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»SELASSIE JE KAPLAN«: KONTEKSTUALIZACIJA RASTAFARIJANSKEGA DUHOVNIŠTVA V BRITANSKIH OBOROŽENIH SILAH

“SELASSIE IS THE CHAPLAIN”: CONTEXTUALISING RASTAFARI CHAPLAINCY PROVISION IN THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES

Povzetek Britanska kopenska vojska namerava prvič imenovati rastafarijanskega kaplana, ki bo služil v njenih vrstah in podpiral nesorazmerno veliko število rastafarijancev v britanskih oboroženih silah. To je pohvalen korak, ki ne pomeni le zagotavljanja posebne duhovne oskrbe za veliko manjšinsko versko skupino, temveč tudi dejanje velikega epistemološkega pomena za skupino, ki jo britanske oborožene in varnostne sile od njenega nastanka v 30. letih 20. stoletja na Jamajki nasilno in odkrito preganjajo. Imenovanje je mogoče razumeti v širšem kontekstu, ki kaže, da njegova narava zahteva vzpostavitev dialoga in informirano, na dokazih temelječo razpravo.

Ključne besede *Rastafarijanstvo, britanske oborožene sile, vojaško duhovništvo, nasilje.*

Abstract For the first time, the British Army is looking to appoint a Rastafari chaplain to serve within its ranks and to support the disproportionately large number of Rastafari within the British Armed Forces. This is a commendable step which not only represents specific spiritual provision for a large minority faith group, but also represents an act of enormous epistemological significance for a group violently and openly persecuted by the British military and security forces since its emergence in 1930s Jamaica. This paper seeks to contextualise these, offering the view that the pivotal nature of this appointment necessitates dialogue and an informed evidence base.

Key words *Rastafari, UK Armed Forces, military chaplaincy, violence.*

Introduction

The British Army is currently in the initial stages of appointing a Rastafari chaplain to serve within its ranks for the first time. There are today, according to official Ministry of Defence data, over 1,500 armed forces personnel who self-identify as Rastafari. In 2012 official data reported 101 Rastafari amongst a total regular force of almost 180,000, to constitute 0.05% total. In 2025, however, the regular force has shrunk to 137,000 whilst Rastafari representation has ballooned to 1,529 to make up 1.1%, meaning that in relative terms the Rastafari community within the UK Armed Forces has grown 22-fold in just thirteen years¹. The appointee would aid in supporting the disproportionately large number of Rastafari who serve within the Ministry of Defence (MoD), as well as any others in need of spiritual and pastoral support². This is commendable, and would serve to redress decades of spiritually underserving this community which increasingly forms part of its make-up³. Not only that, the provision of a Rastafari chaplain also represents an epistemologically significant act; just as with the provision of Muslim, Jewish and Sikh chaplains, it is an acknowledgement from military upper echelons that an individual can be theologically schooled in a non-Christian tradition yet still able to support the whole breadth of those within the forces. That this would be a person schooled in a theological tradition openly, violently, persecuted by the British State and by British colonial forces, makes this even more substantial.

This direction, though, comes amidst several challenges for the MoD and the UK Armed Forces. Global geopolitics continues to shift in directions which suggest the active engagement of forces personnel is becoming more rather than less likely. This increased precarity comes at a time in which recruitment and retention within the forces is said to be “in crisis” (Webb, 2025), whilst several recent high-profile cases have highlighted issues around cultures of care within the Forces⁴. This context renders appropriate, tailored and quality support of service personnel of even more pertinent need to military employers. These efforts are themselves found in an increasingly fraught global context, with US President Donald Trump shuttering Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programmes within the US military and dismissing several top-ranking officials perceived as ‘DEI hires’⁵.

The journey to appointing a Rastafari chaplain itself presents challenges within and without the MoD. New processes are required to be devised for a community which has no central body of orthodoxy or ordainment. Further, inherent aspects of military service, such as its connections to imperialism and violence, find themselves

¹ This data comes from a 2025 Freedom of Information Request submitted by author.

² In the wider UK population, 6,000 identified as Rastafari in the 2021 census, of a total of 67.6 million (though this is likely several times smaller than the actual number; due to Rastafari suspicion of government data collection activities). As a percentage this puts Rastafari, officially, as 0.008% of the UK population. This means that by the available data, Rastafari are 137.5 times better represented in the UK Armed Forces than in UK society as a whole (ONS, Census).

³ A 2019 Freedom of Information request indicated that Rastafari was the fastest growing religion in the UK Armed Forces, rising 40% since 2016 (Glover, 2025).

⁴ See ‘UK Armed Forces Context’ section.

⁵ See ‘UK Armed Forces Context’ section.

in tension with core aspects of Rastafari belief – something those already serving and in need of spiritual support have already had to navigate. Practical aspects of the deployed role may also prove hard to overcome for some. It is as such essential that the MoD engages in this process with a firm evidence base and understanding of the community it is attempting to provide for. Previous minority faith appointments also offer further helpful context.

For the past year and a half, I have been pursuing a three-year British Academy funded ethnographic research project which aims to gain an understanding of Rastafari experiences within the UK Armed Forces. So far I have spoken with twenty-seven Rastafari service personnel, all men, all bar one in the British Army, and almost all Commonwealth soldiers of Caribbean heritage. These conversations have all taken place in MoD facilities, five of them alongside observations of the study participants as they went about their daily roles. Analysis of these is in its early stages and has so far been thematic. During my research I have spent time with Rastafari personnel who have invariably spoken about how much Rastafari chaplaincy provision would represent a ‘gamechanger’ for them and their lives in the forces. It is this fieldwork, as well as time spent amongst Rastafari communities in St Lucia and Antigua, which informs this paper.

This article seeks to examine some of the opportunities and challenges which surround the hugely significant appointment of the first Rastafari chaplains to minister in the UK Armed Forces. First, I will explore the historical context of UK/British government engagements with Rastafari which demonstrate the significance of this appointment. Secondly, I will examine the present UK military context around recruitment and personnel support, in doing so exploring previous efforts to appoint chaplains from minority faith communities. Lastly, I will examine some of the challenges and synergies, from within both the MoD and Rastafari communities, which surround this appointment process.

The title of this article comes from the similarly titled ‘Selassie is the Chapel’, a song originally recorded by Bob Marley in 1968 and re-released in 2023. With lyrics written by renowned Rastafari elder Mortimer Planno (Reggaeville, 2025), Marley extols Haile Selassie as his personal ‘chapel’. He sings (Reggaeville, 2025):

“Haile Selassie is the Chapel

And the world should know (all should know, all should know)

That man is the Angel

Our God, the King of Kings”.

