

Bob Avakian On EMANCIPATION FROM MENTAL SLAVERY AND ALL OPPRESSION

In 1863, mid-way in the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln finally issued the *Emancipation Proclamation* and, as a result of the Civil War, Black people were formally freed from literal, physical slavery. But today the question is: **When, and how, will Black people finally be free from all forms of slavery and oppression?** And this poses straight-up this big question:

When will Black people finally emancipate themselves from the mental slavery of religion?!

We have seen the possibility of a world without oppression powerfully expressed in the not-too-distant past, during the radical upsurge that took place within this country and throughout the world during the 1960s and early 1970s.¹ Within this country, the struggle of Black people was at the forefront of all this, and as that struggle became more radical in opposition to the system itself, and groups like the Black Panther Party, driven by the impatience and daring of Black youth, grew and gained influence, the advanced role of the struggle for Black liberation exerted an even more powerful positive role. And, as a very significant part of the widely and strongly held conviction that it was not only necessary but possible to put an end to the nightmare that had been endured for so long:

among Black people—who we're always told are just sort of inherently religious—there was a massive turning away from religion, especially among the youth. Why? Because people were filled with hope, they didn't believe that there was no hope for a better world. They were full of hope for a better world right in this world. And so, among Black people, there was, on the part of the youth in particular, a major turning away from religion and from all the old conventions that went along with religion that were conservatizing influences holding down the people.²

Hard Truths, Emancipating Truths

But the great promise of the 1960s radical upsurge, and the hopes that it raised, were not realized—fundamentally because things did not go all the way to an actual revolution. And, over the decades since then, through conscious policy by the ruling powers to foster the growth of more bourgeois and petit bourgeois strata among Black people, while at the same time maintaining and containing the masses of Black people in conditions of deprivation, oppression and vicious repression, this bitter reality has resulted:

Among the basic masses of people, including Black people (not the more middle class strata being developed through conscious ruling class policy, but the masses of oppressed people), there

was a tremendous amount of demoralization and sense of defeat, and the introduction (including through deliberate ruling class policy and action) of massive amounts of drugs further intensified the desperate conditions of the basic masses and further reinforced the sense of demoralization. A lot of people were dying or being reduced to broken wretches on the basis of turning to drugs out of despair—the lack of hope, or the death, in immediate terms, of the hope that inspired so many people, on a real basis, through the course of the 1960s upsurge, which had now ebbed and been transformed. And this situation was made even more desperate and demoralizing with the growth of gangs in the ghettos and barrios of this country (as well as internationally), with youth drawn to the gangs in conditions of increasing deprivation and desperation and what was for most the illusion of getting rich, with the orientation of “get rich or die trying,” fueled by the growth of the drug trade and the influence of the putrid culture promoted throughout society that fostered and extolled the exploitation and degradation of others as the means for making it big, whether on Wall Street and on the world stage, or on the streets in the neighborhoods of the inner city.³

In the face of all this, amidst a feeling of fatalistic hopelessness, there has been, on the part of large numbers of Black people, a retreat into religion. It is often claimed that religion is what has allowed Black people to endure and persevere through all the trials and tribulations—the very real horrors—they have been subjected to throughout their experience in America, and that this remains the case now. But this is a logic of defeat—it rests on the underlying assumption (spoken or unspoken) that the system will basically remain as it has been, and that Black people will continue to be despised and discriminated against, persecuted, brutalized and terrorized, and the best they can hope for is to somehow survive, and strive to thrive, through all this—or, if you suffer in this life but you “get right with the Lord,” or submit to Allah, you will be rewarded in some “next life.”

