

Ella P. Mitchell and Henry H. Mitchell*

Black Spirituality: The Values In That "Ol' Time Religion"

Gimme that ol' time religion,
Gimme that ol' time religion,
Gimme that ol' time religion,
It's good enough for me.

For well over a century, Blacks have sung a Spiritual affirming the value of their "old time religion." In fact, people of all cultures have been known to recognize Black religious richness. However, apart from relatively distinct characteristics of spontaneity in worship, and mention of fortitude in the endurance of suffering, there has been little specific detail in this praise of our heritage. What on earth is this widely admired phenomenon called Black spirituality? What kind of religion was it that generated the Spirituals in the proverbial "Ol' times?" Some careful attention to these questions may well provide models of great value for the present day. It just might be "good enough" for us today as well!

At the bottom of the typical vagueness about Black spirituality is the fact that most people have only a very indistinct notion about spirituality of any variety. Dictionaries are very brief on the subject, and even what they do say tends to use the term to define itself. It is said to be

* The Mitchells are Visiting Professors of Homiletics at the Interdenominational Theological Center.

non-material and intangible. But this is only what it is not; what then is it?

One of the best definitions has it as "sensitivity or attachment to religious values." Of course, one then has only to define "religious" instead of "spiritual." But the mention of values is very helpful. Authentic spirituality always involves values, behavioral patterns, and priorities.

To put it more emphatically, true spirituality involves a belief system about God and Creation which controls ethical choices/behavior and supports calmness of spirit in times of stress. It also prescribes a style and content of worship. Black spirituality adds only a typical testimony that God as Holy Spirit is real and present with persons, so that the influence on human action is not legalistic coercion but personal influence.

In worship the Presence actually possesses the worshiper, giving healing and making whole. Thus true Black worship is the manifestation and celebration of that Presence, followed by a life-in-the-world which reflects that same control by the omnipresent God. In a word, this is the best of the Black tradition of spirituality.

Black Spirituality in History

It would be easy to suspect that this definition of Black spirituality is a figment of an odd combination of romantic idealism and Black nationalist imagination. "It sounds nice, but it has never happened in the real world." Such suspicion is normal and even justified. However, the fact is that even though it is dying out at an alarming rate, the Black spirituality described here is not just a fact of history. It is still alive and well right now in innumerable Black churches and homes, and among individual Black saints.

Examples are in order, beginning in the era of slavery and moving to the present.

The myth that spirituality has made most Blacks too loving of their masters/enemies (to be trusted as soldiers) was widely believed among northern Whites in the early 1860s. This partly explains Lincoln's reticence to enlist Blacks for the Union army: "If I were to arm them, I fear that in a few weeks the arms would be in the hands of the rebels." General Weitzel resigned when assigned Black troops, but recanted, and his Black soldiers at Port Hudson made him one of the most renowned commanders of the Civil War. "Respect" was shown for Blacks only after they had killed hundreds of their rebel opponents.

However, courage in battle was not a matter of hatred for soldiers who saw themselves as "the Gospel Army," seeking emancipation from the shackles of slavery. Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, commander of a Black regiment in South Carolina, described them as having prayer meetings around campfires at night, when not on battle alert. Men in uniform prayed for freedom and peace, and many shouted, as in their own simple churches "back home." Their crusade was spiritually motivated, a blow for righteousness.

Higginson was deeply impressed by this naive idealism which was illustrated by the virtual absence of revenge as a motive. When a Florida town was set on fire by Union troops, it was northern Whites who were the inhumane culprits. When a young Black soldier of occupation kicked a young White aristocrat, it turned out to be in a scuffle with a military policeman, an encounter often justifying the use of deadly force. In other words, the young White could legally have lost his life. The young Black's professional restraint was monumental.

Higginson commented pointedly: "Yet the spot was pointed out to me where two of our leading men had seen their brothers hanged by Lynch law; many of them had private wrongs to avenge..." "...they rarely showed one gleam of revenge, and I shall never forget the self-

control with which one of our best sergeants pointed out to me at Jacksonville, the very place where one of his brothers had been hanged..." Such an expression of restraint, born in part of spirituality, is rare indeed among soldiers anywhere.

