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RELIGIOUS IDEAS IN NEGRO SPIRITUALS

By HOWARD THURMAN

THE purpose of this study is to examine a series of Negro Spirituals to discover the underlying pattern of their religious ideas. They will not be discussed from the point of view of music or poetry, but rather as inspired expressions of religious interpretation found on the lips of a people who were far removed from a familiar environment and from that emotional security common to those who live out their days in the midst of their fathers. It must never be forgotten that the slave was a man without a home. He had been snatched from his "familiar place" and, under the most cruel and inhuman conditions, transported thousands of miles away into a new world.

His primary social grouping had been destroyed, so that it was not possible for him to perpetuate his own tongue. He must employ a new language—not a different dialect of his native African—but a new language. Slavery stripped the African to the literal substance of himself, depriving him of those props on which men commonly depend—language, custom, and social solidarity. In addition to all of this he was a slave; without freedom of movement or of person. This fact must be kept steadily in mind in any analysis of his songs.

A second fact that must be remembered is that the slave took over the religion of the master and became a traditional Christian. In many ways this fact is amazing as well as ironical. It was a fateful moment in the life of the new world when the African slave was brought face to face with the Christian religion. It may be that then, as now, this black minority was called upon to redeem a religion that the master and his posterity disgraced in their midst. Be that as it may the fact remains—the slaves became Christians.

To the old Negro preacher of yesterday fell the responsibility of confirming his people in their adopted faith and of interpreting its essential meanings. All during the week the slaves were without validation, without the possession of any rights that had to be respected. But when they came to church the old minister, illiterate, superstitious perhaps, often misinformed and misguided, spoke one truth which sprang full grown out of the heart of God. "You," he said,

“are not slaves, not niggers—you are God’s chillun.” Many tired, weary Negroes through all the hard days caught a new hold on life, found a new source of strength welling up in them and their spirits were uplifted and inspired by the liquid words falling from the ignorant man’s lips. It is the ultimate truth about human life, says religion, and it was the projecting of this truth into the heart of Negro life that has made it impossible for all the brutality and woe of their environment to destroy them. You cannot destroy the soul and the life of a people who believe that!

What then were the source materials of these, their Christian songs—the American Negro Spirituals? There were three: the Bible, old and new; the world of nature; and the raw experiences of religion that were the common lot of the people and emerged from their own inner life. Echoes from all these are present in almost any of the songs. We shall examine each of these somewhat in detail with reference to the use to which they were put and the end-result.

I

The Bible. The Christian Bible furnished much of the raw materials of imagery and ideas with which the slave singers fashioned their melodies.

There is a great strength in the assurance that comes to a people that they are children of destiny. The Jewish concept of life as stated in their records made a profound impression upon a group of people who themselves were in bondage. God was at work in history. He manifested himself in certain specific acts which were over and above the historic process itself.

The slave caught the significance of this at once. He sings:

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
 Let my people go;
 Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
 Let my people go;

Refrain:

Go down, Moses, ‘Way down in Egypt’s land;
 Tell ole Pharaoh
 Let my people go.

Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,
 Let my people go;
 If not I’ll smite your first-born dead,
 Let my people go.

No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go ;
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go.

The Lord told Moses what to do,
Let my people go ;
To lead the children of Israel thro',
Let my people go.

When they had reached the other shore,
Let my people go ;
They sang a song of triumph o'er,
Let my people go.

The experience of Daniel and his miraculous deliverance was also an ever recurring theme :

My Lord delibered Daniel,
My Lord delibered Daniel,
My Lord delibered Daniel ;
Why can't He deliber me?

The experiences of frustration and divine deliverance as set forth in the stories of the Hebrews in bondage spoke at once to the deep need in the life of the slaves. They were literalists in their interpretations, not only because such was the dominant pattern of the religious thinking of the environment, but also because their needs demanded it. It is a commonplace that what we have need to use in our environment, we seize upon ; it is a profound expression of the deep self-regarding impulses at the heart of man's struggle for the perpetuation of his own rights.

Many liberties were taken with the religious ideas. For here we are not dealing with a conceptual approach to religion but an intensely practical one based upon the tragedy of great need. This fact accounts, in my opinion, for the predominance of the appeal of Protestantism to the masses of the people as over against that of Catholicism. There was a desperate ache to have primary touch with God stripped bare of intermediaries and of ritual.

