



Muhammad Ali: WHY IS JESUS WHITE?

This bulletin is transcribed from a video-clip excerpt of a 1971 television interview conducted by BBC host Michael Parkinson with the late, great Muhammad Ali. As of January 9, 2020, the clip is available at <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x53mfp9>.

In memoriam Muhammad Ali, 1942–2016.

Things are getting much better, but I always wondered when I went to church on Sunday—I've always been one to—I'm not just a boxer. I do a lot of reading, a lot of studying, I ask questions, I go out, travel to these countries, watch how people live, and I *learn.*

And I always asked my mother, I said, "Mother, how come is everything white? Why is Jesus white with blonde hair and blue eyes? Why is the Lord's Supper all white men? The angels are white and, oh, Mary, and even the angels ..."

I said, "Mother, when we die, do we go to heaven?" She said, "Naturally, we go to heaven." And I said, "Well, what happened to all the black angels when they took the pictures?"

(Audience laughs and applauds)

See—I said, "Oh, I know, if the white folks was in heaven, too, then the black angels were in the kitchen preparing the milk and honey."



(Audience laughs)

She said, “Listen, you quit saying that,” but I was always curious, and I always wondered why I had to die to go to heaven—why I couldn’t have pretty cars and good money and nice homes now. Why do I have to wait till I die to get milk and honey? And I said, “Mama, I don’t want no milk and honey. I like steaks!”

And I said, “Milk and honey’s a laxative, anyway!” Do they have a lot of bathrooms in heaven?!

(Laughter)

So, anyway, I was always curious. I always wondered why, you know, Tarzan is the king of the jungle in Africa. He was white. And, uh—

(Laughter and applause)

White man—I saw this white man swinging around Africa with a diaper on, hollerin’—

(Ali hollers like Tarzan)

You all see *Tarzan* over here? You know Tarzan?

Interviewer: (Affirming that they know of Tarzan in England) Right.

And all the Africans—he’s beating them up and breaking the lion’s jaw. And here’s Tarzan talking to the animals, and the African’s been there for centuries, and he can’t yet talk to the animals. Only Tarzan can talk to the animals. I always wondered why Ms. America was always white—and all the beautiful brown women in America—beautiful suntans, beautiful shapes, all type of complexions, but she was always white. And Ms. World was always white, and Ms. Universe was always white. And then they got some stuff called “Whitehouse Cigars,” “White Swan Soap,” “King White Soap,” “White Cloud Tissue Paper,” “White Rain Hair Spray,” “White Tornado Flo’ Wax.” Everything was white, and the *angel* food cake was the *white* cake, and the *devil* food cake was the *chocolate* cake!

(Audience laughs and applauds)

I said, “Mama, why’s *everything* white?” I always wondered, you know, and the President lived in the WHITE house. And Mary had a little lamb, his feet as white as SNOW, and Snow WHITE and *everything* was white—Santa Claus was white! And everything *bad* was black. The little ugly duckling was a black duck, and the black cat was the bad luck, and if I THREATEN you, I’m gonna BLACKmail you—

(Laughter)

—I said, “Mama, why don’t they call it WHITEmail? THEY lie, too!” I was always curious!

(Ali chuckles)

And then, and then *this is when I knew something was wrong.*

Won the Olympic Gold Medal in Rome that day. Olympic champion—the Russian standing right here (Ali motions to one side), and the Pole right here (motions to other side). Is Poland considered a communist country?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Yeah, I’m defeatin’ America’s so-called “threats” or “enemies,” and the flag is goin’ “da da duh duh duhm duhm” (Ali makes a slow, rising motion with his right hand to indicate a flag being raised on a flagpole



while simulating the tune of the U.S. National Anthem) “da da dah dah duh duhm...” I’m standing so proud. (Ali straightens his suit and his posture to illustrate the point while his anthem crescendoes) “Da DA DUH DUH DUHM DUHM—” and I done *whooped the WORLD* for America! “DAH DU DUH tum TUM THUM.”

I took my gold medal—thought I’d invented something! I said, “Man, I know I’m gonna get my people freedom now. I’m the Champion of the Whole World—Olympic Champion! I know I can eat *downtown* now!” (Ali pulls his shoulders back to expand his chest and strokes his tie like a medal as he speaks)



And I went downtown that day, I had my big ol’ medal on, and went in a restaurant. See, at that time things weren’t integrated, and black folks couldn’t eat downtown. And I went downtown, and I sat down, and I said (Ali changes the register and accent of his voice to one more nasal and roundly enunciated), “Uhh, a cup of coffee, a hot dog.” He said, the lady said (Ali puts on a falsetto), “We don’t serve Negroes.” And I was so mad, I said, “I don’t eat ‘em either! Just give me a cup of hot coffee and a hamburger!”

(Loud applause from the audience)

You know, I said (Ali raises his voice and points his finger in anger), “I’m the Olympic Gold Medalist, won three days ago, went out and fought for this country in Rome, I won the Gold Medal, and I’m gonna eat!” (Ali leans in and whispers now) The manager—I heard her tell the manager, she says, he says, “Well, I’m not, I’m not the man to—he’s got to go out,” and anyway I didn’t raise it up and they put me out.



And I had to leave that restaurant in my hometown where I went to church and served in their Christianity and fought in—my daddy fought in all the wars—just won a gold medal, and couldn’t eat downtown, and I said, “Something’s wrong.” And from then on, I’ve been a Muslim.

[...] Black people’s been brainwashed. How we’ve been taught to love white and hate black, how we’ve been robbed of our name in slavery, we were robbed of our culture, we were robbed of our true history. So, it left us a walking dead man.

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