For Rastafari in the UK Armed Forces up to today, Selassie does, and indeed must, serve as both chapel and chaplain in lieu of any specific Rastafari spiritual provision. “Take your troubles to Selassie”, Marley sings in the fifth line (Reggaeville, 2025). Whilst for many years this has been the sole source of spiritual refuge for Rastafari

serving in the military, the wheels are in motion for His Majesty to soon have reinforcements.

1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The significance of the present direction from the MoD is hard to overstate, in view of the historical context of Rastafari/Afro-Caribbean oppression at the hands of English/British military forces. Rastafari is a monotheistic, often panentheistic, spirituality; it has at its core a yearning for the world and the universe to exist in its most organic form, as well as a fierce resistance to injustice and imperialism. The history of the Rastafari movement is one inextricably rooted in global colonial history, and specifically the colonial history of the English/British Empire. Jamaica (pre-colonially Xaymaca), where the Rastafari movement would coalesce in 1930, was first ‘claimed’ by Spanish imperial forces in 1494. This would mark the commencement of some of the most brutal episodes in human history. Indigenous groups, including the Taino, fiercely resisted the Spanish invaders but were ultimately decimated⁶ by enslavement, murder and disease, leading to the first forced transportation of enslaved Africans to the island to work on agricultural plantations. Sensing opportunity after failure in nearby Hispaniola, English forces arrived on the island in 1655 and eventually defeated the Spanish militarily to establish overall control (Castanha, 2011). The all-consuming influence of these two forces, as well as the covetous attitudes which its oppressors held towards it, led Carole Yawney to describe Jamaica as an “artefact of imperialism” (Yawney, 1989, pp 177–202). English, and subsequently British, administrations set about establishing and maintaining Jamaica as a plantation colony exploited through an abasement of enslaved Africans bought to Jamaica as possessions, mostly from occupied British colonies in West Africa (Bishton, 1986 p 50). Those who survived the harrowing and deeply perilous journey through the ‘Middle Passage’ to Jamaica were tasked with maximising economic output for an imperial force which had stripped them of every right and freedom belonging to them as human beings.

This system was legislated for by the British parliament until increased unrest and rebellion saw it outlawed in 1833. By 1800, over 300,000 enslaved Afro-Jamaicans were being put to work on the island. After legal emancipation, systems of ‘apprenticeship’, indentureship and white racial hegemony followed, which allowed colonial overseers to maintain tight controls on the economic and social freedom of non-English derived Jamaicans up until independence in 1962 and beyond (King & Foster, 2014, pp 248–262, 254–257). Throughout this period, English and then British military forces brutally controlled the physical bodies and the freedoms of thought, movement and association of Afro-Jamaicans. In Tacky’s Revolt (1760–61), the Baptist War (1831–32) and the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865), amongst many others, Afro-Jamaicans attempting to fight for any amount of freedom and justice

⁶ *It is crucial that narratives around Indigenous ‘extinction’ or ‘erasure’ through tragedies such as these are resisted (Castanha, 2011).*

were ferociously and violently repressed by British military forces with modern technology intent on ensuring white control⁷.

It is in this context that the Rastafari movement emerged in Jamaica in 1930 with the coronation of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie (born 1892) in Addis Ababa as Emperor of Ethiopia on November 2nd. Inspired by Jamaican folk peasant traditions and early 19th century 'Ethiopianist' movements towards reasserting Blackness and Africanness in Christian traditions, early Rastafari saw in the coronation of Haile Selassie the crowning of a Black king who would bring redemption and deliverance to God's 'chosen people' – Africans who had been scattered through imperial conquest⁸. His Majesty not only represented a ruler whose lineage connected him directly to the Biblical kings of old through his Solomonic royal line, but also one perceived to be the leader of the only African country which had not been colonised by European invaders. All this positions the colonial experience and anti-imperialism right at the very heart of Rastafari thought, both then and through to today. For the earliest adherents, identification as Rastafari was an explicit rejection of British rule, of the authority of King George V (1865–1936) and his imperial forces and administrators, and a recognition of the earthly and cosmological sovereignty of Haile Selassie.

This foundation inevitably bought the movement into conflict with the colonial and neo-colonial regimes of Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. The Rastafari movement was identified by colonial authorities early on as a movement uncondusive to its aims of control and subjugation. As early as its inception, Jamaican police forces were monitoring Rastafari street gatherings in an attempt to curtail the movement's growing anti-colonial influence⁹. In 1932 the foundational Rastafari preachers Leonard Howell (1898–1981) and Robert Hinds (dates unknown) were tried for sedition¹⁰, which Dunkley refers to as "the crime of encouraging Black people in Jamaica to pledge allegiance not to the colonial government to imperial Britain, but to the Ethiopian emperor"¹¹. In doing so he was alleged by the judge to have been "abusing the King and the Queen, Queen Victoria, in fact everybody" (Dunkley, 2013,

⁷ *The Morant Bay Rebellion is marked out even amongst these horrific displays of racist savagery as being of particular brutality. Summary executions, house burnings and firing on unarmed, uninvolved civilians characterised the British Crown's response to a march against injustice and poverty. British newspapers celebrated officers who had done "splendid service" by "shooting every black man who cannot account for himself" (Anderson, 2017).*

⁸ *The words of Jamaican labour activist Marcus Garvey are key in this divine recognition, as he is said to have uttered the prophecy: 'Look to the east for a Black king will be crowned. He shall be your redemption'. (Black History Month, 2020)*

⁹ *Early archival material from police surveillance of the group in 1932 offered the view that Howell and his followers were a "curious religious sect" constituted of "poor and ignorant people who apparently have nothing else to do" (Griffin, 2021, p 91).*

¹⁰ *Hoenisch notes that the Jamaican legal authorities were keen to make a "public spectacle" of Howell's trial, appointing Chief Justice Sir Robert William Lyall-Grant to preside in a case which received extensive press coverage (Hoenisch, 1988, p 440).*

¹¹ *Dunkley describes this prolonged campaign as "one of the longest and most consistent campaigns against any opponent of colonialism in British Jamaica during the twentieth century" (Dunkley, 2013).*

p 74). This was to be the first of many in a long line of state prosecutions/persecutions of the movement. Thomas notes state surveillance of the movement in the 1950s oriented towards fears of communist sympathies within Rastafari (Thomas, 2017, p 74). In 1954, under the pretence of narcotics control, state authorities moved in and destroyed the Pinnacle settlement Howell had established as a space of autonomous Rastafari expression. In 1960, Black radical leader and advocate for Haile Selassie's divinity, Claudius Henry (1903–1986), launched a short-lived guerilla campaign to overthrow the Jamaican government alongside American supporters, ultimately being captured and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment after two Jamaican soldiers were killed (Lewis, 2014, p 59). All this surveillance, restriction and denigration was carried out directly by the British State through Jamaica's status as a crown colony, enforced by the British-founded (and still existent) Jamaica Constabulary Force and underpinned by British military power.

