

By Diana L. Beach\*

## A Response

Ronald Massanari has voiced many of my own thoughts after reading Anne Wimberly's provocative article on "Spirituals As Symbolic Expression" especially in regard to the living, numinous, and finally irrepresentable quality of symbols and to the potential dangers of a too literal application of Jungian ideas. However, I would like to share a few further reflections.

The tradition of Black spirituals faces me again with the irrepressible nature of the archetypal realm and the power of healing and wholeness which lurks deep in the depths of the human psyche. There is a tension in any discussion of symbols, reflected again in this article, between the desire to find the historical antecedents of a particular symbol—to prove, for instance, that the notion of "living water" is really African—and the contention that archetypal material springs full grown, like Athena from the head of Zeus, from the unique circumstances of the historical moment. I feel that this debate between dispersion and spontaneous generation of symbols presents us with a false dichotomy. Certainly American Blacks did not "invent" the wheel and the rock and the hero and the lamb. These symbols were already at their disposal in the Christian teachings laid upon them and, as Wimberly indicates, often in their own African heritage as well. It is worth noting that the Biblical authors did not "invent" them either. Many symbols we now identify as Christian were in common use in many religious traditions of the ancient world. The earliest statues of the madonna and child were turned out in the same workshops which produced statues of Orpheus as the Good Shepherd and Isis holding the infant Horus.

But the Bible also indicates, however, that many of these symbols appeared in the same way that they still appear to us today—in spontaneous dreams and visions direct from the collective unconscious itself. Elijah's wheel, Moses' burning bush, Jacob's ladder and John's heavenly city all have parallels in the psyches of modern people. Such images have appeared again and again and will continue to appear. Certainly the Black religious experience has always been a particularly powerful crucible for the spontaneous creation of numinous images such as these. The fact that these symbols are often also reflected in both the Semitic and the African past indicates the power of the imagic function of the human psyche to reproduce in all times and in all places patterns which reflect the very structure of the human soul itself.

We also know that suffering can bring us into closer contact with the archetypal realm and thus to God. Because of the suffering and

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\*The Reverend Diana L. Beach is Dean of Pastoral Counseling, New York Theological Seminary.

oppression of Africans brought against their will to the New World, their music seems to me to reflect a particularly powerful distillation of the Christian tradition. In the pain and hardship of the Black religious experience the externals were stripped away, or were perhaps an unaffordable luxury. It is important to note that what survives in the spirituals is not some minor commentary on the Christian faith, some interesting but out-of-the-way rendition, some strange tangent, but the very heart and soul of the Gospel itself. Again we see the healing process of the psyche at work; in times of trouble it is the essentials that remain, moving us toward health and wholeness. Ms. Wimberly has rightly pointed out that the very sketchiness of the transmission of European Christianity to the poorly educated slaves, whatever the nefarious reasons their masters may have had for keeping them in ignorance, still had the effect of strengthening the power of the Gospel message because it left room for the essential images of the Divine to emerge directly from the souls of Black folk—in Jungian terms, from the Self. The archetypal realm reasserted itself and the Good News was renewed in direct contact with Divine Reality. It is this process of divine reality breaking through in this most immediate way that gives the songs the power to move *all* men and women with the strength of their conviction; for their message springs directly from that well of Being in the deepest heart of us all.

One last related thought. I sometimes find myself becoming impatient with some of my Black friends who seem to me to want to relate *everything* to the Black experience. But Ms. Wimberly has reminded me again of what an essential process this is, not only for Blacks, but for all of us. For if we cannot find God in the closest texture of our daily lives and of our cultural roots then where is She/He to be found at all? For God must have not just something, but everything to do with who I am and where I have come from, and must be able to make sense of every aspect of my being. The wisdom of the spirituals can therefore point each of us in the direction of examining and reclaiming our own individual faith and heritage, for it is there that God lives in and for us.