

## **Amiri Baraka's "When We'll Worship Jesus": Deconstructing the Bourgeois Image of Jesus Christ**

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“Do not think that I came to bring peace on Earth. I did not come to bring peace on Earth but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in law. And a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.”- Matthew 10:34, 35, 36<sup>1</sup>

The above mentioned lines which have been quoted from the chapter of Matthew in the Bible may shock the general people, as most of them have been born and brought up in a bourgeois system which by the training delivered to their subjects through the ideological state apparatus have been familiarised with an image of Christ as someone who wants to bring peace through reconciliation. This image or the caricature of Jesus is made very carefully by the ruling class since to call Jesus a revolutionary figure speaking out for the oppressed masses against the grasps of tyrannical rule may often serve as an inspiration for insurrection. Jesus was in fact a revolutionary figure in that age pointing out that “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21) and not within one man. This is a direct call for revolution against the tyrannical Roman Monarchy. However, today, the present system (capitalism) will have the people believe through their religious teachings that the best thing to do is to close your eyes whenever you are in a problem and pray to the image of ‘peace’ symbolised in the figure of Jesus. The people are told by the various institutions that it was Jesus who had sacrificed himself on the cross for the good of mankind whereas in actuality he was crucified by the Romans on the basis of of being a delinquent, along with two other people who had committed crimes against the state. Today we are told to worship and kiss this crucifix which

the bourgeois system sells as commodities for the purpose of mere profit. This is the point that African American poet and activist, the late Amiri Baraka comes in to point out exactly “when we’ll worship Jesus”.

The poem “When We’ll Worship Jesus” starts with the lines:

We’ll worship Jesus

When Jesus do

Somethin

When Jesus blow up the white house...(Harris 251)

These lines bring out the Marxist theme of smashing the state apparatus of the bourgeois through which it carries out its dictatorship on the majority of people but maintaining democracy for their own class. To understand this attitude we need to understand the Marxist concept of a state. Engels says:

The state is therefore by no means a power forced on society from without; just as little is it ‘the reality of the ethical idea’, ‘the image and reality of reason’, as Hegel maintains. Rather it is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms, these classes with conflicting economic interests might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of order and this power arisen out of society but placing itself above it and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state. (Engels 177)

Lenin talks about the distortion of Marxism in his essay *The State and Revolution*, since Marxism provides a scientific outlook for the proletariats, peasants and the masses of oppressed workers and students:

And, conversely the existence of the state proves that the class antagonisms are irreconcilable. It is on this most important and fundamental point that the distortion of Marxism, preceding along two main lines, begins. On the one hand, the bourgeois and particularly the petty bourgeois, ideologists, compelled under the weight of indisputable historical facts to admit that the state only exists where there are class antagonisms and a class struggle, “correct” Marx, the state could neither have arisen nor maintained itself had it been possible to reconcile classes. From what the petty bourgeois and philistine professors and publicists say, with quite frequent and benevolent references to Marx, it appears that the

state does reconcile classes. According to Marx, the state is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another; it is the creation of “order”, which legalises and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the conflict between the classes. In the opinion of the petty-bourgeois politicians, however, order means the reconciliation of classes, and not the oppression of one class by another; to alleviate the conflict means reconciling classes and not depriving the oppressed classes of definite means and methods of struggle to overthrow the oppressors. (Lenin 267)

Baraka therefore tells us that he will not worship this caricature of Jesus as that discourse which is disseminated by the bourgeois class who wants to reconcile the class antagonisms. Under Capitalism reconciliation of classes is impossible. The poet goes on listing the things to be done and in the process he is trying to tell us that he wants to smash the instruments of the bourgeois state. The title of the poem itself suggests a mock reply to the supposed question “Why don’t you worship the white image of Christ that we portray?” It is as if to this question that Baraka replies:

We’ll worship Jesus when

He get bad enough to at least scare somebody- cops not afraid

Of jesus

Pushers not afraid

Of jesus,

Capitalists racists

Imperialists not afraid

Of jesus shit they makin money off jesus (Harris 251)