Neo-colonial forces would then carry this baton forward. Just after independence in 1963 a pogrom against Rastafari was enacted, known today as the Coral Gardens Massacre, in which state forces detained, assaulted and killed community members after a man misidentified as Rastafari robbed a petrol station¹². During this decade Black Power activism would become increasingly vocal, with Rastafari a leading voice in attempts to gain greater rights and autonomy for Afro-Jamaicans¹³. From the 1960s onwards, persecution of Rastafari persisted in the form of arbitrary detentions, forced public shavings, withholding of education and social exclusion, defining the Rastafari experience in Jamaica for decades¹⁴. These experiences of persecution are shared by Rastafari all across the Caribbean and in the UK.¹⁵

Through the popularisation of reggae music, the Rastafari message would both embed itself in the Jamaican middle classes, eventually becoming a central pillar of Jamaican culture and further sending it around the world. Today, in a journey from persecution to marketisation, Rastafari and the reggae music it imbued with militancy and power stand arguably as Jamaica's most marketable cultural commodities. Rastafari has been used (and abused) for a range of disparate and misaligned commercial purposes, from promoting all-inclusive beach resorts to adorning smoking pipes sold at roadside souvenir shops (Powell, 2022b). In this journey the movement has shifted, in the words of Ennis Edmonds, from that of "outcasts to culture bearers" (Edmonds, 2003).

¹² Hundreds were arbitrarily detained, tortured and killed by police forces with ramifications of loss of property, employment and family which would last decades. Jamaican PM Andrew Holness (born 1972) offered an official apology for the massacre in 2017, establishing a compensation fund for victims which has been criticised for not being large enough to recompense for the damage done.

¹³ Walter Rodney places Rastafari as the root of a 1960s Black Power movement which represented a new slogan but was "really an ideology and a movement of historical depth".

¹⁴ Persecution is still a feature of life as a Rastafari in Jamaica today, though it is on a diminished scale. In 2021 a teenage Rastafari woman was forcibly shaved in police custody causing outrage across the island.

¹⁵ During my doctoral fieldwork in St Lucia I was privy to countless stories of extreme persecution, from poisonings to public shavings and beyond (Powell, 2025, pp 150–152).

From the late 1940s onwards the movement was on the move, as Jamaicans and others from Commonwealth states answered the call to come and 'rebuild the mother country'. Thousands came to Great Britain to serve in its public sector, bringing with them culture and spirituality from home¹⁶. This physical transmission accompanied the transmission of the Rastafari message through the airwaves in reggae music as the movement took firm root in the UK from the 1960's onwards. In the UK virulent racist discrimination and a lack of understanding of the faith community would combine to render an environment deeply hostile to Rastafari individuals and communities. Rastafari and Black communities came to be more broadly characterised as synonymous with criminality, particularly drug dealing and the violence that surrounds it. This is epitomised in the 1977 'Shades of Grey' report, commissioned by West Midlands Police, which ostensibly sought to understand approaches to policing in the predominantly Black Handsworth area in Birmingham¹⁷. The report's author, John Brown, would, in the words of seminal journalist Derek Bishton, prove instrumental in fostering "the popular sentiment that Black people were much more predisposed to criminality, and that it was their culture which produced this behaviour" (Bishton, 2025).

Brown wrote that "hardcore dreadlocks" with a "criminalised sub-culture" had posed a constant threat to "the peace of individual citizens" (Brown, 1977). This deeply racist suggestion that there was an inherent cultural deficiency at the root of this criminal behaviour served, much like the Coral Gardens Massacre before it, to misidentify Rastafari with a violent criminality which stands wholly at odds with the philosophical core of a movement which strives for equality and justice. These violent and criminal associations have continued to afflict Black and Rastafari communities in the UK up to today. Police 'Stop and Search' data from 2023, published in 2024, shows huge racial disparities, with 'Black Other', 'Black', and 'Black Caribbean' the three most stopped ethnic group. Black Caribbeans were almost four times as likely to be stopped, and therefore suspected of criminal activity, than 'White British', whilst 'Black Other' were more than sixteen times more likely to be searched (UK Government, 2025b).

This history renders the appointment of a Rastafari chaplain of immense significance. A spirituality once rendered seditious and treasonous at its very core, criminalised and persecuted by British colonial forces and the British state, ultimately endorsed, validated and salaried by the successor of British Colonial forces in the UK Armed Forces. A community branded nefarious and illegitimate, sought out and supported by government and Crown.

¹⁶ *The so-called Windrush Scandal, which emerged in 2018, detailing the wrongful detention and denial of legal rights to members of this generation, serves as an important context for distrust of state apparatus amongst Rastafari communities, as will be noted later.*

¹⁷ *Just before publication Handsworth hit the news in the UK again as Conservative Shadow Justice Secretary Robert Jenrick was revealed to have bemoaned having not seen "another white face" during an hour and a half in the area in a subsequently released covert recording from March 2025. Regrettably, Jenrick demonstrates a repeat of lazy, racist stereotypes around race and culture as determinative that appear in Brown's report (Mason, 2025).*

2 BRITISH ARMED FORCES CONTEXT

Moves towards the provision of a Rastafari chaplain come amidst a somewhat fraught contemporary context for the UK Armed Forces. Of most immediate concern, the UK finds itself in a time of unprecedented military acceleration in this century. A perceived increase in hard power geopolitical threats, most prominently from Russia¹⁸, has forced a change of approach towards defence and defence spending across the European members of NATO. Since World War II, UK military spending as a percentage of GDP has fallen steadily, from a high of just over 7% in 1955 to around 2% in the 2020s (Statista, 2025). The Labour party of Prime Minister Kier Starmer was elected in the summer of 2024 on a manifesto pledge to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, and has since outlined a “clear ambition” for this to rise to 3% by 2030 (UK Government, 2025a). These significant increases have since been quickly outpaced by global events and demands from US President Donald Trump, with NATO members agreeing in June 2025 to increase security budgets to 5% of GDP by 2035 (Whannel & Francis, 2025). These increases are huge, and offer fiscal embodiment of articulations from UK leaders that the country needs to get itself up to “war-fighting readiness” (Luck, 2025). Earlier in June 2025, the UK Governments Strategic Defence Review had committed the country to a further £1.5bn in defence spending in an attempt to render the UK Armed Forces, in the words of Defence Secretary John Healey, “10 times more lethal” (Francis & Beale, 2025).

