

Diana L. Hayes\*

## Slain In The Spirit: Black Americans And The Holy Spirit

When beginning to think about how I wanted to approach the understanding of the Holy Spirit from the perspective of African Americans, the words of an old slave spiritual began to run through my mind. Over and over again, I heard words that spelled out the faith of a people in the process of creation, emerging from a past, hidden and forbidden to them, in Africa, and looking ahead to a new beginning in a strange land overshadowed by the knowledge that they were welcome only for the quality of their labor rather than the value of their lives.

They sang, in times of trouble, in moments of doubt, words that buoyed them up because they were carried on the wings of a faith which sustained and nurtured them, a faith rich in its West African origins yet interwoven with a new understanding. They sang:

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

There is a Balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole,  
There is a Balm in Gilead  
To heal the sin-sick soul.

---

\*Diana L. Hayes is Assistant Professor of Theology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

They sang in witness of, in joyful proclamation of their belief in a God who saves, in a God who lived and died for them, in a God who had sent God's spirit to be with them to affirm them in their conviction that they were a part of God's creation, meant to live a life that was good in God's eyes as free men and women,

Robert Hood sets forth the pervasive force of the Spirit's presence in the life of Black Americans in this way:

The Spirit experientially and conceptually exercises a very strong influence in black American religion and culture.... Like the breath of God in Scripture, this power makes the slave songs and gospel hymns, the rhetoric of the black preacher and the Black trickster alike, the extemporaneous and unrehearsed prayers of the unsophisticated, and the written liturgical prayers of more sedate congregations. It is the presence of the Spirit—revealed in the sounds and ritual of black churches—that impresses black folk at a service, prayer meeting, Bible class, or a revival. With the Spirit present they can say with great sagacity and joy that they really are a 'church' and are in 'spirit-filled worship.'<sup>1</sup>

What are the origins of this conceptualization of the Holy Spirit for African Americans? Its roots are African and are shared by all who are members of the African diaspora. It is the sharing of a common spirit, "an attitude that sees all of life in the context of the encounter with the Divine, and the all-embracing vision of the Divine-human encounter." It is grounded in a world view (recognizing that African traditions and religions vary) that emphasizes the community as the basic source of identity and spirituality.

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro Cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), p. 204.

Besides belief in a Supreme Being, the African religious traditions emphasize belief in the ancestors, the practice of sacrifice, belief in spirits and powers (both good and evil), and, finally, belief in the fullness of the present life. Reverence for ancestors, in particular, is a universally important feature of African religions.... The Spirit of the ancestors is a vital part of the African concept of community, in which the collective power of all members of the community —the living and the “living dead” energizes and pervades the daily life of everyone.<sup>2</sup>

Of singular importance for African religion is the “preservation and strengthening of life-force or power” which serves as its organizing principle. This power was manifested for good and evil through gods and spirits.

The gods and men related to one another through the mediation of sacrifice, the mechanism of divination, and through the phenomenon of spirit possession. Widely shared by diverse West African societies were several fundamental beliefs concerning the relationship of the divine and the human: belief in a transcendent and benevolent God, creator and ultimate source of providence; belief in a number of immanent gods, to whom people must sacrifice in order to make life propitious; belief in the power of the spirits animating things in nature to affect the welfare of people; belief in priests

---

<sup>2</sup>Jamie Phelps, O.P., “Black Spirituality” in Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, O.P., eds. *Spiritual Traditions of the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 335.

and others who were expert in practical knowledge of the gods and spirits; belief in spirit possession, in which gods, through their devotees, spoke to men.<sup>3</sup>

This worldview with its emphasis on the continuity of the spiritual and physical realms traveled with the captive Africans to their new homes in the Americas. There, in the clash between their indigenous faith and the Christianity that was forced upon them, a new spirituality emerged, but one which also retained much of the religious traditions that had shaped and formed them as a living community of faith in their homeland. As Raboteau notes, the African gods were "carried in the memories of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic" and were revealed especially in such African American religions as Candomble, Santeria and Vodun—syncretistic meshings of traditional African religions and the Catholic faith. Catholicism was especially open to such meshings as the slaves experienced a correlation between their gods and spirits and Catholic saints as well as other Catholic symbols and rituals which were not present in Protestantism with its relative lack of ritual and symbolism.