They took the Biblical question "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" and made of it an affirmation :

There is a Balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole,

CHRISTENDOM

There is a Balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.

Solo part:

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

Don't ever be discouraged,
For Jesus is your friend,
And if you lack for knowledge,
He'll ne'er refuse to lend.

The curious thing about this song is the way in which the idea itself is kept hanging in suspense on the sub-dominant note. It expresses the appreciation without fulfillment. Only at the very end of the song the sub-dominant note disappears and the heart of the singer is at rest.

There is another song in which the same characteristic appears but the words and the entire melody end in a mood of suspense, without answer or fulfillment. I refer to "The Blind Man Stood on the Way and Cried," based upon the story of blind Bartimaeus. In the Bible Bartimaeus cries and Jesus heals him. But in the song *he does not receive his sight*. The words are:

O, de blin' man stood on de road an' cried,
O, de blin' man stood on de road an' cried,
Cryin' O, my Lord, save a me,
De blin' man, stood on de road an' cried.

Cryin' dat he might receib his sight,
Cryin' dat he might receib his sight,
Cryin' O, my Lord, save a me,
De blin' man, stood on de road an' cried.

Those who sang this song had cried but there had been no answer. They were still slaves. Who knew better than these singers and their posterity that vast frustrations often are not removed! "The peace that passeth understanding is the peace that comes when the pain of life is not relieved. It is the peace that comes shimmering on the crest of a wave of pain. It is the spear of frustration transformed into a shaft of light."

II

Jesus. Few of the Spirituals have to do with the nativity of Christ. This has given rise to many speculations. James Weldon Johnson was of the opinion that the fact that Christmas day was a day of special license having no religious significance to slaves, is largely responsible. My own opinion somewhat concurs. It should be added that, in teaching the Bible stories concerning the birth of Jesus, very little appeal was made to the imagination of the slave because it was not felt wise to teach them the significance of this event to the poor and the captive. Even now these implications are not lifted to the fore in much of the contemporary emphasis upon Jesus. It is of first rate significance to me that Jesus was born of poor parentage; so poor indeed was he that his parents could not even offer a lamb for the sacrifice but had to use doves instead. Unlike the Apostle Paul he was not a Roman citizen. If a Roman soldier kicked Jesus into a Palestinian ditch he could not appeal to Caesar; it was just another Jew in the ditch. What limitless release would have been available to the slave if his introduction to Jesus had been on the basis of his role as the hope of the disinherited and the captive. In the teaching of the Christian religion to the slave this aspect of the career of Jesus was carefully overlooked, and continues to be even now. Much is said about what the Christian attitude toward the poor should be; but I have yet to hear a sermon on the meaning of the religion of Jesus to the disinherited, to the poor.

When I was a boy it was my responsibility to read the Bible to my grandmother, who had been a slave. She would never permit me to read the letters of Paul except, on occasion, the 13th Chapter of First Corinthians. When I was older this fact interested me profoundly. When at length I asked the reason she told me that during the days of slavery, the minister (white) on the plantation was always preaching from the Pauline letters—"Slaves be obedient to your masters," etc. "I vowed to myself," she said, "that if freedom ever came and I learned to read, I would never read that part of the Bible!"

Nevertheless, there are a few Christmas spirituals that point out the centrality of the significant event that took place in Bethlehem. There is one which connects the birth of Jesus with his coming into the life of the individual—an inner experience of the historical fact.

When I was a seeker,
I sought both night and day,

CHRISTENDOM

I asked de Lord to help me,
And He show'd me de way.

Go tell it on de mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on de mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.

Another of these songs celebrates the star leading to Bethlehem. It is like finding the pearl of great price or the treasure hidden in the field—for which the finder leaves all else.

Dere's a Star in de East on Christmas morn,
Rise up shepherd an' foller,
It'll lead to de place where de Savior's born,
Rise up, shepherd an' foller.

Leave yo' sheep an' leave yo' lambs,
Rise up shepherd, an' foller,
Leave you' ewes an' leave yo' rams,
Rise up shepherd an' foller.

