

Dear Mr. Ebenezer

As members of the academic community, we are writing to you to express our concern regarding your policy banning the wearing of dreadlocks by observant Rastafarians. We accept that it is the schools's prerogative to set its disciplinary ethos, and that the school's impressive pedagogical and social achievements do indeed speak for themselves. It is not, therefore, our intention to challenge the school's policy as such, nor indeed your own educational philosophy as expressed in your blog posts and social media presence. Rather, as academics for whom such questions are of central importance, we feel that your application of these principles in this case is rooted in a misunderstanding of the religious, spiritual, and indeed social significance of dreadlocks for practicing Rastafarians; a misunderstanding that we hope this letter may, in some small way, help to correct.

As scholars of Caribbean culture and society, including its diverse religious and spiritual expressions, we were particularly struck by your response, quoted in the Daily Mail online on September 15th, that 'At the moment we are treating this as a social issue. I have seen no tenets that you have to have dreadlocks. The kindest thing you can do for boys is have strict discipline and firm boundaries and everyone has to comply with that.'

There are three claims in this statement that we feel it is our intellectual, as well as moral, responsibility to respond to.

The first is the claim that this is a social issue, and therefore, by implication, not a religious one. We feel that drawing a sharp distinction between these two spheres is unsound when it comes to Rastafarian faith, as it is both a faith and a social movement.

While there is a broad scholarly consensus which situates the genesis of the Rastafarian faith in the 1930's with the formation of the community at Pinnacle and the teachings of Leonard Howell, it has numerous antecedents in both the Garveyite movement and various Ethiopianist congregations that have been part of the religious life of the African diaspora in the Americas for centuries. The latter were largely Christian religious movements which emphasised parallels between the experiences of displacement, enslavement, and social death of African people in the Americas and the history of the Israelites as set out in the Bible, as well as engaging with Biblical references to Africa and Ethiopia which were often otherwise marginalised. In addition, it made the claim that the teachings of Christ were better instantiated, and more fully lived, by the enslaved and marginalised than by their masters. It was, indeed is, a theological movement which strove to adapt the Christianity imposed by colonial authorities and a society based on racialised chattel slavery into a Christianity that could meaningfully speak to the experiences of those most oppressed and exploited.

We would like to emphasise that in the specific case of Rastafarianism, social concerns play a particularly important role. It is an emancipatory movement rooted in religious practice, equally committed to spiritual and religious knowledge and practice as to the instantiation of forms of life that defy and challenge the restricted social role that Afro-Caribbean people were assigned historically, as well its contemporary iterations in diaspora. These two are profoundly interlinked.

This brings us to the second claim in your public statement: that you have "seen no tenets that you have to have dreadlocks". This statement is not untrue, as such; the Rastafarian faith is, as outlined above, an antinomian and decentralised religious movement. Personal biblical exegesis is very important, as is lived religious practice. There is a Rastafarian saying that only half the Bible is written on paper, the other half is in the hearts of Man. There are several Rastafarian sects that do have a hierarchical structure and clearly defined doctrine, and see Rastafarians outside them as heretical. It is not our intention to discuss the relative merits of such claims, but we should point out that these groups do not enjoy a hegemonic position within the Rastafarian community as a whole.

The point here then, is that it is not meaningful to speak of absolute tenets when it comes to the Rastafarian faith at all. This should not be understood to undermine the legitimacy of the religious wearing of dreadlocks in itself, as there are several major religions, including Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sunni and Sufi Islam, and most forms of Protestant Christianity that all lack a clear hierarchical structure for precisely determining religious practice beyond scholarly consensus or established practice within a given community. One could equally say that there is no central tenet saying that a Muslim woman *must* wear a head covering or that a Hassidic man *must* wear *payot* and a *kippah*, but these are nevertheless generally respected as important to many people's religious practice.

While one is not less of a Rastafarian if one *chooses* not to grow dreadlocks, a child being *forced* to cut them off or face isolation and expulsion asserts the final authority of an institutional authority to determine one's religious and cultural practice. Complying with this *is* unequivocally contrary to Rastafarian beliefs and practice, and we believe that persisting in this course of action is therefore unnecessarily cruel to the child and his family and does constitute a form of religious discrimination which is antithetical to the broad, ecumenical Christian spirit of Fulham Boy's School.

Finally, we would like to address your point about discipline and boundaries. As stated above, we do not seek to dispute this pedagogical approach as such. Instead, we would like to draw your attention to what appears to be the conflation of dreadlocks as a subcultural form of self-expression with dreadlocks as Rastafarian religious practice. In your blog post 'Why we are doing what we are doing and who we are doing it for', you write:

'Do these policies and firm boundaries somehow constrain boys' development, creativity or expression? We think the opposite.'

Owing largely to the international popularity of reggae music, dreadlocks have been appropriated by a variety of musical subcultures, from metal rock to various iterations of hippy culture, as a generalised form of personal rebellion against societal norms or as an expression of a more "natural" way of life, or a signalling of creative individuality. While we concede that such practices may run counter to the school's understanding of discipline and boundaries, the Rastafarian practice differs significantly. As outlined above, it is an expression of personal faith, of responsibility, and a commitment to self-sufficiency and autonomy, values which are very much in harmony with the school's stated aims. Rastafarian religious practice is not undisciplined and boundless: indeed, Rastafarian dreadlocks are expressive of a profound personal discipline in the tradition of Talmudic and early Christian asceticism, as well as a commitment to spiritually informed social justice.

We should point out that we are writing this letter with some reluctance. We do not wish to explain the Flanders' family's faith on their behalf, and would not presume to do so. However, it has become clear from your own responses and statements that you are not taking the family's claims seriously, and continue to misunderstand this case as a question of boundary setting and school discipline. We therefore hope that an intervention from us, a diverse group of academics from several different disciplines, may cause you to reconsider your position, reinstate Chikayzea as a student on equal terms with his peers, and apologise to the Flanders family. We have enclosed a modest bibliography of scholarly research on Rastafarian beliefs as well as a selection of Rastafarian writings should you wish to pursue further independent enquiry.

Best Regards

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