It is in the development of what has come to be called "slave religion" that we encounter many of the Africanisms that were retained. In their expression of religious emotion, certain forms and manners are clearly reminiscent of African religious expressions. I would like to explore, as an example, "spirit possession," or as it is more commonly referred to in the Black Church in the United States, being "slain in the spirit". Raboteau states that there is a "discontinuity...between the African heritage of spirit possession and the Black shouting tradition in the United

---

<sup>3</sup>Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible" Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 11.

States." Yet, at the same time a continuity can be seen "in the context of action, the patterns of motor behavior preceding and following the ecstatic experience." Both traditions involve "hand-clapping, foot-tapping, rhythmic preaching, hyperventilation, antiphonal (call and response) singing and dancing. Only the drums were missing initially in the United States but these have in recent years re-emerged along with brass and wind instruments, guitars, piano, organ, tambourines, and other instrumental forms of "making a joyful noise unto the Lord."

The preacher was drawing his sermon to a close...When a small old woman...among those in the gallery, suddenly rose and began dancing and clapping her hands; at first with a slow and measured movement, and then with increasing rapidity, at the same time beginning to shout "ha! ha!" The women about her arose also, and tried to hold her...The woman was still shouting and dancing, her head thrown back and rolling from one side to the other. Gradually her shout became indistinct, she threw her arms wildly about instead of clapping her hands, fell back into the arms of her companions, then threw herself forward and embraced those before her, then tossed herself from side to side, gasping, and finally sunk to the floor, where she remained...Kicking, as if acting a death struggle.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, on a physical level both traditions are rather similar, but on the theological level significantly different. In the African tradition, devotees of a particular god or gods are *possessed* by that god or those gods "whose personality displaces that of the human

---

<sup>4</sup>As quoted in Raboteau, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

medium which has no self-control."<sup>5</sup> However, in Black Christianity, "it is the context of belief (which) shapes the possession experience and determines the manner in which the experience is interpreted."<sup>6</sup> Rather than being "mounted" and "rode" by a god or gods, it is instead "the Holy Spirit who fills the converted sinner with a happiness and power that drives him to shout, sing and sometimes dance."<sup>7</sup>

The old meeting house caught on fire. The spirit was there. Every heart was beating in unison as we turned our minds to God to tell him of our sorrows here below. God saw our need and came to us. I used to wonder what made people shout but now I don't. There is a joy on the inside and it wells up so strong that we can't keep still. It is fire in the bones. Any time that fire touches a man, he will jump.<sup>8</sup>

It is the belief, the faith context which is different. "While the North American slaves danced under the impulse of the Spirit of a "new" God, they danced in ways their fathers in Africa would have recognized."<sup>9</sup>

It is in the narratives the slaves themselves told of their conversion experiences that this shift is clearly seen. The African slaves were taught a distorted Christianity which mandated their oppression and denied their humanity yet, paradoxically, they were able to discern the kernel of truth in Jesus' message—that God was a God for all, and that all of God's creation was good. Their conversion experience confirmed this goodness within them in

---

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Stuck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves* (Philadelphia and Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969), p.

<sup>9</sup>Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 72.

ways that dramatically contrasted their physical status of enslavement with their spiritual breaking of the chains that bound them.

To be converted meant "getting religion"—being "slain in the Spirit"—"struck dead" by the hand of God and revived as a new being. It was a physical, rather than passive act, in which "the spirit possessed the physical being of the slaves" leading them to shout, speak of visions of God, heaven, or freedom and engage in often frenzied behavior that "manifested the Spirit's presence."<sup>10</sup>

One's true rather than slave identity was revealed through conversion, the revelation that one was a "child of God... a human being, one of those redeemed by God"<sup>11</sup> and it is the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ who showed the path to that new identity. George Cummings notes that:

