

# Breaking the Chains (*Blacks and Christianity*)

by James Rogers, Jr.

*Shine on Reverend Pearson who  
threw away the vain old god and  
kept Dickens and Rembrandt and  
fresh plowed sod.*

~ **Joni Mitchell** “Shine”

In the United States, blacks are the most religious as a group and overwhelmingly Christian. According to the Pew Research Center, these are the findings concerning the black population: belief in god, 88%, belief in miracles, 85%, belief in angels/demons, 83%, religion important in lives, 80%, pray daily, 77%, belief in life after death, 58%, interpret scripture literally, 55%, and attend services weekly, 54%.

Free inquiry, open-mindedness and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake are what propel societies to excel, and in the United States this is often thwarted by religious culture, an effect magnified in the overall black community.

The god blacks serve is the same god taught to them by slave masters intent on having a docile workforce, happy with an invisible protector. Slavery was an economic and psychological tool used to benefit those in power and to control the weak. Today, the majority of blacks in the United States still cling to that biblical childlike image of god even though available information would tell them otherwise. Cognitive dissonance prevents them from processing new information.

Short-sighted thinking driven by superstition and myth prevents many blacks from benefiting from the progress that comes from living in a modern world, where logic and science provide answers to our existence.

The following can be found in Peter 2:18 (King James Bible): “A good slave is a good Christian, slaves obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.”

Blacks, like any group, have internal dynamics that hold them together, and in the United States part of it is a shared sense of oppression from whites and a worldview guided by what’s been taught to them by the clergy, along with a literal interpretation of the bible. This indoctrination has done damage for many in the black population by setting up roadblocks to learning. To secular blacks, many of whom have had the same religious indoctrination, it’s frustrating to see family members and friends comfortable going through life missing out on the benefits of a nonreligious worldview.

The song lyrics at the beginning of this article reference **Bishop Carlton Pearson**, a black Pentecostal minister from Tulsa, Oklahoma, who broke away from his denomination’s



**James Rogers, Jr.** is from northeast Ohio. He considers himself a humanist and his theology is based on the natural world (nature), reason and just being curious about everything.

teachings in order to embrace a more inclusive message somewhat similar to what Universalists believe — universal salvation and the belief in a loving god who would not send anyone to hell. He talks about moving away from ancient Christian fundamentalism and the teachings of Christ and on to something similar towards what **Albert Einstein** talked about, the “god of nature.”

When one listens to Pearson’s online [video](#), one would wonder what bible he is reading! Pearson’s interpretation of the scriptures is a far cry from what he was taught at Oral Roberts University. Pearson was on the board of regents until **Oral Roberts** himself censored him and had him removed.

The evangelical community that Pearson belongs to has no room for anyone questioning their strict interpretation of scripture, be it blacks or whites. In the black

community, that childlike version of Christianity is compounded by centuries of worshipping a father figure (God) not unlike the slave master. Both are to be loved and feared.

University of Houston history professor **Bob Buzzanco** said, “It’s difficult to talk about race in America and I’d never discount the power of white supremacy but there’s an internal problem, as there is with any group, when you let religion take on a primary role instead of more ‘worldly concerns.’”

Those “worldly concerns” Buzzanco speaks of are what the black community needs to focus on more than tradition. That cultural tradition has much to do with the black experience that is full of emotional trappings found in the black church. These emotions are a sort of group-speak typified by institutions such as a black church, where much of black social activity is centered. Anyone familiar with black churches knows the power of black ministers and their reciting of the “word of god.” There is also passion in the music, another way to connect with the “spirit.” During a funeral, this is magnified by the recurring theme of the deceased leaving their earthly home to be united with the heavenly father. The departed is treated to a joyous send off to a place where all troubles and pain will end. That payoff at the end of this life can color what one can accomplish in this life.

For many blacks the power of myth is all encompassing and is reinforced by the love they have for family ancestors. This totalitarian belief system can only be broken by embracing new traditions. I love this quotation by Einstein:

*A large part of our attitude toward things is conditioned by opinions and emotions which we unconsciously absorb as children from our environment. In other words, it is tradition — besides inherited aptitudes and qualities — which makes us what we are. We but rarely reflect how relatively small as compared with the powerful influence of tradition is the influence of our conscious thought upon our conduct and convictions.*

*It would be foolish to despise tradition, but with our growing self-consciousness and increasing intelligence we must begin to control tradition and assume a critical attitude toward it, if human relations are ever to change for the better. We must try to recognize what in our accepted tradition is damaging to our fate and dignity — and shape our lives accordingly.”*

Black Christians hold a deep conviction of god’s solidarity with their plight and all oppressed peoples. This idea was refuted in the 1973 book by **William R. Jones**, *Is God a White Racist?* Jones asks the question, if god provides liberation for black peoples the way he did for Jews, where is the proof? If god is known by his actions, or in this case inactions, then god is a white racist. Since the Christian god is an invention by whites, many wonder why blacks would petition a racist god for relief. How many prayers have gone up to the lord in slavery times by blacks, and how many by believers in modern times for injustices, such as in the **George Zimmerman** so-called “defensive” shooting fiasco; the Ferguson, Missouri incident; the New York City choking death of **Eric Garner**; and so many others. The only reasonable answer to these unfortunate events is that there is no one listening.

**Kathy R. Miller**, an atheist of mixed heritage has witnessed prejudice from black and white Christians. She states:

*“I didn't learn about religion from my parents, I learned about it in the street. I can remember the neighborhood kids telling me about living forever with god after I die and the thought was more terrifying than comforting to me. I ended up attending the Methodist Sunday School in my neighborhood, but always questioned things like why they thought the world would be better if everyone accepted Jesus into their hearts. Many of my friends on my street were black, but my school was predominately Jewish, so I had many friends who did not accept Jesus into their hearts, and they were nice people. I began searching for something different and studied other religions, not finding anything I believed in or totally agreed with.”*

In high school, Miller was reading works by **Toni Morrison**, **Langston Hughes**, **James Baldwin** and other “worldly artists” who don’t fit in with the black church model. She gets strange reactions when people find out she’s an atheist. Most don’t believe her or just think she is trying

to be different. Her family and friends get a look of fear on their faces like they cannot or do not even want to think of the possibility that people who grew up like them would even question god or Christianity. “I always thought it was sad. They seem so proud of their beliefs, but I don’t understand how they can feel that way about a religion taught to them from the people who held them captive.”

People like Miller are separated from others in the black community by their thirst for growth. Growth comes from the unfamiliar, not from being stagnant and accepting what is given to you. In slavery times, blacks were a captured people, and then given the bible in order to capture their minds.

What comforts one person may not comfort another. In the United States there is a growing number of blacks and whites finding comfort in the constant journey for truth, and are rejecting stagnant answers given to them by traditional faiths. Although the percentage of black atheists, agnostics and humanists is small in comparison to that in the white population, many black Americans are breaking away from the fog of indoctrination, as witnessed by the proliferation of black atheists groups on social media.

I will end this article with a quote from comedian **Chris Rock**, who said: “If you’re a black Christian, you have a real short memory.” ♦

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edited by **Karen L. Garst, PhD**

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—**Susan Blackmore**, *The Meme Machine*

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