Introduction

Usually, the mass production of popular cultural goods is driven by forces of economics, politics, social revolutionary movements, and cultural aesthetic expressions, through what Paul Hirsch calls culture-producing systems (Hirsch 1972). The production, marketing, and distribution of reggae as cultural goods in the musical industry facilitate a modern form of “commercial cultural product;” one that Hirsch defines as “nonmaterial goods, directed at a mass public of consumers, for whom they serve an esthetic [sic] rather than a clearly utilitarian purpose” (Hirsch 1972: 639). The production and distribution of reggae music “entail[s] relationships among a complex of network of organizations which both facilitate and regulate [its] innovation process” (Hirsch 1972: 640). This process makes it a profitable enterprise. In the production of culture via the record industry, however, the exporting of theology as a cultural commodity is not a run-of-the-mill phenomenon in commercial markets. Consumers do not usually buy and sell theology as a cultural product, even when a religion is commercialised. This is especially the case with Rastafarian theology, which is spread or accessed only as a by-product of the reggae musical industry. Fans that are hooked on reggae purchase and use its musical products and Rasta accessories for aesthetical rather than theological purposes. For this reason, this chapter examines Rasta reggae theology not as a commercial commodity driven by supply and demand economics and mass culture production, but as an unusual phenomenon and a by-product of reggae music and Rastafarian culture.

Which other world-class pop-culture musical ballads or anthems employ such obvious grammar of theology to admonish fans: “Walk right in!…You’re living in sin, working iniquity” in Bob Marley’s ‘Bend Down Low’; “You will reap what you sow, and only Jah Jah know” in Marley’s ‘Trench Town Rock’; “The goodness of Jah/Jah I’doreth for I’ver” in Marley’s ‘Burnin’; and “Come we go chant down Babylon one more time” in Marley’s ‘Chant Down Babylon’. What should reggae fans make of the sexy but theologically coated lyrics: “We jammin’, we jammin’, and
I hope you like jammin’ too... We jammin’, we jammin’... in the name of our Lord... Holy Mt. Zion... rules all creation... We jammin’, I want to jam with you?” of Marley’s ‘Jammin’? When the King of Reggae sang: “We don’t need no more trouble!” but warned, “These are the words of my master telling me that no one who doeth evil shall prosper... Whosoever diggeth a pit shall fall ‘n it... We have a small axe ready to cut you down,” in ‘Small Axe’, why was he so Bible conscious? Reggae artists baffle many fans who have little interest in religion as to why their lyrics are so infused (if not obsessed) with theology. To question why this cultural, socio-political, and commercialised music—with its hypnotic and sexy pull (in lyrics like ‘Stir It Up’, ‘Jammin”, and ‘Soul Shake Down Party’) —has to find a basis in Bible and theology is, at the same time, to underscore an intriguing paradox in the unique character and appeal of Rasta-reggae (hereafter, roots-reggae, as distinguished from other popular forms). Answering this cultural question with a theological Orientierung (orientation) offers an opportunity to investigate a fascinating theological phenomenon in a movement’s cultural production; a movement whose advocates are themselves suspicious of theology, especially of the Christian hue, but construct their theology of freedom on the language of a four-hundred-year-old Christian book used to institutionalise the oppression and enslavement of their forebears.

Roots-Reggae and Cultural Identity Production

In the second half of the last century the new sizzling art form and cultural production, reggae music, took the artistic world of pop culture by storm; producing Marley’s ‘Exodus’, the “Best Album of the Twentieth Century,” and ‘One Love’, “[s]ong of the century and the millennium” (Time Magazine 1999). Musical legend, ingenious songwriter, and electrifying stage performer, Marley was awarded the United Nations Peace Medal of honour in 1978, and inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994. The pop artist of the twentieth century was also “voted the third-greatest songwriter of all time in a 2001 BBC poll (behind Bob Dylan and John Lennon)... and sold an estimated 50 million records world wide” (Jelly-Schapiro 2009: 34). Marley and the Wailers, as producers, marketers, and the “principal ‘popularisers’ of roots-reggae,” became so popular, “by 1986, the Wailers’ ten albums had sold to consumers more than 20 million copies” (King and Jensen 1995: 18). The world was graced by many reggae masters—the likes of Desmond Dekker, Peter Tosh (Winston McIntosh),