These spending increases bookend a period in which the personnel strength of the UK Armed Forces has shrunk. Full-time trained personnel numbers have been significantly reduced over decades, with the Army hit most acutely. In 2024 troop numbers fell below 73,000 for the first time since the early 1800s (Sheridan, 2025a). This figure is 27,500 lower than 2010, and now renders active troop numbers lower than Romania’s (Peck, 2025). In April 2025, the Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, warned that the Armed Forces were shrinking at a rate of 300 personnel per month (Saballa, 2025). Much comment has been made within this of a recruitment and retention ‘crisis’ (Sheridan, 2025b). In February 2025 the Ministry of Defence announced the creation of a new body to bolster recruitment efforts, the ‘Armed Forces Recruitment Service’, reportedly putting £1.3bn behind it to further these efforts (Saballa, 2025), following criticism from some quarters about the previous outsourcing of this work to the private sector agency Capita.

Discussion also increasingly centres the cultural facets which surround these issues. The Guardian’s Defence and Security Editor, Dan Sabbagh, wrote in January 2024 that amongst “key problems” facing UK military recruiters is a reduced appetite from younger generations to enlist and to fight for the UK. In a statement outlining

¹⁸ In a February 2025 speech outlining the government’s desire to bring forward Labour’s manifesto pledge to raise defence spending to 2.5% by 2027, Prime Minister Kier Starmer described ‘grave threats’ being faced by the UK. “Putin’s aggression does not stop in Ukraine. Russian spy ships menace our waters. Russian planes enter our airspace. Russian cyber-attacks hit our NHS. And just seven years ago – there was a Russian chemical weapons attack, in broad daylight on the streets of Salisbury”. Ultimately, he describes “the great lesson of our history is that tyrants like Putin only respond to strength” (UK Government, 2025a).

the reasons behind their struggles, Capita pointed to “demographic and cultural changes” which have held back efforts (Shabbagh, 2024). Indeed, YouGov polling in February 2025 found that only 41% of Gen Z respondents described themselves as “proud to be British”, half the figure of young people two decades earlier (Difford, 2025). In this, the Army’s publicity-generating ‘snowflake’ ad campaign sought to speak directly to millennials through society’s perceptions of their impediments, labelling “selfie addicts” desirable for their “confidence” and “phone zombies” for their “focus” (BBC, 2025a). As well as shifting notions of patriotism and Britishness, perceptions around workplace cultures within the UK Armed Forces make it an undesirable place to work for some. Prominent and widely publicised stories of recent years speak of racist¹⁹, sexist²⁰, homophobic²¹ and predatory²² actions within the organisation. Systematically, Black personnel are disproportionately far less likely to be commissioned than their white colleagues²³. With regard to Rastafari specifically, Dwight Pile-Gray, one of the first Rastafari guardsmen in the British Army, won a claim of race discrimination and harassment against the MoD in 2023 after he was prohibited from entering his garrison by a white guard who was unable to conceive that a Black man with dreadlocks could be a soldier legitimately entering this space (Beale, 2025a). Since their election the Labour administration has pushed forward its plans for an independent armed forces commissioner to move HR complaints outside MoD control, and to serve as a “wake-up call to recognise that behaviour within some of our services is unacceptable” (Swallow, 2025). Increasing Black and minority faith representation amongst those who serve as pastoral and spiritual support for personnel across the forces will serve to further challenge these behaviours²⁴.

These efforts to improve Armed Forces culture and further diversity and inclusion are, however, taking place in a global context in which fundamental questions are being asked about the value of such exercises. After winning a second term in the White House, President Donald Trump immediately set about halting, scrapping and

¹⁹ In 2019, Fijian Lance Corporal Inoke Mamonakaya was awarded nearly half a million pounds in compensation after being left suicidal after a “campaign of racist abuse” from colleagues (Drewett, 2025).

²⁰ In August 2024, Kerry-Ann Knight, one of the faces of the ‘snowflake’ campaign, received compensation and an apology after having endured 12 years of racist and sexist abuse in the army (Beale & Lace-Evans, 2025).

²¹ The Etherton Review, published in May 2023, described a “culture of homophobia” which pervaded the Armed Forces between 1967, when homosexuality was decriminalised in the UK, and a ban on gay people serving being lifted in January 2000. This is not to suggest that this form of discrimination ceased at this point. In 2015 a member of the Queen’s Household Cavalry lodged a complaint that he had been bullied by a senior colleague for his sexuality over several years (House of Commons, 2025; Murphy, 2025).

²² Most prominently, 19-year-old Gunner Jaysley Beck took her own life in her barracks at Larkhill Camp in December 2021, after being sexually assaulted by a senior officer. 2025 has seen the case considered by the coroner, who concluded that the British Army mishandled Gunner Beck’s complaints. Other women have since come forward with stories of sexual assault within the Forces, with one saying that “rape was seen as an ‘accepted way of life’ during their time in the military” (Swallow & Madan, 2025a; Glennon & Swallow, Turnnidge, 2025).

²³ Despite making up 12.2% of UK Regular Forces, ethnic minorities constituted only 3.6% of officers, as per April 2025 diversity statistics (Ministry of Defence, 2025c).

²⁴ Hansen is right to describe that “any military seeking to integrate and deploy religiously diverse personnel should take stock of its own organizational culture” (Hansen, 2017, p 125).

denigrating DEI efforts within government and the armed forces. Further, Trump has sought to personally intervene in redressing what his bills have designated “DEI hires” (White House, 2025), i.e. those perceived to have been made in recognition of a candidate’s demographics or support for DEI initiatives, rather than their ability. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Linda Fagan was fired, pointedly, the day after Trump was sworn in, whilst Navy Vice Admiral Shoshana Chatfield was dismissed in April 2025, both moves seen by commentators to represent an “anti-DEI” agenda (Robinson, 2025). In February 2025, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General CQ Brown, the first Black person to lead a branch of the US Armed Forces, was similarly let go. Chatfield is said to have appeared on a “so-called ‘woke list’” (Bedigan, 2025), whilst Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth had previously stated that Brown should be binned because of his “woke” focus on DEI initiatives (Looker, 2025)²⁵. The USA, and Trump’s, influence in global military matters is enormous. The most powerful armed force in the world is able to manoeuvre itself both physically and ideologically, demonstrated nowhere more clearly than by Trump’s successful attempts to move NATO members towards 5% of GDP spending. This raises the prospect of Trump seeking to influence NATO Allies towards an anti-DEI agenda, although there is as yet little sign that the UK will follow its transatlantic neighbour in this regard. Despite this, the UK Armed Forces, or even more pertinently its chaplaincy provision, is far from immune from the ‘culture wars’ that surround these issues. In December 2024, the Daily Mail reported “fury” as “woke MoD bosses threaten to strip the cross from chaplains’ military cap badge” (Eden, 2025)²⁶.