Once more, the question is sharply posed: **How can Black people be finally and fully emancipated from centuries of oppression, and how does this relate to ending all oppression, of all people, everywhere?**

The answer is that the possibility of this is real, but it can happen only on the basis of a *scientific approach to changing the world* and the *scientifically-grounded understanding that this oppression is rooted in and caused by the system of capitalism-imperialism*—the same system that is viciously exploiting and murderously oppressing people not just in this country

but all over the world and is plundering the natural environment—and that *this system must and can be overthrown through an actual revolution and replaced by a radically different and far better system: socialism, whose final goal is a communist world, without any oppression or exploitation of anyone, anywhere.*

As I have put it, expressing a simple and basic truth: “in fundamental terms, we have two choices: either, live with all this—and condemn future generations to the same, or worse, if they have a future at all—or, **make revolution!**”⁴

And, in relation to this, I have also spoken to this profound truth:

There is the potential for something of unprecedented beauty to arise out of unspeakable ugliness: Black people playing a crucial role in putting an end, at long last, to this system which has, for so long, not just exploited but dehumanized, terrorized and tormented them in a thousand ways—putting an end to this in the only way it can be done—by fighting to emancipate humanity, to put an end to the long night in which human society has been divided into masters and slaves, and the masses of humanity have been lashed, beaten, raped, slaughtered, shackled and shrouded in ignorance and misery.⁵

But here is another way that, in fundamental terms, there are two choices: either cling to the mental slavery of religion and remain oppressed, **or cast off the mental chains of religion while rising up to fight with a real chance to get finally and fully free, in putting an end to all oppression and exploitation.**

Religion may seem to give people comfort in the face of the oppression and anguish they are forced to endure, or to make people feel that with religion they can keep from “doing wrong”—or, even though they may “do wrong,” they still have some worth. And it is true that, for some people, their religious views are a motivation to fight against various forms of oppression, and many people who approach things from a religious standpoint have insights and knowledge that it is important to know about and learn from. But it is also true that, as a way of thinking and a guide to acting, religion relies on the invention of supernatural beings that *do not exist but which are said to ultimately shape and control reality, including the fate of human beings.* Religion calls on people to submit to those imaginary supernatural beings (or, to very human authorities speaking in the name of those imaginary supernatural beings) and to follow scriptures that in reality *do not lead to ending oppression but actually promote and reinforce all kinds of degradation and horror.* (This is something I have illustrated very concretely in the book *Away With All Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World*, particularly with regard to the three main monotheistic [one-god] religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.⁶) In this way religion stands in *direct opposition to taking up a consistently scientific approach to understanding reality*

and waging a scientifically-grounded fight to end all oppression.

This is why the powers-that-be, whose very existence, wealth and power rest on oppression and exploitation, continually promote religion. It is why the very same slavemasters who prohibited Black people from learning to read (and severely punished those who did) actively encouraged their slaves to take up religion and get down on their knees in prayer. And it is why today, the ruling powers in this country are only too willing to provide a platform for, and parade around, any Black people who are inclined to engage in passionate “god-talk.” This may be painful to hear, but the question is: is it true, or not? Think about it.

It is neither possible nor principled—and no one should ever try—to *force* people to give up beliefs they hold at any given time. In the most fundamental terms, emancipation—from every form of slavery and oppression—must be the *voluntary and conscious* act of people. But there is a great need and importance to *waging ideological struggle, in a principled way but as sharply as necessary, to win people to take up a scientific approach to understanding, and changing, the world and break with ways of thinking that actually contribute to keeping them, and others, oppressed.*

Again, it is true that many religious people take part now in important struggles against oppression; and it is also true that many religious people will be among the millions taking part in the revolution to do away with this whole oppressive system. But this revolution, and the continuing struggle to end all oppression and bring about real and complete emancipation, must be *led* by those, among the most oppressed, and others as well, who have taken up a *scientific approach to changing the world* and have *cast off the mental slavery of religion*, along with every other way of thinking that promotes, or at least rationalizes and objectively justifies, oppression.

A bitter truth is this:

Oppressed people who are unable or unwilling to confront reality as it actually is, are condemned to remain enslaved and oppressed.⁷

But, an even greater, emancipating truth is this:

The notion of a god, or gods, was created by humanity, in its infancy, out of ignorance. This has been perpetuated by ruling classes, for thousands of years since then, to serve their interests in exploiting and dominating the majority of people and keeping them enslaved to ignorance and irrationality.

Bringing about a new, and far better, world and future for humanity means overthrowing such exploiting classes and breaking free of and leaving behind forever such enslaving ignorance and irrationality.⁸

*Footnotes online at www.revcom.us