In many of the songs about him, the majesty of Jesus stands forth in a very striking manner. In fact in most of the songs that treat Jesus as religious object, he is thought of as King. In these, Jesus and God are apparently synonymous. This may have been a form of compensation, an effort to give to the spirit a sense of worth and validation, that transcends the limitations of the environment. For if Jesus who is Savior is King, then the humble lot of the worshipper is illumined and lifted. The human spirit makes a dual demand with reference to God—that God be vast, Lord of Life, Creator, Ruler, King, in a sense imperial; and that he also be intimate, primary, personal. The contrast is most marked:

He's the lily of the valley,
O my Lord,
He's the lily of the valley,
O my Lord,

King Jesus in His Chariot rides,
O my Lord,
With four white horses side by side,
O my Lord!

Or sense the majesty of these lines:

He's King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
 Jesus Christ, first and last,
 No man works like him.

He built a platform in the air, No man works like him
 He meets the saints from everywhere, No man works like him
 He pitched a tent on Canaan's ground, No man works like him
 And broke the Roman Kingdom down, No man works like him.

Or

Who do you call de King Emanuel?
 I call my Jesus, King Emanuel—
 Oh, de King Emanuel is a mighty 'manuel;
 I call my Jesus, King Emanuel.

Oh some call him Jesus, but I call him Lord,
 I call my Jesus, King Emanuel,
 Oh, de King Emanuel is a mighty 'manuel;
 I call my Jesus, King Emanuel.

Or this:

O ride on, Jesus, ride on Jesus,
 Ride on, conquering King!
 I want t' go t' hebb'n in de mo'nin'.

In the Spirituals the death of Jesus took on a deep and personal poignancy. It was not merely the death of a man or a God but there was a quality of identification in experience that continues to burn its way deep into the heart even of the most unemotional. The suffering of Jesus on the cross was something more. He suffered, he died but not alone—they were with him. They *knew* what he suffered; it was a cry of the heart that found a response—and an echo in their own woes. They entered into the fellowship of his suffering. There was something universal in his suffering, something that reached through all the levels of society and encompassed in its sweep the entire human race. Perhaps the best of the hymns carrying the idea of completed atonement is this one:

But He ain't comin' here t' die no mo',
 Ain't comin' here t' die no mo'.

Hallelujah t' de Lamb,
 Jesus died for every man.
 But He ain't comin' here t' die no mo',
 Ain't comin' here t' die no mo'.

The most universally beloved of all the hymns about Jesus is the

well known—"Were you there when they Crucified my Lord?" Several years ago when our delegation visited Mahatma Gandhi, it was the song that he requested us to sing for him. The insight here is profound and touching—at last there is worked out the kind of identification in suffering which makes the cross universal in its deepest meaning. It cuts across difference of religion, race, class and language and dares to affirm that the key to the mystery of the cross is found deep within the heart of the experience itself.

Were you there when they Crucified my Lord?
 Were you there when they Crucified my Lord?
 Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble,
 Were you there when they Crucified my Lord?

The inference is that the singer was there: "I know what he went through because I have met him on the high places of pain and I claim Him as my brother." Here again the approach is not a conceptual one but rather an experimental grasping of the quality of Jesus' experience by virtue of the personal frustration of the singer.

Perhaps the most famous of the songs about the resurrection is "An' de Lord shall Bear my Spirit Hom'." The song opens with a stanza depicting a grave scene: "Dust, dust an' ashes fly over my grave"; ending the first part with a semi-chorus that sounds out the basic idea: "An de Lord shall bear my spirit hom'." The successive stanzas depict the Crucifixion, Joseph's begging the body, the rolling away of the stone, and the triumphant phrase—

De cold grave could not hold him,
 Nor death's cold iron band.

Then they continue with the story about Mary and the words of the Angel. After each stanza there is the deeply moving refrain;

He rose, he rose from the dead,
 An' de Lord shall bear my spirit hom'.

The idea is clear and direct—because he rose from the dead, he will bear my body home. He was the conqueror of death in his own life and hence he will be able to do no less for me—this idea has been an important aspect of Christology, for many many centuries. The unusual thing about the song is the way in which it combines in one poetic unit the fact of the resurrection and its relevancy for the slaves' own lives.

Before passing from this aspect of our discussion it is interesting to

point out that the life and the mind were ever on the alert for the dramatic quality in the Bible story. The outstanding significance of the Bible was that it provided inspiration and illumination to the slaves as they sought to thread life's mystery with very very few clues. What they had found true in their experience lived for them in the sacred Book. God was at work in history. One of the oldest songs said:

Who lock, who lock de lion
 Who lock de lions' Jaw
 God, lock, God lock de Lions' Jaw.

The point is relevant!