2.1 Minority faith chaplaincy support

Examining the recent history of minority faith chaplaincy growth in the UK Armed Forces, as well as broader minority faith support globally, offers further valuable context for the appointment of Rastafari chaplains. Post 9/11 the UK sought to align itself with US military efforts to combat terrorism on the battlefield. In 2001 SAS forces supported the US invasion of Afghanistan, to be joined later by a diversity of UK Armed Forces representation. In 2003, the British Army joined US forces in its invasion of Iraq, latterly supported by personnel across the forces. The nature of these conflicts, as taking place in majority Muslim countries against a backdrop of Islamic extremism, casts a light on Muslims serving in the UK Armed Forces²⁷. In 2003, BBC News reported that around 300 Muslim servicemen and women were currently being “forced to seek religious guidance outside the military” as they had

²⁵ Interestingly, Brown was himself initially appointed by President Trump.

²⁶ In an attempt to better represent its chaplaincy provision, the Royal Army’s Chaplaincy department is proposing to alter its cap badge to a design less specifically Christian, although this is yet to be bought in.

²⁷ Both George Bush and Tony Blair went to extensive lengths to attempt to separate these conflicts from Islam more broadly, so as to not further alienate Middle Eastern communities soon to experience British and American boots on the ground in their region again. In October 2001, Blair appeared on Al Jazeera, days after Osama bin Laden had done the same, to affirm that “this is not about the west versus Islam” as he warned sympathy with bin Laden would ultimately lead only to further repressive Taliban-like regimes in the region. In 2010, three years after leaving office, Blair would attempt to distance the contributions of the conflict towards an increasingly unstable geo-political landscape whilst describing ‘Radical Islam’ as the “world’s greatest threat” (BBC, 2003, 2010; The Guardian, 2001).

no MoD chaplaincy provision. The then Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, is described as offering the view that “their number is not high enough to justify appointing full-time imams” (Choudhury, 2025)²⁸. This position changed under Hoon’s successor John Reid, who welcomed the first Muslim as well as Buddhist²⁹, Sikh and Hindu chaplains to the UK Armed Forces in 2005. Speaking at their unveiling, he described that “spiritual, moral and pastoral support” would now be available “for service men and women of all faiths”. Reid’s unmitigated claim of course neglects the fact that provision for Rastafari, amongst many other faith communities, was still unavailable at that time. His ambition, however, was seemingly in this direction. “We want to make sure that people of all faiths in this country recognise that the British Armed Forces really truly are the Armed Forces of Britain” (BBC, 2025b). Twenty years on, the British Army is looking to expand this provision once again.

However, the differences in scale here are noteworthy. It is striking that the lack of provision for 300 service personnel was considered something of a scandalous investigative scoop in 2003. In 2025, over 1,500 Rastafari service personnel are similarly without internal “religious guidance”. Hoon’s comments also appear mismatched even with the provision of the time. In his view 300 Muslim personnel did not cross the threshold for spiritual provision, yet the 65 Jews serving as of 2005 already had a dedicated chaplain, Rabbi Malcolm Weisman, whose predecessors stretch all the way back to 1892 (Lewis, 2020). Of course, there are historical reasons for this disparity, and political climates separate the Rastafari personnel of today with the Muslim personnel of 2005. However, there are questions which should be asked about what separates these three communities, the smallest of which has had chaplaincy support for well over a century. Part of this can be explained by the rapid growth of the Rastafari community, from just over 101 in 2012 to today’s large cohort. It seems, however, that chaplaincy provision is not simply a ‘numbers game’.

Perception and understanding are key in the support of any religious community within the UK Armed Forces. For Rastafari communities, a lack of understanding about the breadth and heterogeneity of Rastafari beliefs is an issue faced by almost all the Rastafari service personnel I have encountered through my research. As one put it, the “chain of command generally tries to understand what Rastafari is, but I’m yet to encounter one who truly does”. Others report that Rastafari is not “taken seriously” as a faith community, and can be considered to be theologically ‘light’ or

²⁸ This response was criticised by Lord Ahmed of Rotherham, since convicted of child sexual assault, as calling into question the loyalty of the UK Government to those willing to die for the country.

²⁹ Buddhist chaplains represent important spiritual support to Gurkha soldiers recruited from Nepal and North India, who often identify as Buddhist or Kirati.

inconsistent. Others again have reported having to contend with assumptions around Rastafari and peace/pacifism or cannabis use³⁰.

Ignorance of the beliefs and values of minority faiths can regrettably even be found amongst chaplaincy teams themselves. Kim Phillip Hansen's 2012 'Military Chaplains and Religious Diversity' offers a revealing window into this in a US context. Central Department of Defense (DoD) directives state that it "places a high value on the rights of members of the Military Services to observe the tenets of their respective religions" (Hansen, 2012, p 39). Despite this, ignorant and even prejudicial attitudes can pervade. His richly detailed book is constructed around interviews with thirty-four chaplains within the DoD, from various Christian denominations as well as one Jewish and one Muslim chaplain. Hansen describes asking participants for examples of religious accommodations they would "advise against and which commanding officers would rule out as contrary to good order and discipline". Intriguingly, "approximately three-quarters of them spontaneously mentioned Wicca"³¹. Such a response predominates, despite a relatively very small number of Wiccans making up the US Armed Forces. Although publicly available DoD data is not granular enough to provide specific data, published reports show that Wiccans form part of the 24% of 1.3 million active duty troops classified as 'other/unclassified/unknown' in 2019, less than the 0.4% who identify as Jewish or Muslim (Congressional Research Service, 2025, pp 46–48).³² Hansen reports that amongst his interlocutors, many did not personally object to Wicca but felt it had a "whacko reputation"³³. This was not quantified specifically, but bears inferences of crazy, disordered or illegitimate³⁴.