The first two lines are a direct reference on what Louis Althusser calls the Repressive State Apparatus, which is used by the bourgeois class from time to time to protect their interests and to repress by brutal aggression the class war which goes on from time to time. We know that the African-Americans have a long history of slavery through brutal oppression in the episodes of mass murder, rape, lynchings and public humiliation. It is for that reason that Booker.T. Washington, a noted African-American writer writes in his autobiography *Up from Slavery*:

The earliest impressions I can recall are of the plantation and the slave quarters- the latter being the part of the plantation where the slaves had their cabins. My life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate and discouraging surroundings. (Washington 17)

Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov (Lenin) had intricately described the State as “Special Bodies of Armed Men, Prisons, etc.” In his essay “The State and Revolution”, he quotes Engels:

As distinct from the old gentile order, the state, first, divides its subjects according to territory. This division seems “natural” to us, but it cost a prolonged struggle against the old organisation according to generations or tribes. The second distinguishing feature is the establishment of a public power which no longer directly coincides with the population organising itself as an armed force. This special public power is necessary because a self-acting armed organisation of the population has become impossible since the split into classes. This public power exists in every state; it consists not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds, of which gentile [clan] society knew nothing. (Lenin 268)

After talking about “cops”, Baraka immediately goes on to talk about capitalists, thus implying that it is this class that owns the special armed apparatuses and in the African-American context, denoting their racist identity. David Harvey in his book *The Enigma of Capital* notes down “African-Americans in particular had actually been experiencing difficulties with housing finance from late 1990s onwards”<sup>2</sup>. Religion and religious institutions these days have become like trusts and cartels owning huge areas of land and property and their respective priests have become the owners of these property. Some priests still rule over the majority of the oppressed people by the dint of their superstitious credibility. Most of them rule by using texts operating like transcendental signifieds instead of giving a scientific anthropological and historical interpretation on the plight of the oppressed. It is these institutions that have constructed the image of a docile Jesus Christ who symbolises peace. Baraka is seen to constantly deconstruct this myth used by the bourgeois class to spark a revolution against them. He possesses so much emotion in his hatred for the caricatured image of Jesus that the poet writes:

Jesus need to be busted

Jesus need to be thrown down and whipped

Till something better happen

Jesus aint did nothing for us

But kept us turned toward the sky (Harris 252)

After explicating the reasons for not worshipping the constructed image of Jesus by the class enemy, Baraka goes on to denote the conditions after which Jesus can be worshipped:

We'll worship Jesus

When he gets a boat load of AK-47s

And some dynamite

And blow up Abernathy's robot

For Gulf (Ibid)

This is where we can find that Baraka has a striking resemblance to the Marxist conception of smashing the bourgeois state by an armed revolutionary uprising. Engels in his *Anti-Dühring* writes:

The proletariat seizes state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms and abolishes also the state as state. Society thus far, operating amid class antagonisms, needed the state, that is, an organisation of the particular exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production, and therefore especially for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited class in the conditions of oppression determined by the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom or bondage, wage-labour). The state was the official representative of society as a whole, its concentration in a visible corporation. But it was this only insofar as it was the state of that class which itself represented, for its own time, society as a whole: in ancient times, the state of slave owning citizens; in the middle ages, of the feudal nobility; in our own time, of the bourgeoisie. When at last it becomes the real representative of the whole of society, it renders itself unnecessary.

(Engels 301)

Slowly the focus shifts from Jesus (a single person) to a collective we. Here Baraka connotes the Marxist doctrine of the emancipation of the working class being an act of the working class itself, but obviously needing a revolutionary (not reformist/revisionist) communist party to direct the masses of oppressed people in a socialist transformation of society:

...Jesus ain't, he can't change the world

We can change the world

We can struggle against the force of backwardness

We can change the world

We can struggle against our selves, our slowness, our connection

With

The oppressor, the very cultural aggression which binds us to

Our enemies

As their slaves.

