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A Critique of Slave Conversion Consciousness: Its Implications For Black Theology and Ethics

Raw physical force alone has never been able to totally define or control behavioral relations between the oppressed and oppressors. Myths and ideologies have been equally instrumental in conditioning the behavioral responses of both groups. Acceptance of this premise makes it easy to understand why many Christian slavemasters of the American South, particularly between 1800 and 1860, intentionally made the oral instruction of slaves a priority. These masters systematically encouraged southern white preachers to develop special literary sources for this express purpose.

Literary sources for the oral instruction of slaves included such materials as catechisms, sermons, prayers and hymns.¹ These materials often placated the consciences of those masters who found it increas-

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¹ *The Religious Instruction of the Colored Population: A Sermon preached by the Rev. John Adger, in the Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, S.C., May 9, 1947.* Published by request. (Charleston: T.W. Haynes, 1847); S.C. Barker, "A Sermon to Servants." Lettie J. Austin, *The Black Man and the Promise of America.* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foreman and Co., 1970), pp. 32-37. Printed from Harper's Magazine (20:175, December 1864), pp. 64-66; Philip Barcroft, *A Sermon Dealing with the Conversion of Negro Slaves to the Christian Faith*; T. G. Bruce, *A Sermon on the Duty of Instructing Slaves, Delivered Sabbath Evening, August 23, 1846* (Georgetown: Wise, 1846); *A Catechism for the Religious Instructions of Persons of Color* (Charleston: Printed for the author, 1844). "The Subjects have been treated in accordance with the views of the Protestant Episcopal Church;" Susan Fickling, *Slave-Conversion in South Carolina, 1830-1860.* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 1924); Charles Colcock Jones. *A Catechism for Colored Persons* (Charleston: Observer Office Press, 1834); H. N. McTyeire, *Duties of Masters to Servants. A History of Methodism* (Nashville, Tenn.: N. P. 1884); Benjamin M. Palmer, *A Plain and Easy Catechism Designed Chiefly for the Benefit of Colored Persons, to which are Annexed Suitable Prayers and Hymns* (Charleston: Observer Office Press, 1828).

ingly difficult to live with the inevitable conflict they sensed between the ethical ideals of Christianity and the inhuman practices required to maintain institutional slavery.² They were haunted perennially by the thought that God, the cosmic master, would require an account of their stewardship on the day of judgment. This thought hung over their heads like the sword of Empedocles, threatening to sever them from the theological claims they used to justify their position of superiority.

They had both a theological and ethical need to resolve this troublesome issue. Failure to address it properly threatened to erode the moral vitality of the soul of the young republic.³

The primary claim here is that Christian slavemasters, perhaps more unconsciously than consciously, in their attempt to solve this problem, created a more complex ethical and theological dilemma. It can be construed in this way: Christian masters could only admit in theory that their slaves were saved by God's grace alone. In actuality they had to teach that God only saved slaves who fulfilled their earthly masters' code of servile works.⁴ This meant in fact that God did not save what the slavemasters considered slaves who were "bad niggers."⁵ Obedient slaves, however, were to understand that this notion of servile salvation that Christian masters compromisingly agreed to, consisted only of spiritual freedom.⁶ It was in no way to be understood as implying

² See Erskine Clark's book *Wrestling Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979).

³ William Meade, *Pastoral Letter... on the Duty of Affording Religious Instruction to those in Bondage. Delivered in the year 1834*. Reprinted by the convocation of Central Virginia in 1853. (Richmond: Ellyson, 1853).

⁴ This observation is made either implicitly or explicitly in all those sources that instruct masters on their duties to servants. Cf. H.N. Myeire, *Duties of Masters to Servants*.