Hansen reported that 'some' were of the belief that "Wiccans sacrifice animals, and explained that you couldn't have live chickens and blood all over a ship" (Hansen, 2012, p 57). This level of ignorance is concerning – not just in that it displays a graphic misunderstanding of Wiccan practices, but because it indicates chaplains dealing with requests from a faith minority from an evidence base which is not grounded in any understanding of the community. Whilst I have not yet encountered ignorance to this degree towards Rastafari amongst the UK chaplains I have met, it is essential that such spiritual illiteracy cannot be allowed to fester and grow. Parallels also exist here with descriptions from my interlocutors around perceptions

³⁰ *Many of those I have engaged with throughout my research have described being the recipient of faith based 'banter' around cannabis use, with questions around procuring cannabis for others regularly reported. This was described as particularly acute around random drug testing, with comments made to the effect of "you're going to be in trouble in there!". For some this was considered to be in good jest, and indeed in some conversations I have been part of, instigated by Rastafari personnel themselves. For others this had clearly become tiresome and an unenjoyable facet of working with colleagues.*

³¹ *Wicca is a modern Pagan earth-centred faith community, which emphasises personal spiritual experience and connections with nature.*

³² *The available data does not report on Rastafari representation within the DoD.*

³³ *This perception issue around Wicca is seemingly also present at the highest levels of US military decision making, with the first Wiccan Chaplain, Don Larsen, removed from service in 2007 (Cooperman, 2025).*

³⁴ *In parallel, these are all charges levelled at Rastafari by state authorities over many years.*

of them from the chain of command. Hansen wrote elsewhere that chaplains often “often fail to take Wicca seriously”, failing to view it as a ‘real’ religion. This can mean that “chaplains are unenthusiastic about responding to religious needs asserted by Wiccans”. Part of this, he writes, is rooted in “Wicca’s emphasis on individual creativity” and personal practice (Hansen, 2017, pp 135–136). Rastafari represents a similarly heterogeneous practice which can be a struggle to grasp for those from faith communities with a widely adhered-to orthodoxy, a divergence that can again lead to accusations that Rastafari is not a ‘serious’ or logically coherent spirituality. Western-centred Judeo-Christian hegemonic denigrations such as these have no place in a modern organisation seeking to support its employees. The MoD must, as such, take active steps to limit the formulations of opinions such as these through training and knowledge encounters. The provision of a Rastafari chaplain also presents a hugely valuable opportunity for a chaplaincy colleague who can both explain and advocate for the faith.

3 CHALLENGES

All the above serves as a backdrop which indicates that although there are challenges surrounding the appointment of a Rastafari chaplain, it is a task of immense importance. As well as these challenges, however, there exist opportunities and even synergies. In terms of the former, the recruitment of a chaplain from the civilian Rastafari community may prove complex for several reasons. There may be hesitation amongst suitably experienced Rastafari pastoral leaders to engage in military service. Ideologically, tensions arise between the distinctly anti-colonial core of Rastafari and the inextricably colonial fabric of the UK Armed Forces. Further, Rastafari articulate a more general suspicion of ‘state apparatus’, particularly Western former colonising states, as ‘Babylonian’³⁵. There may also be friction between the nature of military service as connected to violence and death amongst a Rastafari movement which has historically rejected both of these (Powell, 2025). The UK Armed Forces also represents an inherently hierarchical institution standing in direct contrast to largely horizontalized Rastafari communities. Some civilian Rastafari have put it to me that serving in any armed force which is not Rastafari or in service of Haile Selassie represents ‘serving two masters’, and is as such not tolerable, something made explicit in the Oath of Allegiance taken by all those joining the UK Armed Forces³⁶. As previously described, it is also a military with a history, both long and recent, of racist discrimination against Black service personnel.

³⁵ *Within Rastafari articulations, Babylon represents the epitome of the wicked and evil, both worldly and spiritual. This is often conceptualised as colonial forces and the forces of power which prop them up such as the police and the military. Many civilian Rastafari I have spoken with have offered the view that the British Army represents the pinnacle of Babylon in this world.*

³⁶ *The Oath of Allegiance commits those uttering it to “bear true allegiance to His Majesty King Charles III, His Heirs and Successors” and to “faithfully defend” them. ‘Two masters’ is presumably a reference to Matthew 6:24, in which during the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructs audiences that “no one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other”. In this context specifically, “You cannot serve God and wealth”. Fittingly, Richard Budd gives this title ‘Serving Two Masters’ to his book on the development of American military chaplaincy between 1860–1920 (Budd, 2002).*

Despite all this there are hundreds of Rastafari who have crossed the boundary between civilian and soldier, and who were able to overcome these apparent tensions. Civilian sentiments I have encountered throughout my research have been split between those who see military service as completely antithetical to a Rastafari movement founded on militant resistance to violent imperialism, and those who see it as in keeping with the military service of Haile Selassie and/or an acceptable means of economic and social empowerment for those emerging from the Commonwealth context where this may be more limited. There may well be sufficient appropriate candidates in the latter camp to staff a chaplaincy post.

One added layer of complexity to this, however, is the lack of a body of central authority or ordination in Rastafari. At the moment, joining one of the forces as a chaplain requires an ‘endorsement’ from a relevant central body such as a Church or religious body as to an individual’s credentials within their faith community. A current RAF advert says that applicants must be “accredited/registered/ordained/licensed by the endorsing authority of your faith or belief” (RAF, 2025). However, there is no central body of accreditation within a Rastafari movement which is at its very core individualised and horizontalized. Different mansions³⁷ in different countries often have central administrative bodies, but these do not offer ordination/accreditation in a form which would be familiar to those emerging from the Christian tradition. The Ministry of Defence is at present attempting to put together an endorsing authority for Rastafari chaplains with direct consultation with Rastafari leaders and Rastafari within the military. It is essential that this process is conducted alongside civilian and military Rastafari communities, and with as broad an evidence base as possible.

Even though many Rastafari have navigated these apparent theological tensions, potential chaplains may find this harder. Those eligible to be endorsed for chaplaincy work will likely be community leaders who have spent significant time offering theological and pastoral support for Rastafari around them. These are public figures who are likely to be considered by those around them to epitomise Rastafari Liverty and praxis. It may be the case, then, that those with the requisite experience for this role are held to, and hold themselves to, a higher standard of moral uprightness and, potentially, separation from the structures of Babylon than the laity around them. There are parallels here with Rastafari chaplaincy provision within the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), who already have a team of Rastafari chaplains offering support to those in prisons³⁸. These chaplains have themselves crossed a threshold which demarcates civilians and service to UK state authorities. The two roles are, however, wholly different in other significant ways. Service within the MoJ is within the UK and does not preclude serving a local community at home, whilst regular enlisted chaplains are expected to go wherever their unit may be deployed. Further, it could

³⁷ Loosely, denominations. The three largest mansions of Rastafari are the Nyabinghi Order, the Bobo Shanti Ethiopia African Black International Congress, and the 12 Tribes of Israel. Ministry of Defence data now accommodates Rastafari entering their mansion affiliation in the gathering of religious demographic data.