The Spirit's presence, according to (an ex-slave named Cornelius) Garner, entailed the affirmation of independence and selfhood, sustained hope for freedom as embodied in their prayer life; served as the basis of love within the slave community; and even assisted slaves in their desire to escape to freedom. The Spirit's sustaining power/presence was nurtured in the secret meetings where Black slaves disobeyed their masters' orders to serve God, sustained their sense of personal identity and well-being, and provided mutual support for each other by giving meaning and hope to their tragic existence.<sup>12</sup>

Sarah Rhodes, a former slave, speaks of those meetings in this way:

---

<sup>10</sup>George Cummings, "The Slave Narratives as a Source of Black Theological Discourse: The Spirit and Eschatology" in Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, eds. *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), p. 48.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

We used to steal off to de woods and have church, like de Spirit moved us—sing and pray to our own liking and soul satisfaction—and we sure did have good meetings, honey— baptize in de river like God said. We had dem spirit-filled meetings at night on de bank of de river and God met us there.<sup>13</sup>

Their defiance was born of the Spirit which moved them to disobey their masters in order to obey their God, a God whom they knew had created them as free men and women in God's own Spirit. This Spirit-grounded strength enabled them to flee plantations, plot and carry out escapes and rebellions, and silently but obstinately refuse to participate in their own dehumanization, often to the consternation and fear of their masters.

The slave narratives reveal an eschatological hope which reflects "a connection between the presence of the Spirit of God and the hopes and aspirations of the slave community."<sup>14</sup> Their's was a hope born of a burning desire for freedom and the determination to one day be free. It was an eschatological hope born of the Spirit's movement within them and the Spirit's sustaining and nurturing presence in every aspect of their lives.

They looked forward to a reversal of the status quo—a shift in time and situation for them and those who oppressed them, expressed in the belief that "everybody talking about heaven ain't going there." The future was promised them and gave them the ability to stay strong, but it was not a future way off somewhere. It was, at one and the same time, here but not yet in its fullness. The "eschaton was not an opiate. The transcendent future was also the present. The 'home over yonder' and the 'promised land' of the

---

<sup>13</sup>James Mellon, ed. *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), pp. 194-95.

<sup>14</sup>Cummings, "The Spirit ...", p. 54.



spirituals were for the slaves both an 'otherworldly' promise and a 'this worldly' hope for freedom."<sup>15</sup>

The spirituals spoke of a future freedom to come in heaven, but one that could also be achieved by their actions in escaping to the North and to Canada, in fighting against their oppressed status. The spirituals are the voice of the Spirit of God expressed in the words of an illiterate yet faith-filled people. James Cone sees the Spirit as

...God himself breaking into the lives of the people, 'buildin' them up where they were torn down and proppin' them up on every leanin' side.' The Spirit was God's presence with the people and his will to provide them the courage and the strength to make it through.<sup>16</sup>

They could, therefore, sing in affirmation of that presence: "Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart I will pray." For it was a feeling, a feeling reflected in rhythm, in song, and in faith. "This song invites the believer to move close to the very sources of black being, and to experience the black community's power to endure and the will to survive."<sup>17</sup>

All the believer has to do is to respond to the divine apocalyptic disclosure of God's revelation and cry, "Have mercy, please." This cry is not a cry of passivity, but a faithful, free response to the movement of the Black Spirit. It is the Black community accepting themselves as the people of the Black Spirit and knowing through

---

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup>*The Spirituals and The Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Crossroad/Seabury Press, 1972), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

his presence that no chains can hold the Spirit of black humanity in bondage.<sup>18</sup>

Cone concludes that "The spiritual, then, is the Spirit of the people struggling to be free."<sup>19</sup> He continues:

Black history then is the stuff out of which the black spirituals were created. But the "stuff" of black history includes more than the bare historical facts of slavery. Black history is an experience, a soulful event. And to understand it is to know the being of a people who had to "feel their way along the course of American slavery," enduring the stresses and strains of human servitude but not without a song. *Black history is a spiritual.*<sup>20</sup>

It is the sung-memory of a hope sustained against all odds for a freedom that *will come*, in God's own time and their own. This eschatological hope and their acting upon it had the effect of transforming them, not just spiritually but also in physical ways. As Harriet Tubman noted:

I looked at my hands to see if I was de same person now  
I was free. Dere was such a glory ober de fields and I felt  
like I was in heaven."<sup>21</sup>

This experience of the working of the Spirit continues to be a part of Black America's understanding of how God acts in its own history. It calls forth "a spirituality that is not the classic *imitati*

---

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup>Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People* (New York: Corinth Books, 1961), p. 30.