⁵ A classic illustration of this must be seen in the reaction of southern gentlemen's responses to Nat Turner's Insurrection. See *Nat Turner*, edited by Eric Foner, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

⁶ Charles C. Jones, a preacher and slaveholder, acknowledges the need for compromise on this issue in *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes*, 1842.

political freedom.⁷

Masters of this persuasion thought they were guaranteeing their indispensability to institutional slavery, but they did not have the prescience to know that they were creating for themselves a more complex ethical and theological dilemma. Their solution clearly suggested that slaves were saved by works rather than by God's grace. The ethical (deed) was given preeminence over the theological (belief). Such teaching, antithetical to the teachings of Scripture, required that slaves become-for-their-masters in order to be-for-God.⁸ The righteousness of God was only available for those who fulfilled the Biblical mandate that the slave obey his master: "Slaves obey your masters for it is right in the Lord." As far as the slaveowners were concerned, becoming-for the earthly master took priority over being-before the heavenly Master.

Masters undoubtedly sensed the potential dangers inherent in the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Speculatively, we surmise that the following reasons may have been justifiable grounds for suspicion: (a) salvation by grace clearly suggested a spiritual egalitarianism. Had they understood this spiritual egalitarianism, slaves would possibly have deduced a social egalitarianism. If, before God, masters were as sinful as their slaves, the latter might rightly have concluded that they were socially equal with their masters; (b) it would have recognized slaves as autonomous moral agents before God.

How could masters have made such a concession without compromising the theological rationale for being God's stewards over the slaves? This question makes it clear why these masters discovered themselves to be in both an ethical and a theological quandary;

⁷ All those who wrote manuals regarding the instruction of slaves conceded this point.

⁸ Paulo Freire analyzes the problem of "being and becoming" from the perspective of oppressed and oppressor in his excellent book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1972). Particular attention should be given to his first two chapters. As a humanist he does not speak to the theological aspect of the problem.

between a rock and a hard place. Also at stake was the masters' claim of being themselves saved by grace. If they were indispensable to the salvation of the slaves by servile works, was it not equally necessary for masters to fulfill the duties of being good masters in order to be saved themselves? That being the case, were not masters implying that they too were saved by a lesser form of servile works?

A descriptive analysis of the institutional resources, (sermons, catechisms, prayers and hymns) will show how slavemasters construed the doctrine of Christian conversion for the primary purpose of acculturating slaves. We will call the master's definition of slave conversion the "depersonalized mode of conversion consciousness." This typifies what I have termed the ethical and theological dilemma. It theoretically illuminates that body of historical data where the oppressor prescribes all reality, even God, for the oppressed. Under this mode the slave is denied the right of self-affirmation. Self-depreciation and humiliation become normative modes of behavior for the oppressed.

Our major thesis here is that slaves developed what I term four alternative modes of conversion consciousness for coping with "the depersonalized mode." They were: I. The personalized mode. II. The Communalized mode. III. The tricksterized mode. IV. The secularized mode.

These alternative modes reflect slaves' attempt to undo, as well as correct, the damage done by the "depersonalized mode." For the sake of clarity a word of explanation is necessary about the methodological value that each of these modes⁹ have for a descriptive analysis of the ethical and theological dilemma in both the literary sources created by slavemasters and the folk sources created by slaves. We will address first the "depersonalized mode."

⁹ I mean by "mode" a particular manner of acting or doing. A disposition of the will.

I. The Depersonalized Mode

This mode of conversion, used by slave masters to acculturate slaves for servile labor, is in no way consistent with the ethical and theological teachings of the Bible. The objective of the depersonalized mode was to produce the "Sambo," and "Uncle Tom" personality types,¹⁰ in order to reinforce the stereotype that blacks were innately inferior to their white counterparts. It was to make slaves conform ethically and theologically to their master's definition of subservience. Christian conversion, it was believed by some masters, would make slaves more obedient and happier. Christian slavemasters not only produced literature for instructing slaves orally in their servant duties, they also published character sketches portraying the ideal Christian slave.¹¹

Docility was perceived by masters as a main character element for discerning whether or not the slave had been truly converted to this mode of consciousness. Other character attributes such as honesty, piety, industriousness, kindness, and patience, were all glorified and enjoined by the master. Slaves who did not subscribe behaviorally to the master's understanding of these virtues were stereotyped as sinful. It was more important for slaves to obey the instructions of their masters than anything else. A descriptive analysis of these sources will show that masters selected certain biblical passages to justify an aberrant social structure and were, thereby, unconsciously affected by their own creation.