God was the deliverer. The conception is that inasmuch as God is no respecter of persons what he did for one race he would surely do for the other. It was a faith that makes much in contemporary life that goes under that name seem but filthy rags. Daring to believe that God cared for them despite the cruel vicissitudes of life meant the giving of wings to life that nothing could destroy. This is the basic affirmation of all high religion.

III

The World of Nature. The world of nature furnished the Spirituals much material that was readily transformed into religious truth. The materials were used in terms of analogy solely, with no effort to work out any elaborate pattern with regard to the significance of nature and man's relation to it. Most often the characterizations are very simple and direct.

Thus, in the South there is a small worm that crawls along in a most extraordinary manner. He draws his little tail up to his head making his body into a loop, then holding himself by his tail he extends his head into the air and forward. He is familiarly known as an "inch worm." His movement is slow, deliberate, very formal, and extremely dignified. Often with his entire body lifted he seems uncertain as to the way to go, swinging himself from side to side in the air until at last he lets himself straighten out on the ground.

Observing this creature on the ground in the early morning or on the cotton leaf the slave felt that it characterized much of his own life; hence, he sang:

Keep a inchin' along,
 Massa Jesus comin' by an' by,

CHRISTENDOM

Keep a inchin' along like a po' inch worm,
 Massa Jesus comin' by an' by.

The most profound of all the hymns on nature-themes and, in my opinion, the most intellectual of all the Spirituals is "Deep River." On the surface of it there seems to be nothing more here than simple other-worldliness.

Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
 Oh don't you want to go to that Gospel feast,
 The land of Promise where all is peace,
 Deep river, my home is over Jordan.

The analogy is fruitful with great meaning. Life is a deep river.

To think of life as being like a river is an apt and almost universal analogy. The analogy is complete in the first place because the river has a very simple beginning, and it gathers in depth and breadth and turbulence, as it moves across the broad expanse of the continent till it gives itself up to the sea whose far-off call all waters hear. It is the nature of the river to flow. It is the nature of life to be in process, always moving, always in flux. It is small wonder that Heraclitus reminds us that no man bathes twice in the same stream.

The analogy is complete in the second place because the river has flood times. There are times when the river ceases to be tranquil and easy going and beneficent, spreading peace and helpfulness throughout the land that it touches, and becomes a monster, reckless of good and evil, spreading pestilence and destruction along its reckless way. It is the flood time of the river.

Life is like that. There are times when your life or mine ceases to be even, balanced, lovely and becomes violent, tragic, terrifying. Out of the depths of your tragedy or agony, you may cry, "God is not in his Heaven, and all is *not* right with the world—life is evil and its perpetuation is a more monstrous evil." It is the flood time of the river. It is then that one needs to remember that often the test of life is found in the amount of pain that can be absorbed without spoiling one's joy.

The analogy is complete in the next place because the river has a goal. The goal of the river is the sea—that out of which the river comes and that to which the river goes is the sea. All the waters of all the lands come from the sea, and all the waters of all the lands go to the sea. The source and the goal of the river are the same.

Life is like that. The goal of life is God. That out of which life comes and that into which life goes is God. We do not wonder, then, that Augustine says, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our souls are restless till they find their rest in Thee."

It is this profound meaning in the hymn, "Deep River," that gives to it first place among all the Spirituals.

IV

Religious Experience. The religious experiences of the slave were very rich and full because his avenues of emotional expressions were definitely limited and circumscribed. His religious aspirations were expressed in many songs delineating varying aspects of their desires. The other-worldly hope looms large, and this is not strange. The other-worldly hope is always available when groups of people find themselves completely frustrated in the present. When all hope for release in this world seems unrealistic and groundless the heart turns to a way of escape beyond the present order. The options are very few for those who are thus circumstanced. Their belief in God leads quite definitely to a position which fixes their hope upon their deliverance beyond the grave. What a plaintive cry are these words:

Don't leave me, Lord
Don't leave me behin'.

Jesus, Jesus is my Frien'
Lord don't leave me behin'.

There is a desolation, fear, loneliness, but hope, desperate and profound!

Even a casual bit of reflection will reveal just how important it was for the slave to run no risk of missing the joy of the other world. What soul searching must have been present in a song like this:

Good Lord, shall I ever be de one
To get over in de Promise' Lan'?
God called Adam in de garden,
'Twas about the cool of de day
Call for ole Adam,
An' he tried to run away
The Lord walked in de garden,
'Twas about de cool of de day,
Call for ole Adam,
An' Adam said, "Hear me Lord."