*Christi*, but rather *participati Christi*, through performance, drama, emotion and ritual."<sup>22</sup>

As slavery gave way to a "putative" freedom, the Spirit remained with the people, revealing itself in ways that continued to affirm and strengthen them in their positive self-understanding of themselves as a people of a loving and liberating God. The Spirit sustained them over against the stereotypical depictions and degradations they were forced to endure in their daily lives.

W.E.B. DuBois, although deploring, as did many educated and middle class Blacks, the emotionality and noisiness of his brothers' and sisters' witnessing to the Spirit's movement within them, nevertheless, recognized the Spirit as one of the hallmarks of Black religion:

It varies in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor—the stomping, shrieking and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughter, the vision and the trance. All this is nothing new in the world, but old as religion, as Delphi and Endor. And so firm a hold did it have on the Negro, that many generations have firmly believed that without this visible manifestation of God, there could be no true communion with the Invisible.<sup>23</sup>

Many class-conscious Blacks opposed this "exhibition", as they saw it, of being primitive and heathenish, preferring the staid, sedate, unmoved and unmoving rituals and services of predominantly White churches. Today, this attitude is changing as Blacks in the Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and other mainline churches are

---

<sup>22</sup>Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?*, p. 205.

<sup>23</sup>*The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1961), pp. 141-42.

returning to their roots in the African American community—a community brought into existence by the action of the Spirit shaping, forming, nurturing, and sustaining an oppressed and beleaguered people. More and more middle class African Americans are seeking that which they have lost somewhere along the way up. They are recognizing and reaffirming a heritage almost irreclaimable and certainly abandoned in favor of a form of assimilation which often led to self-denial and alienation. Roman Catholics particularly are realizing that Spirit-induced fervor is a part of both their African and Catholic heritages as evidenced by the Catholic mission of the 19th century. In its day that mission was comparable to a Protestant revival and was a means of evangelizing both Blacks and Whites.

Catholics looked down upon the Protestant form of revivalism, especially Methodist camp meetings, as “heathenish” assemblies. The Catholic clergy opposed religious enthusiasm as an end in itself. It was felt that, “in Protestant revivals, excitement is carried to excess, and made the end aimed at. In Catholic retreats and missions, it is wisely managed and made simply a means.”<sup>24</sup> In actuality, they were not that different.

As with the camp meetings, often the parish mission was held wherever a large group of people could be congregated. On the frontier, this meant huge tents, open fields, or barns. Both aimed for conversion, the reclaiming of sinners for Jesus Christ, and were “specially calculated to excite the piety of the faithful.”<sup>25</sup> Stress was on the spoken word, often accompanied by a “variety of theatrical techniques.” The mission was preached with “powerful emotion” and often the audiences responded with spontaneous

---

<sup>24</sup>Diana L. Hayes, “Black Catholic Revivalism: The Emergence of a New Form of Worship”, in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. XIV (Fall 1986/Spring 1987) #’s 1 and 2, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup>Jay P. Dolan, “American Catholics and Revival Religion, 1850-1900,” *Horizons* 3 (Spring 1976), p. 44.

outbursts of weeping, shuddering and moaning. Catholic revival preachers were also itinerant circuit riders. Initially, emphasis was on the already baptized but fallen away Catholics. The revival was an occasion for conversion of the indifferent, the new immigrants who had recently arrived from Europe and who were failing rapidly in their faith.