¹⁰ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Elkins' presupposition in this book is that institutional slavery was designed to make the slave into a "Sambo" type personality. This argument is countered unequivocally in John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹¹ Cf. William Pope Harrison, *The Gospel Among Slaves. A Short account of Missionary Operations Among the African Slaves of the Southern States*. Compiled from original sources and edited by W. P. Harrison (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1893).

II. The Personalized Mode

Slaves made their own personal cases, having internalized their master's teachings about conversion, that they had encountered a God who saved them by grace rather than by works. They made this distinction in their own testimonies about the conversion experience in what might be termed the pre-conversion experience statements.¹² The following statements illustrate pre-conversion and post-conversion responses: "I tried to do what God told me but could not..." In the post-conversion statement a positive claim is made: "Ever since that day I have been doing what he told me to do."

The personalized mode of conversion took place outside of the institutional white church.¹³ This conclusion is predicated on the following omissions in the stories: (a) no mention is made of a white preacher; (b) no mention is made of the church building; (c) seldom is there any mention of the rite of baptism; and (d) the experience takes place frequently in an open space. Evidence of this nature suggests that the personal conversion narratives of slaves had their origin in what scholars have designated as "the underground" or "invisible church." It makes clear that slaves understood God to be in absolute control of their radical change experience. God, being "God all by himself," was able to execute the conversion event without the aid of human agents.

The personalized mode of conversion explains how the slave was led from a depersonalized mode of conversion consciousness to a personalized one. It describes how God dramatically, often by "killing dead the old self," takes the "new self" out of the "old self." This is seen in the

¹² *God Struck Me Dead*. Volume 19 in *The American Slave*. George P. Rawick, General Editor. (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972).

¹³ Cf. E. Franklin Frazier *The Negro Church In America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963). See especially chapters one and two. In chapter one the author describes how the "Invisible Institution" comes into existence; in chapter three a description is given of how "the Invisible Institution" merges with the institutional church.

following testimony: "I saw new Mary coming out of old dead Mary." Such an account of how God evolves the "new self" out of the "old self" provides the cornerstone for a metaphysics grounded in the social reality of the slave community. This spiritual metamorphosis provided the oppressed with a new language for breaking the bonds of absolute control undergirding institutional slavery. The once will-less slave, empowered by God's will, has now become the very opposite of what the depersonalized mode of conversion consciousness had made her. God, who created the first self that was depersonalized by slavery, makes "what ought to have been" out of "what ought not have been." In this divine act of recreation and redemption the theological is given its proper place of preeminence over the ethical, that is to say, the converted has been properly equipped to obey God above the master. For this reason gratitude becomes the dominant theme in the post-conversion sections of the narratives.

III. The Communalized Mode

The personalized mode of conversion consciousness gave slaves a positive sense of selfhood and individualism that was the prerequisite for building a community of spiritual freedom in God and Jesus Christ. Oppression itself created a pathological understanding of community for master and slave, as slaves such as Frederick Douglass attest. The language of spiritual songs became slaves' way of translating the personalized mode of conversion consciousness into a communalized mode.¹⁴ It was their means of objectifying what had happened to them individually. It was also their method of maintaining creative tension between the theological (being) and the ethical (reflective doing).

