions and draw the parallel of the lives of these prophets. I contend that these people were killed because the Europeans or mainstream society felt threatened. It is no coincidence that the strongest and most outspoken leaders of our race are those who were not afraid to die, because they knew that death was the ultimate price for freedom. It is no coincidence that other accommodating leaders never lived the life of constant uncertainty that the prophets lived. If freedom meant accommodation, the prophets preferred death.

Christianity: Whose God is it Anyway?

Christianity was consistently used to justify all systems of oppression. It was used in Africa by Leopold II and other colonizers as the excuse to steal land from Africans under the guise of bringing Christianity to the natives. It was used to perpetuate the institution of slavery by claiming that slavery was the curse of God on Ham, the dark
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son of Noah. Preachers often said that it was the slaves’ duty according to the Bible to bear the lash and obey the orders of their masters. Christianity was then used to justify the continuation of oppression by brainwashing its newly recruited African servants into believing in an almighty white God and an everlasting life in the hereafter. Africans were taught to deny themselves of pleasure, human rights, and worldly treasures because their peace and happiness would come in the afterlife, with the afterlife being, of course, death. It is no wonder many Africans prayed for death to escape their worldly sorrows.

However, the prophets challenged these views of Christianity. David Walker set his God and his religion apart from the whites’ god by saying, “It is my solemn belief, that if ever the world becomes Christianized, it would be through the means, under God of the Blacks, who are now held in wretchedness...by the white Christians of the world.” It was comments such as these and the fact that David Walker pointed out the hypocrisy in the views held by Christians when concerning natural or human rights. Walker questioned how the Europeans could consider themselves Christians and at the same time deprive whole nations of humans of their natural rights. Walker believed natural rights were dictated ultimately by freedom.

Walker confronted Europeans by calling them “pretenders to Christianity” throughout his Appeal he consistently refers to the whites as Christian Americans in the most sarcastic ways. He asks if God is just to all people, and how he affords all people a chance to be at peace, then how could he be a God to the blacks when they are never at peace? Further, Walker’s comparison of the Egyptians’ treatment—who were supposedly the most heathen people during their time according to the Europeans- of the Israelites to the white Americans’ treatment of Africans in slavery is one of the most compelling arguments in the Appeal. He dares anyone to show him one instance of the Israelites’ treatment that could be compared to the wretched and horrific treatment suffered by Africans.

Walker’s differentiation between his Christianity and that of the whites was a clear statement that his Christianity was based on the original principles put forth as Christian ideas and not based on some perverted version of them. It was not that these ideas were foreign to Christians, but that they were distorted to fit what was convenient for
white Christians of the day. Therefore, Walker was not proposing that he practiced a different religion or Christianity, but that he practiced the Christianity. It has been said of Jesus that he "did not come to bring a new religion... only to correct it."4 The other prophets had criticisms as harsh as Walker’s which proved to be blatant confrontations with white America’s sacred ideals and the white man’s position as the ‘gatekeeper’ of all that he considered sacred to his one way connection to God. The Kahina of the Mahgreb considered Christians and the Arabs to be barbarians.5 Dona Beatrice of Kongo even had her own version of Christianity. She adopted a stance that made Europeans in Africa gasp! She likened herself to Jesus Christ and “imitated the death of Christ—her followers came to believe that she died on a Friday, went to heaven to plead the cause of her people with God and was resurrected on a Sunday.”6

Martin Luther King, Jr. consistently pointed out the inconsistencies of white Christians and their beliefs. He stated that, “Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripples them is a dry-as-dust religion.”7 Dr. King noted loudly and often that the disparities in the world were due to the Western world and its “lip service to God”8 and its focus on materialism and depriving its black citizens of their rights.

Like Jesus and other prophets covered in this article, Dr. King believed in the liberation of oppressed people. He used his faith in his God and in his beliefs to rally for the “underdog.” In his decision to stage and participate in the Montgomery Bus boycott, King tried to decide whether or not it would be unchristian like, but decided in favor of his principles saying, “he who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”9 This decision to rely on his Christian principles to fight against what Christian white Americans forced upon a nation of people as justifiable actions is yet another example of how the prophets used Christianity as a weapon against a Christian nation.