The Paulists was the first indigenous religious order in the United States established specifically to run parish missions. They emphasized that

A mission. . . is something which gathers into one powerful showing all the warnings of Divine Justice fully explaining the enormous folly and ingratitude of sin; it leads the sinner back to his very childhood and traces his downward track through youth and manhood towards his last death; which stands with him at his open grave; which calls in his ear the summons to the judgement seat of an offended God; which scorches his face with the fires of hell and all in an atmosphere of fervor, aided by the entreaties of the sinner's friends, their prayers to God, their tears, the example of the repentance of other sinners.<sup>26</sup>

This was evangelicalism in exemplary form. A Redemptorist Father likened the mission "to a thunder and lightning storm" which "bursts upon the scene with powerful sermons to arouse man from the lethargy of sin to a life of fervor."<sup>27</sup> With its emphasis on sin, its stress on fear of the Lord and its aim of arousing fear, reverence, awe, hatred of sin, and love of God, one can say, quite truthfully, that the parish mission was, indeed, a revival in all but name.

---

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45.

Catholic revivalism, however, was different in its emphasis on turning away from the world and towards more celestial goals. Unlike Evangelical Protestantism which led to the evolution of the Protestant version of the Social Gospel, with its emphasis on making the world into the Kingdom of God, Catholic evangelicalism removed the Catholic from the world and left him or her concerned only with achieving the afterlife, rather than attempting to improve the situation of his or her neighbor.

Another striking difference of Catholic evangelicalism was its emphasis on the sacraments and sacramentals. By itself, a personal decision for Christ was considered incomplete. It had to be verified by a "sacramental confession of one's sins and the eventual reception of the Eucharist"<sup>28</sup>

.... for Catholics salvation was achieved through the instrumentality of the visible Church and its sacraments. The spirit of orthodoxy allowed for no other alternative. Catholic revivalism encouraged a sacramental evangelicalism which not only urged the sinner to repent but also provided the means necessary for such a conversion. For Catholics personal conviction of sin was only the first step toward salvation and without the Church the pursuit of holiness could not be realized.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, for Black Christians, Protestant and Catholic, "the Spirit...did not have simply an internal or personal function; it also functioned externally and socially ... It allowed (as noted earlier) for defiance as well as ensured confidence and triumph,.." as well as providing empowerment. There was an ethical dimension to the Spirit's presence as well, one which sustained

---

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

African Americans in their seeming unending struggle for legitimacy. It also "established a solidarity", a community of faith from within which such a struggle could be maintained. This can be seen most clearly during the period of their struggle for civil rights where the use of spirituals as well as the more recent gospel music served as sources of encouragement and inspiration.

I believe that James Baldwin gives the most poignant and evocative illustration of the workings of the Holy Spirit, both in building community and in calling forth individuals to leadership within that community. In his autobiographical work, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, we are introduced to John, a young black male, lost, unsure of himself and of the relevance of the church in his life, angry, rebellious, yet afraid to step out alone. It is here that we can clearly see the continuity, the continuous thread of the Spirit running through the lives of Black Americans—from those slaves metaphorically "struck dead" by God to rise with hands, feet, and a heart made new, to the Blacks of today, still seeking affirmation of their humanity and still trusting in the Lord. Baldwin writes:

On the threshing floor, in the center of the crying,  
praying saints, John lay astonished beneath the power of  
the Lord.

Suddenly, in the middle of a religious service like so many he had attended during his life at this store-front church, John finds himself face down in front of the altar—struck down by God.

Baldwin's graphic description of this encounter with the Holy Spirit re-unites us once again with the African ancestral heritage of spirit possession, of being "slain in the Spirit," of being taken up by the Spirit of God and made God's own.

He knew, without knowing how it had happened, that he lay on the floor, in the dusty space before the altar

which he and Elisha had cleaned; and knew that above him burned the yellow light which he had himself switched on. Dust was in his nostrils, sharp and terrible, and the feet of the saints, shaking the floor beneath him, raised small clouds of dust that filmed his mouth. He heard their cries, so far, so high above him—he could never rise that far. He was like a rock, a dead man's body, a dying bird, fallen from an awful height; something that had no power of itself, any more, to turn.