The cultural basis for the fear that Blacks were "too kind" is to be seen in Black historical novels about the Civil War period. Alex Haley's *Roots* records a hungry young White being fed by a family of slaves, one of whose number had just narrowly escaped death because of this same White. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* portrays its heroine, Viry, sacrificing her freedom in order to nurse her demented White half-sister/mistress, even though the family fortune is ruined, and she is helping at her own expense.

The validity of this cultural reading of Black compassion continues today. During the Depression of the 1930's, hoboes riding the rails illegally were certain that the best place to hop off the freight train and forage for a handout of food was the Black neighborhood. White salesmen knew that they could sell best among those same homes, because the people tended to be too kind to say no. Some were too ignorant to refuse the salesmen, but all were too poor to be expected to be kind, and certainly not to the very Whites who exploited and oppressed them. But many poor Blacks are still that caring.

In our own years in the pastorate, it was not uncommon to be confronted by a car full of poor Whites requesting and almost demanding that they be fed. Black churches in areas of transiency among migrant farm workers were known to be easy marks for food and/or money. They were known to presuppose an obligation to all of God's children, as members of one great extended family of humanity.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of Black spirituality in recent years was seen in the non-violent crusade for civil rights led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. To see hundreds of Blacks, young and old, accepting brutality and insult without well-justified expressions of hatred in

return was enough to melt the heart of America, at least for long enough to pass some long overdue civil rights legislation.

So there is far more to Black spirituality than the rhythmic beat and the shouting, the hearty amens, and the "home in glory." There is a strong commitment to a profoundly Afro-Christian (and biblical) value system and the spiritual/emotional power to live up to it. There is an ethnic nostalgia for the extended family village/community, in which all are kin, and harmony and generosity prevail. What might be called the race's "collective unconscious" is in fact a very conscious oral traditional upbringing, which originated in Africa and, by an amazing *spiritual genius*, refused to die in the arid, cruel desert of an American democracy dispensing freedom selectively. This amazing spiritual genius is the main concern of this article.

Elements of Black Spirituality

The spiritual sensitivity of the Blacks described above is not practiced by all Blacks, not by any means. Nor is the Black Christian population a monolithic and uniform group. In fact, there are many Black church members whose practiced worldviews do not at all reflect what is to be described here, while there are unchurched Blacks whose cultural orientation gives them a way of relating to others which appears strangely Christian. Of what, then, does this best tradition of Black spirituality consist?

The first element in this spirituality is a positive worldview dating back to pre-historic times. That is, the natural world is viewed as friendly, and its Creator is assumed to be likewise. The Ashanti (Ghana) proverb says it: "The hawk (poised aloft) says, 'All things the Supreme Being made are beautiful (good)'" This belief is parallel to the Hebrew view of creation as good: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31) Real

spirituality is positive about life and creation.

Among both groups, and certainly among Africans, this was bound to stem in part from a more hospitable climate than, say, northern Europe. Whereas sub-zero weather and a scarcity of caves could not possibly give a cultural bias in favor of a benevolent natural environment in Germany, Black Africa was blessed with warm weather. It may at times seem boiling hot, and the soil is strangely infertile in many places. But one need not fear being deep frozen if one chances to go to sleep unsheltered. And this has given a cultural bias in the direction of trusting a benevolent Creator. One can only speculate as to how much the present levels of Blacks' trust in God are sheer spiritual genius and how much is the simple tenacity of culture found among all peoples.

This leads to a second element that we might possibly label sensitivity to spirit, leading to God-consciousness. Unlike Western mystics who withdraw from the world in order to commune with God, the African soul finds spirit in everything and everywhere. All of human experience is explained in spiritual terms. This was long mistaken for the worship of objects, or animism, but the operative force of the worldview is to find God in all of God's Creation.

It is understood that some people encounter the Creator in one type of setting, and some in in another. But all places can be sacred, and there is no dichotomy between sacred and secular.

When the Nkrumah regime in Ghana determined to establish a deepwater port near Accra, at Tema, a long, detailed process was necessary to keep peace with the spirits that inhabited the lagoon to be transformed. In scientific terms this process could have been equated with a massive ecological impact study and strategy. By whatever name, it was concrete evidence of African awareness of the spiritual in all of Creation, and the response to the complications thus raised was to become an ecological blessing to succeeding generations.