³⁸ One of these active in this ministry is currently involved in the processes of Rastafari chaplaincy provision within the MoD.

be argued, and indeed has been by some of my civilian interlocutors, that those within MoJ prisons occupy a familiar position of caring for persecuted Rastafari 'downpressed'³⁹ by the Babylonian machine. For those serving in the MoD, however, some potential chaplaincy recruits may draw the opinion that to serve in this role would be to be on the side of the downpressor.

The nature of modern warfare may raise acute challenges in this regard. Whilst serving in explicitly non-combat roles, chaplains have, in some instances in recent conflicts, been sought to provide intel support to military skirmishes. Nix notes the emergence in this century of "advisement on religion", a "term of art for chaplains advising commanders" on the "religious context they are operating in", something he terms a "core capability and responsibility of the military chaplain" (Nix, 2014)⁴⁰. This role is intended to provide understanding and cultural awareness to soldiers in order to help them achieve military aims. Directly facilitating foreign territory operations of the UK Armed Forces in this way, even outside direct combat, may be a bridge too far for some, though this will likely be contextually dependent.

The environmentally destructive nature of warfare and logistics may also factor into the thinking of some. Rastafari has within it a deep environmental ethic grounded within Ital Livity, an idealisation of, and a yearning towards, the greenest and most natural form of all in creation – human, non-human, earth, spirit. Many ground this in a panentheistic cosmological view in which all beings in creation exist within the Almighty, whilst simultaneously the Almighty remains above and distinct. Through this view all of creation (Iration) is understood to communicate through a commonly shared divine energy, often articulated as 'vibrations' (Powell, 2025). This philosophical foundation engenders deep care for and careful engagement with the earth for many Rastafari, something which is not often reflected in training exercises or in warfare. Ital Livity also grounds a natural approach to eating, with many Rastafari practising a plant-based diet which eschews as far as possible processed, canned, inorganic or artificially enhanced foods (Powell, 2022b). Continuing this practice at present in the Army, for example, has been described to me by interlocutors as "impossible". The force does not at present offer widely available vegan ration packs or, as I have observed it, consistent and full vegan options in its 'cookhouses'⁴¹.

Rastafari orientation towards the natural also includes medicinal treatments, with the organic preferred to the pharmaceutical. This presents possible tensions with expectations around treatments, and more specifically vaccinations, within the MoD. Several currently serving Rastafari members have told me that this became a larger issue during the Covid-19 pandemic. Rastafari communities worldwide invariably rejected Covid-19 vaccines perceived to be artificial and corrupting (Plandemic

³⁹ *Rastafari reformulation of oppressor.*

⁴⁰ *Parallels exist here with the US Human Terrain System programme, which brought social scientists into combat environments to offer detailed understanding of local contexts.*

⁴¹ *The Defence Rastafari Network, which connects Rastafari in the UK Armed Forces, is, alongside the MoD Vegan and Vegetarian Network, advocating the provision of vegan ration packs (X, 2025).*

Iwah, n.d.). Some reported to me, however, that their chain of command declared expectations that all personnel would receive a vaccine. Ultimately no official MoD policy on a mandatory Covid-19 vaccine was adopted, but other vaccines are mandated by some forces⁴². The prohibition of cannabis as a medicinal herb and as a sacrament by the Ministry of Defence may also disincentivise potential chaplaincy recruits who see it as central to their practice.

Rastafari Chaplains would also be serving in the military of a nuclear power determined to maintain its status as such. A general opposition to war and conflict is met with a far more specific opposition to nuclear weaponry amongst many Rastafari. This is grounded in multiple ways: in the vocal opposition to nuclear proliferation from Haile Selassie, epitomised in his timeless 1963 speech to the UN⁴³; in the mass killing and mass destruction of natural environments they represent; and in their representation of extreme human hubris and overreach⁴⁴. This specific point of conscience is one shared with other militarily engaged faith groups in the UK. Howson notes the paradigm-shifting effect the introduction of nuclear weaponry had on perceptions of the military, and subsequently on chaplaincy provision, amongst several UK Churches who were forced to reflect on continuing a relationship with the UK military (Howson, P., 2013)⁴⁵. The question of using nuclear weapons, much like other areas of conflict, has seemingly become less remote in the present. Recent Israeli and US engagement in Iran, intended to set back its nuclear weapons programme, provides a charged backdrop upon which the UK has announced its purchase of twelve nuclear capable fighter jets it describes as “the biggest strengthening of the UK’s nuclear posture in a generation” (Beale & James, 2025).

3.1 Opportunities

Beyond these not insurmountable challenges, however, great opportunity is presented by the appointment of a Rastafari chaplain. As noted above, it represents

⁴² The Royal Navy presently states that new recruits “require” several “service vaccinations”, including yellow fever, typhoid and anthrax (Royal Navy, 2025).

⁴³ This speech contained within it other important theological touchstones for the modern Rastafari movement, including the statement that humanity needs to “become members of a new race” rather than a species shackled by the forces of racism and discrimination.

⁴⁴ Criticism of nuclear weaponry was frequent during previous fieldwork in St Lucia at the end of 2021. Zeb put it to me that countries, including the UK, had betrayed the world in continuing to maintain a nuclear arsenal against the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons’ commitment to complete disarmament. There was in this, topically, a distinctly neo-colonial element as well. “Haile Selassie talk against that [nuclear weapons], they were supposed to defuse all those bombs [...] disarmament. All dem countries sign for that yu nuh? The United States, England, France, you know China, all of them, they sign to disarm – they not doing that. Now they want to punish Iran. They say well you trying to develop nuclear warhead. Bare hypocrisy!” (Powell, 2022a, p 111).

⁴⁵ Unease also exists elsewhere. In 2019, Westminster Abbey played host to a “service to recognise fifty years of continuous At Sea [nuclear] Deterrent”. The Dean of Westminster, the Very Reverend Dr John Hall, concluded his address by stating “We cannot celebrate weapons of mass destruction. But we do owe a debt of gratitude and sincere thanks to all those countless men and women who in the past fifty years have maintained the deterrent”. Prior to the ceremony Christian CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) appealed for the service to be cancelled through a letter signed by more than 20 clergy with one describing it as “morally repugnant” (Davies, 2019).

important epistemological validation for the movement, as well as direct pastoral support for the sizeable and expanding Rastafari community within the UK Armed Forces. My interlocutors are very keen that the new chaplain should serve as an advocate and representative for the movement across the UK Armed Forces. Whilst serving Rastafari presently have the Defence Rastafari Network, a faith network⁴⁶, connection point and representative body for Rastafari within the military, those who have founded and who lead the network are soldiers and officers with demanding day jobs to fulfil first and foremost. A chaplain, then, can serve as someone who is a dedicated, paid, figurehead for Rastafari.