And something moved in John's body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed. This power had struck John, in the head or in the heart; and, in a moment, wholly, filling him with an anguish that he could never in his life have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe, had opened him up; had cracked him open, as wood beneath the axe cracks down the middle, as rocks break up; had ripped him and felled him in a moment, so that John had not felt the wound, but only the agony, had not felt the fall, but only the fear; and lay here, now, helpless, screaming, at the very bottom of darkness.<sup>30</sup>

John struggles through, urged on by the prayers of the saints, the community in which he has grown and matured and which continues to watch over him as he fights for his very soul, trembling in fear and anger as memories—both pleasant and painful—ravage him and an ironic voice tempts him to rise and walk away. Yet he finds that he cannot rise, that he does not want to rise, not until he has called upon the Lord for mercy and love and

---

<sup>30</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (New York: Dell, 1985 (Laurel ed.)), p. 193.



has prayed for God's help in "coming through", passing over to the other side—into the light of a new life.

Baldwin continues:

"And someone cried: '*Sinner, do you love my Lord?*'"

Then John saw the Lord—for a moment only; and the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear. Then, in a moment, he was set free; his tears sprang as from a fountain; his heart, like a fountain of waters, burst. Then he cried: "Oh, blessed Jesus! Oh, Lord Jesus! Take me through"

Of tears there was, yes a very fountain—springing from a depth never sounded before, from depths John had not known were in him. And he wanted to rise up, singing, singing in that great morning, the morning of his new life. Ah, how his tears ran down, how they blessed his soul!—as he felt himself, out of the darkness, and the fire, and the terrors of death, rising upward to meet the saints.

"Oh' yes!" cried the voice of Elisha. "Bless our God forever!"

And a sweetness filled John as he heard this voice, and heard the sound of singing: the singing was for him. For his soul was anchored in the love of God; in the rock that endured forever. The light and the darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul.<sup>31</sup>

Today, the Spirit is still with Black Americans in their state of oppression and marginalization within the United States. She is

---

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 204.

manifested in word and deed, in song and prayer, in all of the myriad forms that a creative people have employed to evoke her presence in good times and bad. The Spirit continues to live out God's promise to God's people to sustain them in their faithful journeying towards that new dispensation where they too will be free of the "troubles of the world".

The Spirit still works to build and maintain community even in the midst of apparent fragmentation. The Black Church, that body of all believers of African descent in the United States, stands united across denominational lines and class barriers to witness to the Spirit's life-giving and empowering presence in the ghettos and barrios of our inner cities, serving as challenging beacons of hope and islands of refuge in the midst of a seeming wasteland. The Spirit of God

dispels weariness and faintheartedness. It connects ancestors with the living, mothers with sons, daughters with fathers, the uneducated with the sophisticated, and the impoverished with the affluent.<sup>32</sup>

It is building new communities, rejoining the scattered members of the African Diaspora both within and without the United States, affirming them in their shared oppression, but also leading them forward out of that oppression to new heights expressed in a renaissance of Black culture and the continuing development of Black theology.

Major Jones summarizes well the role that the Holy Spirit has played in the lives of African Americans, both past and present:

During the bitter times, the Holy Spirit, God's inner agent —inner to God and inner within us—played the

---

<sup>32</sup>Hood, *Must God...*, p. 210.

decisive role. It was the Holy Spirit who called, compelled, gathered, restrained, disciplined, and sanctified. It was the Holy Spirit who became our fortress against despair, defeatism, and deep-festering hate. It was the Holy Spirit who first inspired into being the invisible Black Church of Jesus Christ, and then indwelt those Black people of faith and kept the Spirit of Truth about themselves alive within them. It was the holy and personal presence of God's Spirit that affirmed the integrity of Black people's personhood and the legitimacy of their humanity, when the White-controlled churches and the larger society were teaching them the falsehoods of subordination and subjection. And it was—and is—the Holy Spirit of everlasting liberty through whom God and Jesus Christ stood in unmitigated opposition against every form and expression of race evil, human disregard, and personal insult. The times are not yet perfect, but they are better because of the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

I have, however, chosen for the last words of this discourse on the Holy Spirit, a statement from an anonymous freed woman who said: "I have seen nothing nor heard nothing, but only felt the Spirit in my soul, and I believe that will save me when I come to die."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup>Major Jones, *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 118-119.

<sup>34</sup>Clifton Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead*, p. 172.