In this country Blacks were and still are known each to have her or his own special "praying ground." Also, church buildings are, by cultural expectation, alive with hope and healing, but Black believers talk to God anywhere. Rather than cloak communion with God in terms of awesome encounter, the Black faithful have no inhibition about reporting detailed conversations with their Maker, notwithstanding the proper awe and respect.

The goodness of Creation and the Creator leads to what is perhaps the most popular doctrine in all of Black Africa and Black America: the Providence of God. The Creation was and is all good, and God has an ultimately good purpose for everything permitted to happen to those given the breath of life. Whatever the cruelty or injustice of an incident, the final outcome will be positive for the child of God.

To those who criticize this belief as otherworldly escapism, the answer is simple. Only the powerful can afford the luxury of the illusion of self-sufficiency for a season. The powerless never have any alternative to falling back on the goodness and providence of God when they have exhausted all available recourse. Indeed, if there were no such option of belief, life for the downtrodden would become unbearable. Along with providence are doctrines like the justice, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence of God, to implement the providential ends of God. The point is that although human mischief is well beyond human control, the One who does control history's end is provident. Those sensitive to the spiritual are constantly capable of sensing this care. They experience great joy in knowing so concretely the mysterious means used by God on their behalf in due season. In this knowledge they are freed to use the resources they do have to the best advantage, for their own liberation.

In such a context of earthy spirituality, worship takes on special characteristics. The goal is an experience or manifestation of the Presence of this Provident God. Yet this kind of mystical experience is

not a withdrawal from or negation of the real world; it takes place in its very midst. One does not rule out contemplation. Withdrawal to a quiet place or praying ground is common. But the mainstream of worship is a communal experience of the divine Presence, or the Holy Spirit, manifested often in involuntary acts of praise. In other words, a worshiper is blessed to be possessed by the Holy Ghost, and other worshipers are blessed vicariously just to witness the encounter.

The critical difference here is possession of the worshiper by the Holy Spirit, with resulting responses which are *controlled* by the Spirit and not by the worshiper. Of course, cultural expectations shape the possession experience, but the person in ecstasy has no conscious awareness of this. When authentic possession takes place, it is a cleansing and healing (often emotionally cathartic) experience for the subject, and for others as well. It is possible, obviously, to find inauthentic instances of possession. Clergy are often known to manipulate persons by unethical use of their knowledge of this behavior. However, insincerety "will out", and none should ever attempt to prevent falsity by abolishing the centerpiece of Afro-Christian spirituality and worship, which is possession, with or without the "shouting."

The subtle, often unknown facets of African influence on African American spirituality are far reaching and positive. Among the chief of such influences is that of the whole human (body included) being affirmed by its employment in the praise of God, particularly in the dance. This is holistic religion at its best, rather than the expression of ignorance and emotion which it was once thought to be. Indeed, the very strength of Black spirituality is in the fact that it is so literally holistic and specifically requires the involvement of the higher emotions and of the senses and limbs as well. When this uncommon inclusiveness is added to the earthly relevance of Black spirituality to the liberation of the oppressed, the widespread admiration given it is no longer mere sentiment. This tradition is the basis upon which

Blacks have survived with sanity and dignity and have arisen above all the fiendish mistreatment heaped on them, to achieve what they have achieved in the world today.

Contrasts with Western Spirituality

While Black spirituality can only be fully defined and understood in its own terms, it will be better understood by other cultures when contrasted in some depth with their own. For instance, the comparison of prehistoric belief systems in sub-Saharan Africa and northern Europe is enlightening. On the one hand, African bureaucratic monotheism assumed order in nature and a benevolent universe. This surely had at least some influence on the central significance of providence in the belief systems there. On the other hand, the violence and seeming chaos of northern European weather no doubt influenced a belief system prone to distrust nature.

The scarcity of protective resources such as caves forced them to be competitive and aggressive, often violent, just to survive. It was necessary to be alert, on the valid assumption that one had at all times to be in control. Gods like Thor, the god of the thunder, were not expected in the least to care. This is a key consideration.