Malcolm X ventured even further than others and openly called the white race a race of devils. This is the ultimate confrontation with white people and is also one of the most daring outside remarks made by Walker. Malcolm X pointed out the hypocrisy of Christianity when he said, “this white man’s Christian religion teaches blacks that their Savior
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died for them two thousand years ago; but, for all their churchgoing and praying, blacks have not been saved and they have yet to know any freedom, justice, or equality."\textsuperscript{10}

All of the prophets pointed out the hypocrisy of white Christians. They took Christianity and spirituality into their own hands and made it into something that worked for them. The prophets used their spirituality to fight against the evils that white Christians produced.

**Values: Ain't I a Woman? Ain't I a Man?**

David Walker set himself apart by being one of the first among the anti-slavery writers to actually assert himself and his fellow Africans as whole human beings instead of the pitiful wretches that were only 3/5 of a human according to the white Christians. Walker stated, "Are we MEN!! ask you, O my brethren! Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? Are their not dying worms as well as we?"\textsuperscript{11} By comparing blacks to whites as their equals, Walker blatantly defies white society.

White abolitionists of the time were fighting the institution of slavery as a demoralizing effect on white society and on the grounds that the conditions of slavery were physically atrocious. However, white abolitionists hardly ever ventured to equate blacks with whites. They viewed blacks as pitiful creatures and often described them in terms that are used to describe animals, such as loyal, docile, etc. For David Walker to take a stance as a man meant that he would not bow down to another man that was not deserving, "How we could be so submissive to a gang of men, whom we cannot tell whether they are as good as ourselves or not, I never could conceive."\textsuperscript{12}

Evidence of this type of audacity is in most of the other prophets' writings and histories. Jesus was considered a man who exemplified his own teachings, so his death was an "example of courage in the face of threats to one's life."\textsuperscript{13} Jesus should have been noted as a complete man, not a pitiful creature, even though he stood alone in the face of adversity. "The redemptive suffering of Jesus as the Black Messiah must likewise be seen in the light of His work of rebellion...for if Jesus was a sufferer, he was also a rebel, a rebel with a cause who suffered for that cause."\textsuperscript{14} Jesus was seen, as most of the prophets were seen during his time, as one that was despised and rejected by mainstream society.
because he was a liberator of the oppressed.

The Kahina of the Mahgreb and Dona Beatrice were scoffed at initially because they were women. However, feelings soon changed as these women assumed the primary leadership role of their people and fought against the Arabs, Europeans, and other invaders. The Kahina was the resistance leader for North Africa. She was given the nickname of the “Sorceress” because it was said she’d go into trance and then predict the future. This particular power gave Kahina and her people an advantage over the Arabs and it succeeded in keeping invaders at bay.

Dona Beatrice of Kongo was also considered a visionary. Challenging Christianity on all fronts by first presenting herself as Jesus, a male figure, then as the virgin giving birth to a son, proved to be more of an assertion of her power than any other act she committed during her reign. What strengthened her position was the fact that the people of the Kongo supported her and believed in her so wholeheartedly that the Capuchin missionaries felt that she was a threat to their missions. They eventually had her beheaded.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X both asserted themselves as complete men and as equals. They brought manhood and womanhood to the blacks of America and throughout the Diaspora and they forced blacks to wear this identity proudly for the first time in ages. Because of this, these leaders were also considered a threat to mainstream society. It was common knowledge that the only way to keep the black race down was to convince blacks that they were inferior to whites. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X took the wrap of inferiority off the black race and destroyed it.

King states, “The slaveholders of America had devised with almost scientific precision their systems for keeping the Negro defenseless, emotionally and physically.” He later added that, “the Negro can no longer silently endure conditions of police brutality and mob violence. We cannot do so because we are commanded to resist evil by God that created us all.”

King dared to say that waiting was no longer an option. He dared to say that all men were created equal, so they should be treated as such and that anything else was unjust and unacceptable.

Malcolm X’s speeches were considered so inflammatory that
at one time he was considered one of the most dangerous men in the world. His early ideas of separatism and his insistence on blaming the white race for the complete brainwashing of a people served to infuriate and scare whites, while they acted as a rallying cry for blacks. "So let us, the black people, separate ourselves from this white man slave master, who despises us so much! You are out here begging him for so-called integration! But... he is saying that he won't integrate because black blood will mongrelize his race!"

Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword

Of all the incriminating evidence of 'militancy' that can be charged to these prophets, it was their stance on violence, and their opinions of the European race that rounded off the reasons why the prophets were so feared by whites, yet revered by blacks.

