

BY CECIL W. CONE

## The Black Religious Experience

Listening to Gwen Neville makes clear why we blacks have had so many problems all these many years. I am going to give a statement on the black religious experience in an effort to put in focus what that experience is all about.

Black religion is the product of African culture and the cultural environment of the American slave system. It was created out of the encounter of African religion with Christianity. These elements were woven together as the black slave underwent a conversion experience in the presence of the Almighty Sovereign God. This experience provided the slave with a historical *possibility* for existence in a situation of contradiction. It opened up the slave's inner being, enabling him to discern levels of reality not known before. The Almighty Sovereign God became the very foundation for every dimension of the slave's life.

Having encountered the Almighty Sovereign God in the midst of servitude, symbolized in the auction block and the slave codes, the slave experienced a knowledge of the divine will and purpose for humanity that his suppressors could never know. The slave developed religious forms in accordance with this insight. Although his religion took on the outward appearance of the Christian religion as it was given to him by the oppressor, the essence of his religion had little to do with white meanings associated with Christianity.

The essence of black slave religion was not a set of beliefs or doctrines to be memorized, nor was it an ethical code of do's and don'ts that the slaves learned. Rather, the essence of black religion was a black religious experience. The slave's encounter with the divine in the midst of slavery and the consequent recognition of his sinful condition was the first step in the dynamics of the black religious experience. The black religious experience is a depth experience of the Almighty Sovereign God from way down yonder, emerging out of the crucible of suffering. It is that experience of the divine wrought out of the slave's encounter with the absurdity of his condition and his meeting with the Almighty Sovereign God in the midst of that historical reality. Reality for the slave in America, in a historical sense, presented itself as immutable, impenetrable, and impossible. In the midst of this awful situation, the Almighty Sovereign God forced himself upon the slave as a *highly exceptional and extremely impressive* Other — the Wholly Other — radically different from everything known in this world. He was the God of power, whose existence was more real and more terrible than the absurd situation of the slave's life. The black religious experience, then, is meeting God in the depths of the despair and loneliness of slavery.

Although the slave was in rebellion against the system of slavery, and his meeting of the divine definitely had political implications, this

meeting was not, as such, a political encounter. To start with politics as if political resistance were the distinctive characteristic of this experience is to misunderstand black religion. In black religion, God, not politics, is the point of departure. When the slave met the God of radical transcendence in the midst of the extremities of slavery, it created in him a sense of his own limitations — the sense of weakness and sinfulness related, not primarily to politics, but to the wholly otherness of God. God's reality and power became even more manifest through the involuntary and transformative effect it had upon the slave who was *already* in an involuntary, but *nontransformative* situation. This potency of the divine was regarded as sublime by virtue of its creative process. This creative process produced in the slave an experience known as conversion, the key to the black religious experience.

When the slave encountered the Almighty Sovereign God, way down yonder where the slave was at the threshold of death, the Divine forced himself upon the slave in such a manner that the slave recognized at once his own state of sinfulness. From this point onward, the slave was in the hands of the Almighty Sovereign God. After striking the slave dead, the Divine exposed him to a level of reality not known before. When the slave emerged from this experience he was a new creature, completely transformed. This event, which is so keyed to the black religious experience, denoted fundamentally a rather definite and somewhat sudden change in the dominant beliefs, attitudes, subtleties, allegiances, and aspirations of the slave. The drama of the conversion experience for the slave centered in the birth of a new selfhood. It is for this reason that the slave emerged from the event singing, "Looked at my hands, they looked new. Looked at my feet, and they did too." It was this kind of encounter with the Almighty Sovereign God that constituted the uniqueness of the black religious experience.

When the slave emerged from his conversion experience, he was free. And this freedom which he experienced signified that the slave's life was no longer determined by the slave system. It meant that through his black religious experience the slave underwent such a change that his life was totally committed to the Almighty Sovereign God. Because he was free, the slave sang: "Oh, freedom, oh, freedom, oh, freedom over me. Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free." The freedom of which the slave speaks is the present reality. He does not accept the designation given him by the oppressive society. A close examination of this spiritual reveals that the slave is very careful in what he is not saying, as well as what he is saying. He is not saying, "Before I'd be a slave any more," or "Before I'd accept being a slave very long . . ." He says, "*Before I'd be a slave in the first place!*" In the mind and heart of this man of African descent there existed a freedom that could not be denied. According to his own understanding of the situation surrounding his life *he never was a slave*: Furthermore, death would be his lot before he ever is one.

The freedom that the slave experienced in his heart and mind was a product of the black religious experience; but it did not cause him to ignore his everyday life. Far from causing the slave to bury himself in the kind of religious faith that is escapist and narcotic, the black religious experience gave the slave the necessary strength, fortitude, and character to fight against the legalized form of slavery. That is to say, the slave's involvement with the Almighty Sovereign God caused the slave to experience freedom at once internally, while it gave him the assurance that if he participated in the struggle with the divine against the institution of slavery, freedom would eventually become an external reality as well. The outcome of such a black religious experience was that a majority of the slaves participated in one form or another with the Almighty Sovereign God in the destruction of slavery. This participation that led to the black grapevine telegraph system ranged from collecting information, seeking outlets, lecturing against the system, and plotting and planning, to outright rebellion. But the key to this whole business was the slave's encounter with the Almighty Sovereign God — a black religious experience.

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