Such songs as:

I want to be ready
To walk in Jerusalem just like John ;

or:

Oh, swing low, sweet chariot,
Pray let me enter in
I don't want to stay here no longer—

and many others suggest the same basic idea. The most plaintive and beautiful of this entire group is

Lord, I want to be a Christian in a my heart!

Religion was a source of consolation that had power to raise endurance to scintillating quality. It supplied a social milieu in which the lyric words were cast. Here we are not dealing with a philosophy of unyielding despair but a clear sharing by the members of the group with each other of the comfort and strength each found in his religious commitment.

Let us cheer the weary traveler
Cheer the weary traveler
Along the heavenly way.

The same quality is present in "Walk Tokedder, Children."

Yet there was always also present the element of solitariness, a sense of individual responsibility for life which nothing could offset. The sense of personal spiritual need was deeply voiced in the song:

'Tis me, O Lord
Standing in the need of prayer
It's not my brother but it's me O, Lord
Standing in the need of prayer.

For sheer loneliness of heart, felt when, one by one, all social reinforcement from being a member of a religious community has disappeared and the human spirit is left stranded on the shores of its own spiritual desolation, how true is the sentiment:

And I couldn't hear nobody pray,
O way down yonder by myself
Couldn't hear nobody pray.

The same heart cry is sent like a shooting star in—

Keep me from sinking down
Oh Lord, Oh, my Lord
Keep me from sinking down.

These songs were rightfully called "Sorrow Songs." They were born of tears and suffering greater than any formula of expression. And yet the authentic note of triumph in God rings out trumpet-tongued!

Oh, Nobody knows de trouble I've seen
Glory Hallelujah

There is something bold, audacious, unconquerable here—

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down
Oh, yes, Lord
Sometimes, I'm almost to de groun'
Oh, yes, Lord,

Oh, nobody knows de trouble I've seen
Glory Hallelujah.

Sometimes the load is so heavy that nothing is of any avail. Hope is destroyed by feeding upon itself and yet the destiny is deliberately placed in God's hands. A mad maniacal kind of incurable optimism that arises out of great overwhelming vitality that is as deep as the very well springs of life.

I'm so glad trouble don't last away,
O my Lord, O my Lord, What shall I do?
Christ told the blin' man,
To go to the pool and bathe,
O my Lord, What shall I do?

or again:

I'm troubled in mind,
If Jesus don't help me I surely will die
Oh Jesus, my savior, on thee I'll depend,
When troubles are near me, you'll be my true friend.

Freedom from slavery and freedom from life were often synonymous in the thought of those early singers. With actual freedom no closer and the years slipping away with steady rhythmic beat death seemed the only hope. Again God is the only answer.

Children, we shall be free
When the Lord shall appear.
Give ease to the sick, give sight to the blind,
Enable the cripple to walk;
He'll raise the dead from under the earth,
And give them permission to talk.

But occasionally a new note is struck—powerful and defiant.

Oh freedom! Oh freedom!
 Oh freedom over me!
 An' befo' I'd be a slave,
 I'll be buried in my grave,
 An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

“Steal Away to Jesus” belongs in the group of those songs dealing with release. It is a release in death. The same is true of “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.”

There is at least one hymn that belongs to that moment of heartfelt realization when it finally dawned upon the soul of the slave that he was free. Even here God is given the credit.

Slav'ry chain done broke at las'
 Goin' to praise God 'til I die.

I did know my Jesus heard me
 'Cause de spirit spoke to me
 An' said “Rise my chile, your chillun
 An' you too shall be free.”

I shall conclude this discussion with a word about the great hymn “We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder.” There is a great wide stride in this song that catches all the fragmentary aspects of one's yearnings and pours them into one great throbbing channel of triumph. It sums up all the hope for a better day for individuals and groups. It gathers in its march the entire column of progress and advance, sensing the haunting dream of mankind for something better beyond today, disappearing in the hope of an infinite series of tomorrows. Saint and sinner, pagan and Christian, Eastern and Western, all who love life and seek to understand its mysteries and its possibilities at long last find their place in its rhythmic ranks.

We are climbing Jacob's Ladder
 Soldiers of the cross
 Every roun' goes higher and higher
 Soldiers of the cross.

Hawai'i Thurman