Further, in conversations during fieldwork, the need for a chaplain to serve as an educator was described; predictably, to colleagues and to the chain of command, who at present take up the time and intellectual resources of Rastafari personnel to seek out understanding of the movement, but also, it was emphasised to me, to the Rastafari community itself. One early finding from my research, reported by several interlocutors, is the sense that many Rastafari in the UK Armed Forces, anecdotally estimated to be potentially as high as 50% of them, begin to identify as Rastafari *after* taking up service. This is an intriguing dimension of the community which I intend to explore further. It is, however, one which renders proper theological education about what it means to be Rastafari wholly pertinent, and this is a job befitting a chaplain.

Serving Rastafari have also highlighted to me points of great synergy between these professional and spiritual identities. Foremost amongst these is the nature of Haile Selassie himself as a military figure. His Majesty led Ethiopian troops on the front line during initial Italian efforts to colonise Ethiopia, and he would claim eventual victory over Mussolini's forces after returning from exile in England in 1941, triumphantly making formal entry in Addis Ababa in May of that year. That this was a fight engaged alongside British Forces is not lost on many Rastafari in the military. Some I have talked with point to this as evidence that British military history is not wholly one of colonial conquest, but also includes instances of resistance to imperialism⁴⁷. In part due to this legacy, some Rastafari adopt military modes of dress such as fatigues with badges and insignia, generals' jackets and hats, and camouflage-patterned clothing. Haile Selassie represents duality in this – the peaceful, diplomatic statesman standing as the voice of moral reason against colonialism in the League of Nations and the UN, but also as the fierce warrior of resistance fighting its evils on the front line. In the former, the lamb, in the latter, the lion. This legacy serves as an important well of inspiration for many Armed Forces Rastafari I have engaged with.

⁴⁶ *The Defence Rastafari Network forms one of many faith networks within the MoD including Christian, Sikh, Pagan and Buddhist.*

⁴⁷ *The criticism can, and of course has, been made that the decision to support Ethiopia in this was one made in support of Britain's imperial ambitions, rather than a moral one.*

Additionally, many have put it to me that work in the UK Armed Forces represents an extension of a long history within Rastafari of resistance to oppression and injustice. Since its inception, Rastafari has fought for social and racial justice and against colonial imposition in any context it has found itself in the world⁴⁸. For some of those I have spoken with, the UK Armed Forces represents another manifestation of this as a military which seeks to protect fundamental human rights, democracy and sovereignty – “a force for good on the world stage” in its own eyes (Ministry of Defence, 2025a). This may appear to be in tension with recent UK Armed Forces engagements, particularly those in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have been criticised as colonial endeavours in themselves⁴⁹. Indeed, many civilian Rastafari I have engaged with have put it that these conflicts clearly indicate that engagement in the UK military represents a betrayal of this history of Rastafari justice advocacy, rather than a continuation of it. Those within the UK Armed Forces offering this view, however, trace a direct line between Rastafari resistance to apartheid and attempts to bolster Ukrainian resistance towards Russian aggression through NATO adjoined activities on its eastern flank in Estonia.

Rastafari eschatological visions also counter outsider essentialisms which see the movement as wholly meek and peaceful. Visions of the ultimate destination of this world are often expressed in violent and destructive terminology. Babylon is envisioned as being toppled in dramatic and explosive fashion as the forces of wickedness perish and the forces of righteousness, led by His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie, set about a reign of peace and prosperity. This is often expressed through dramatic, apocalyptic language and imagery which sees the elemental forces of lightning, thunder, fire and earthquakes coming to transform the world and consume the wicked (Powell, 2023). In his 1971 release ‘Let the Power Fall On I’, Max Romeo implores the Almighty to topple the evil in this world and to “let the wicked burn to ash Far I [Ras Tafari], let the wicked burn in flames”. Violence and destruction, particularly of the wicked, is as such familiar to the Rastafari vocabulary and imagination. Whilst this is a point made by Rastafari in the UK Armed Forces, many civilian Rastafari have also put it to me that contrary to public perceptions, violence in this vein, against the forces of wickedness, are considered both permissible and at times necessary.

There are also facets of Rastafari belief which represent more facilitation than synergy. The heterogenous nature of Rastafari heavily emphasises individual reason and individualised decision-making; that it is on each individual Rastafari as a ‘conscious being’ to decide how specifically to construct their own worldview and

⁴⁸ Most recently, Rastafari in countries all over the world have gone out onto the streets to protest in support of Burkina Faso President Ibrahim Traore. Traore has set about attempting to remove French military influence and thus the vestiges of French colonial power in the country. These endeavours have received widespread praise from Rastafari groups, with Rastafari commentator Imani Tafari-Ama asking if Traore is “Africa’s 21st-century Garvey?” (Tafari-Ama, 2025).

⁴⁹ Derek Gregory describes the conflicts in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq as representing a “colonial present” (Gregory, 2004).

do what is right for themselves in the contexts they find themselves in. For one choosing to serve in the military support of family, the desire to enhance one's own prospects and, as one Rastafari civilian put it, the chance to leave "the poverty of the ghetto" may all be seen as legitimate, individualised reasons for this career choice. This latter point was emphasised by many civilian Rastafari who saw in their own community one which had been repeatedly, consciously, underdeveloped by the governments around it. The tension between attempts to resist this and the prominent ethical framework which exists within Rastafari were epitomised by a Guyanese Rastafari I reasoned with during fieldwork in Antigua. They put it that "it is harder to be morally dogmatic when one is economically disempowered". This career choice, whilst raising undoubted points of moral and theological tension, often provides economic empowerment for those making it.

Conclusion To conclude, the desire to appoint a Rastafari chaplain to support the large and growing cohort of Rastafari in the UK Armed Forces is not only right and operationally logical, it is also of huge historical and epistemological significance. It is essential that this appointment process is carried out in close consultation with the community it seeks to serve, and with an awareness and understanding of the beliefs and worldviews that exist within it. This appointment is multi-faceted, as it rests on contextualising factors from within and outside the Armed Forces. It also raises a new challenge for the MoD, as it seeks novel approaches to endorsement for a community which sits outside hegemonic Western norms around ordination. The desire to embrace these challenges is commendable. However, this appointment cannot be one which is motivated more by optics than a desire to support. A successful appointment, properly motivated and which overcomes the challenges laid out above, would bring enormous potential in uplifting hundreds of service personnel active now and the many more that are to come. No longer will Rastafari personnel have to confide in Selassie alone, as, in the words of Marley's homage to His Majesty, when the Conquering Lion of Judah is elevated – "triumphantly we all must sing".

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