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Windows into Transcendence

Black Jesus in the movie Red Tails

Every minute of every day, death walks beside each of us. Life is fragile. But, in the busy/ness of ordinary life, we do not consider this fact. Warriors in war are well aware that the next mission could be their last, and the thought of transcendence, of the meaning of one's existence, of relationship with divine forces that know the outcome of events, and that has the power of protection, come to the foreground of consideration.

In the movie Red Tails, the story of the African-American combat fighter unit known as the Tuskegee Airmen, we see religion in the form of two powerful icons—Black Jesus and the goddess Sophia. Executive producer George Lucas used \$100 million of his own money to make, distribute and promote this film, and I urge everyone to go to see it. (See “Please Go to See Red Tails” <http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2012/01/23/please-go-to-see-red-tails/>)

The movie is complete with exciting scenes of aerial dog-fights, explosions, racial confrontation, men wrestling with personal demons, and love on a variety of levels. However, for those of us who are interested in religion in the movies, the function of icons in this movie is an interesting study in signification. The spiritual wisdom and power behind the icon is: “Icons are windows into the Kingdom of God.” (See “Windows Into Transcendence: Lightning and Sophia in Red Tails.” <http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2012/02/14/windows-into-transcendence-lightning-and-sophia-in-red-tails/>.)

An important spiritual element in Greek Orthodox and in Coptic Christianity, the icon is an image, an artistic representation of a holy figure or scene from the Bible. The icon is not idolatrous in that the believer does not worship the icon; rather the icon is a signifier that points to something else. Like a window, it invites one to look through it. And when we watch the movie, we are looking through a window that allows us to look through another window to glean meaning in a timeless eternal now.

We are sitting in the dark in 2012 watching representations of war in 1944 and icons that represent timeless incarnations of Divine Love.

First, Black Jesus. We meet the character Deacon in the chapel with the younger man who refers to himself as Ray Gun, but whom the others call Jr., a nickname that he does not like. Deacon observes that Ray Gun prays after every mission, and he assures Ray Gun that his prayers are helping. He thanks Black Jesus for bringing the squad back safely. Deacon mounts a picture of Black Jesus in the cock-pit of his airplane when he flies. The words beneath the image say: I trust you. The words indicate a two-way trust—Deacon's trust in Black Jesus and Black Jesus' trust in Deacon.

Black Jesus has a long history in the United States. At least as far back as the 19th century ministers such as African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Henry McNeal Turner placed Jesus within an African cultural context. In the early 20th century, Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association encouraged faith in a Black Jesus.

Historian Paul Harvey writing in the book Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity says: “Garveyites distributed images of a black Jesus to reinforce their belief that Christianity was an African religion in its origin” (97). In 1960, twenty years after Garvey’s death, historian and journalist Lerone Bennett, Jr. interviewed Garvey’s first wife and his widow, Amy Jacques Garvey. His widow said of Garvey and Black Jesus:

“Garvey knew and said that God is a spirit; but he said since you are made in the image and likeness of God when you visualize him, you must visualize him as looking like you, instead of visualizing him as looking like another man—a white man.”

http://books.google.com/books?id=BPpYDAS_oUUC&pg=PA53&lpg=PA53&dq=Lerone+Bennett+jr+Amy+Jacques+Garvey+Black+Jesus+Ebody&source=bl&ots=8Hr1Gu_b2_&sig=yHsYT8MHOrTn15p_neuB2z7-lwU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Iz0iT6iaLoGutwfkzJGiCw&sqj=2&ved=0CB4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false

Black Jesus helps African American people look through a divine window and see their own holiness. In a society that sees African Americans as less human, less capable, less worthy of respect, even if an African American is president of the United States, Black Jesus takes us to a transcendent truth that reminds us that every human being carries the image of God and are thus worthy of respect. Black Jesus reminds us that we all are loved by God.

Looking through the window of Black Jesus, in the realm of the eternal now, we encounter the late Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur. He spoke of Black Jesus.

Searchin for Black Jesus
It’s hard, it’s hard
We need help out here
So we search for Black Jesus
It’s like a saint, that we pray to in the ghetto,
To get us through

Tupac Shakur stands in the African religious tradition when he speaks of a god that was once human and who understands the human condition.

Somebody that understands our pain
You know maybe not too perfect, you know
Somebody that hurt like we hurt
Somebody that smoke like we smoke
Drink like we drink
That understands where we coming from

That's who we pray to
We need help y'all

When we look through the window of the Black Jesus icon, we also see Lady Gaga singing Black Jesus.
For her, Jesus is the new black.

Amen, on the runway,
Dressed in his best
Amen fashion, on the runway
Work it Black Jesus

She sings of "Amen fashion. . . celebrate a new compassion." She sings: "Style your passion. . . wear out your vision."

In Red Tails, the icon of Black Jesus is placed on top of a copy of the book The Imitation of Christ, a text that originated in the early 15th century. It is a "call and guide to spiritual aspiration." It is a book that says the spiritual walk requires humility, sacrifice and a willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ. It says: "For the Kingdom of god is peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, and it is not given to the wicked. Christ will come to thee, and show thee His consolation, if thou prepare a worthy mansion for Him within."

This book counsels people to remember that we are all mortal. "If thou thoughtest upon thy death more often than how long thy life should be, thou wouldest doubtless strive more earnestly to improve."

Life is short. Life is fragile. Few people are ready to meet death when it comes. Warriors in war understand this fact. In this movie, we see their various ways of looking beyond themselves, of finding that aspect of God in which they can trust. They look through the iconic image to the skies, and to the Kingdom of God that is at once within and beyond all flawed human society.