At the heart of Black religion is the assumption that one can surrender control and be possessed by the spirit in safety. One is surrounded by the awe and permissive love of the extended-family community. One is blessed with healing catharsis and ecstasy. In a sense, this is a righteousness not our own; it has much to do with the geographic accidents of African provenience. It also may help explain the fact that no world religions ever emerged from the icy regions of the north. Even the Buddhism of China and Japan began in the warmer climate of India. The environmental influence on the dominant psychic formation of much of Europe has not prepared its people

to engage in surrender in worship comparable to that of Black spirituality.

What Western culture rightly labels rationality and intellectual respectability in the worship of the God of truth and order is also an insistence that there be no surprises. The literal foolishness of preaching and worship, as Paul would phrase it, is too threatening. And there are no cultural expectations or controls, at the moment, to limit the potential for chaos. There is no interest in having to say, with Paul, "For whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God..." (II Cor. 5:13)

Carl Jung once suggested that the chaos of the pre-historic demon deities of Europe was controlled by the cultural expectations and restraints of Roman Catholicism, and unleashed by the Reformation in new guise.

There is undoubtedly some survival of the anxiety of the earlier years in the collective unconscious and culture of Europe and its cultural colonies. But the biases of culture are not unmovable. Once one knows the name and identity of such demons, one can speak to them with power and cast them out.

One could then affirm and develop a culturally based (and therefore not completely unlimited) spontaneity, with all that this implies for spiritual growth. Overt human controls, or iron-clad liturgical forms, would be relaxed in favor of the warmth and unpredictable enlightenment and healing of the Presence of the Holy Spirit. The "risks" of religious ecstasy, once safely engaged only in hermits' caves and the ordered environments of monasteries, could then become the normal spirituality of the masses of Euro-American Christendom. A new norm of unthreatening spontaneity could gradually evolve, to the glory of God and the rejuvenation of mainline Protestant and Catholic worship.

Conclusions

This mention of culturally ordered spontaneity hints at the ultimate conclusion and practical application of this discussion. They arise out of the fact that there is no such thing as totally unordered possession by the Spirit in any religio-cultural tradition. Invariably there will be limits understood to apply, and strictly adhered to by devotees, even during possession. Afro-Christian tradition is no exception. Thus, Black spirituality and European liturgy are not polar opposites. They do have areas in common.

In the first place, there is reason, order and symbolism built right into the cultural expectations of Black spontaneity. It is also true that Euro-American liturgists cling to a glimmer of hope that even in their carefully prepared services, the Holy Spirit will break through, with proper decorum, of course. The ideal future for both traditions would be to synthesize into one tradition the strengths of both Black and White spirituality. Black churches that have achieved this goal already in their worship services are not hard to find. It is also obvious that the great increase in neo-charismatic influence among Whites of many denominations has started the synthesis among many White congregations.

However, there is room for improvement everywhere. Meaningless extremes of supposed spiritual expression are all too common among the Black churches of the United States. They have need of the best of both Black and White spirituality. Among Whites, the extremes of warmth tend to occupy the best spots on the television menu, while the frigid, rigid excesses are seldom seen by anybody. The challenge here is to find a way to stimulate the process by which two things can happen:

(1) The predominant ethnic groups and name-brand denominations in this country acculturate to a new trust and acceptance of

authentic religious warmth and spontaneity, without any diminution of what is thought of as solid biblical content, and maintaining such decorum as Paul himself approved. (I Corinthians 14:40) And, of course, there is the still valid traditional doctrine having to do with the Word properly preached and the sacraments properly administered. One simply needs to differentiate between optional facets of culture and profoundly meaningful symbol, in deciding what is "proper."

(2) The Black churches with obvious excesses gain laity who will demand better things. The problem here is not imbedded culture so much as it is unchecked manipulation at the top, cloaked in spiritual garments.

In the effort to achieve White acceptance of spontaneity, one opposes a deeply ingrained cultural bias. Open confrontations with culture are never won. The word acculturation, thus, is carefully chosen. One moves from within, and carefully times the introduction of acceptable emphases at the growing edge. With patience over time, perceptible change can be attained.

Meanwhile there is the hope that exchanges between groups, plus the rapidly increasing availability of cable television time, will so facilitate the process of spiritual acculturation that it will not take so long after all. For no matter how proudly we portray Black spirituality, we long for the day when the Spirit will so unite all the children of God that injustice will cease and the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.