We can change the world

We aint gonna worship jesus cause jesus don't exist

Except in song and story except in ritual dance, except in slum stained

Tears or trillion dollar opulence stretching back in history, the history (Harris 253)

It is clear from these lines that Baraka is directly taking up a stance against the "black churches" which practices the culture of songs and dance as a healing process. But what is its use? Will the songs abolish the corrupt system of capitalism? Baraka answers this with a vehement "no". This is even more clear when Baraka stresses on what he and his African-American comrades should not do:

We aint gona legitimize the witches and devils and spooks and hobgoblins

The sensuous lies of the rulers to keep us chained to fantasy and illusion

Sing about life, not jesus

Sing about revolution, not no jesus

Stop singing about jesus (Ibid)

This particular aspect has an inter-textual resemblance with one of the writings of famous revolutionary guerrilla leader Ernesto Che Guevara who in his essay "Socialism and Man in Cuba" writes:

Capitalism uses force but it also educates people in the system. Direct propaganda is carried out by those entrusted with explaining the inevitability of class society, either through some theory of divine origin or a mechanical theory of natural law. This lulls the masses, since they see themselves as being oppressed by an evil against which it is impossible to struggle. (Guevara 217)

This is the main reason. People pray to the God due to the invisible laws of capitalism. They pray for the freedom of oppression by what Adam Smith called the invisible hand. They pray as they do not know, as they have been kept in this condition of stupor by mass propaganda by the capitalists. Even today when we open any channel on television the dictatorship of the capitalist class is clearly discernible. More than any programme which deals with the ways human problems can be solved televisions show us the different ways human emotions, relationships and every aspect of life is connected with commodities and consumerism. This

television to use Che's words "lulls the masses". This lull is very dangerous as it comes very close to mass hypnosis and is almost like an addiction. Amiri Baraka in another poem of his "Dope" writes about what kind of emotion or what kind of voice this addiction can be like:

It must be the devil

It must be the devil

It must be the devil...

It ain't capitalism

It ain't capitalism...(Harris 263-64)

This proves that the propaganda carried out by the dictatorship of the advertisements and discourses of the capitalist class have been quite successful in projecting the problem onto the mythical figure of the devil rather than the system of capitalism. Today we see in Hollywood that the movies are made based on post-apocalyptic society, where we are being invaded by aliens, zombies, werewolves, vampires, ghosts, ghouls and cities getting destroyed. The majority of the people who watch these are convinced and most of them can even imagine the end of the world rather than a revolutionary way to end capitalism.

Amiri Baraka ends the poem on a revolutionary outlook as he says:

...throw jesus out yr mind. Build the new world out of reality, and new

Vision

We come to find out what there is of the world

To understand what there is here in the world

To understand what there is here in the world!

To visualize change, and force it.

We worship revolution. (Ibid 254)

This poem therefore captures the theme of Amiri Baraka's move from his Black Nationalist phase to his Marxist position. Through this poem he has upheld some of the basic features of the Marxist doctrine of revolution. To understand the theory it is vitally important to comprehend the nature of the Marxist theory of the state which is the organised instrument of a particular class. The state of the bourgeois, since they are few in number requires the need of force and mass propaganda to control the millions of oppressed either through force or lulling them to sleep. It is for that reason that Baraka refuses to worship the caricatured and stereotypical image of Jesus which is nothing but a construction. Baraka in this poem deconstructs that image and shows us why it is necessary to have a

revolutionary outlook to rise up in arms against the system which coerces and distorts the very nature of democracy. These reasons lead him to worship revolution and turn his back onto the commodity which is now being sold in the image of Christ.

**Notes:**

- 1- The lines have been quoted from the New Testament published by “The Gideons International”. These lines are said by Jesus Christ as a commandment for his twelve disciples.
- 2- The lines have been borrowed from David Harvey’s *The Enigma of Capital*. It is clear how African-Americans have been victimised by the state of the capitalist class.

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