David Walker, throughout his Appeal issues threats that will be sanctioned by God as payback for the wrongdoings of white Christians, "Unless you speedily alter your course, you and your country are gone!! The irony of this is that Walker justifies his position of righteousness and violence against whites through the Bible as did the Europeans justified slavery and other sufferings that were heaped upon Africans. In addition to his use of Christian passages to justify his position, Walker uses language such as barbarous and vicious to communicate how he feels about the white Christian America and their treatment of Africans.

Jesus, the Christ, and also the ultimate symbol of the African in chains, crucified for wrong he had not committed, became the ultimate rebel. One only needs to recall the destruction of the Temple.

Kahina of the Mahgreb destroyed Bayhaya, her own capital, so that it could not fall into enemy hands. She also ordered the defeat of several armies which served to drive back others who were considering trying to overtake her queendom.

Dona Beatrice and Martin Luther King, Jr., although not obvious proponents of violence, nevertheless understood the motivation behind it. Their methods of resistance however were somewhat different than a violent response. It is worthy to note here, though, that Martin Luther King, Jr. made several references to the impatience of blacks being told to be patient. He also used 'spiritual violence' as Walker often did, to
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make his point by quoting from the Bible, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...I have not come to bring this old negative peace with its deadening passivity. I have come to lash out against such peace. Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new."21

Once again in the face of adversity, Malcolm X uses an abrupt confrontational style that begs for challenge. His 'never turn the other cheek because you only have two' philosophy set white Americans on edge. Malcolm consistently said that he "would not call upon anybody to be violent without a cause."22 But this still served as a message to white Americans that blacks were not going to take it anymore. Malcolm's philosophy was 'if I'm struck then I'll strike back' and it served as a constant reminder of the rising anger among the black community. Like Walker, Malcolm X dared to call the white man out of his name. He dared to call him wicked and evil, the antithesis of what the white man considered himself. And Malcolm dared to call him these names in public, on television, and on the radio.

Conclusion

David Walker and other dead prophets challenged society much more critically than their soft spoken accommodating partners. People like Booker T. Washington, who straddled the fence, but who fell under the graces of white society as 'one of the good ones' are but one example of the type of leader that stood opposite the prophets.

The prophets refused to compromise their stance against Europeans and/or mainstream society. It was this refusal to bend, the outward show of contempt and utter disgust for the white man, that served as the impetus to have these people killed.

David Walker was found dead mysteriously due to what some call foul play. Is it so mysterious that a man like this, who in 1830 dared to confront Christian Americans with their worst fear, an educated, outspoken, free black man, would end up dead without any known reason?

Jesus was nailed to a cross for committing offenses of which he was never guilty, but because he confronted the powers that be and their religion and oppressive nature, he was labeled as a lunatic, a thief, and a drunkard23 to justify his death.
Kahina of the Mahgreb, after serving as the resistance leader for North Africa for so many years and holding at bay the European and Arabic forces, was finally forced from the mountains to which she fled to engage in battle that would ultimately result in her death. “Her head was sent to the Caliph and Berber resistance came to an end.”

Dona Beatrice faced a horrible death because of her daring to use the Europeans’ Christianity in her own fashion. This was the ultimate insult. In return for her sacrilegious stance and her resistance to European influence, she and her son that she claimed came from a virgin birth were killed in public as a literal and figurative representation of what happened to her people, “...the sentence against Dona Beatriz, saying that under the false name of Saint Anthony she had deceived the people with her heresies and falsehoods. Consequently the king, her lord, and the royal council condemned her to die at the stake...They (she and her son) were quickly led to the stake...They were covered with other pieces of wood and burned alive. Not content with this, the following morning some men came again and burned the bones that remained and reduced everything to very fine ashes.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot down which was an ironic way for him to die, being that he was an advocate of non violent means of resistance. But it is not necessarily physical violence that threatens a people, it is also a spiritual violence that wreaks havoc on the soul.

Malcolm X was shot down in front of his wife and children for daring to be the representative of true manhood/humanhood for black people. He dared to join the other prophets in their never ending quest for freedom.

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Notes


2 Ibid. p. 20.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


6 Ibid. p. 51.


8 Ibid. p. 19.

9 Ibid. p. 126.


12 Ibid. p. 37.


16 Ibid.