The poets of the spiritual songs knew first hand the inherent contradictions that were derived from separating the theological from the

¹⁴ James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Vicking Press Publishers, 1925).

ethical. Salvation by grace alone did not preempt the necessity for good works. Instead it demanded them on a consistent basis. This claim can best be illustrated by the traditional spiritual "Have You Got Good Religion?" Stylized in the manner of catechetical rhetoric the converted community, predicated on its conversion experience with God, constructed its own critical means of examining everyone who claimed to have experienced "the travel of the soul." This, as did other songs, often implied the dialogical character of the community's consciousness. The song leader initiated the inquiry for all professed believers. "Have you got good religion?" Everybody in the community of believers knew that "good religion" entailed more than verbal affirmations ("certainly Lord") and theological rhetoric. Bearers of "good religion" were required to demonstrate it in their ethical conduct and exemplify it in their daily works.

The community would remind itself individually and collectively that it was answering itself and God. All responses of "certainly Lord" were being monitored by the giver of "good religion." It was not enough to answer according to the community's expectation of itself. The proof of "good religion" had to be embodied in its witness. Similarly, "Do you love everybody?" was the moral acid test that every claimer of "good religion" had to pass. If God made "good religion" for everybody, he made its bearers "love everybody." There was no room in the community for flippant attitudes on this matter. The possessors of such attitudes were warned by the community of the consequences of their behavior.

You better mind, you better mind

You got to give an account at The Judgment

You better mind.¹⁵

Slaves, through the communalized mode of conversion consciousness, found a way to create a community of spiritual freedom within

¹⁵ *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*. John W. Work, Editor. (New York: Bonanza Book 1940) p. 212.

institutional slavery. This was the slave community's normative response for correcting the depersonalized mode of conversion consciousness.

IV. The Tricksterized Mode

The tricksterized mode of conversion consciousness is typified in what is referred to as the trickster tales of the slave community—specifically the “brer Rabbit” stories.¹⁶ Slaves undoubtedly used these stories to teach each generation the psychological techniques of survival with each other as well as with capricious masters and overseers. This was necessary because oppression magnified such moral issues as greed, exploitation, and distrust. Tricksterized consciousness taught the realism and necessity of such behavior. Slaves adopted their animal friend “brer Rabbit” as their trickster symbol because of his size and meager strength. They saw in this little creature one who was able to be and do what he willed in a world of nature ruled by the law of the survival of the fittest. They were encouraged by the fact that “Rabbit” prevailed in the face of what appeared to be nature's absurdity. “Brer Rabbit,” they saw, survived by using his meager strength deceptively, manifesting it in the form of wit, humor, and innocence.

Tricksterized conversion consciousness was an atypical response to the Christian master's definitions of ethical and theological behavior. Slaves sensed the limitations of Christian language as taught by masters for accommodating those strange human feelings (e.g. anger, hatred, and self-gratification) that conditions of slavery elicited from them. They needed an alternative means of displaying the purity of their feelings to each other while concealing them from their masters.

The tricksterized mode allowed them to do this in the following

¹⁶ William T. Faulkner, *The Days When The Animals Talked: Black American Folktales and How They Came To Be*. Illustrations by Troy Howell. (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1977).

ways: (a) it allowed them to use the depersonalized mode of behavior deceptively as a means of surviving absolute depersonalization. In so doing slaves valued the "nowness" of existence over the Christian requirement (taught by the masters) of waiting for a compensatory reward in heaven. (b) It allowed them to create a psychological space between their masters' heteronomous authority, thereby relativizing the power of the master; (c) it allowed slaves to intermittently pit the value of play over against the value of work, usurping their masters' power to define all reality. Slaves, consequently could approach the work project (although it was forced upon them) with a sense of freedom that was grounded in the reality of playfulness itself. This enabled them to gracefully maintain a degree of subjectivity amid circumstances that reduced them to objects.

The tricksterized mode recognized the complexity of life in the face of the master's oversimplification of the either/or categories of good and evil, being and non-being. The masters' way of demarcating human existence did not adequately express what slaves knew to be its ambiguousness. The depersonalized mode of conversion consciousness claimed that God created Whites good and Blacks evil; that God made Whites in the fullness of being and Blacks in a lesser state. The tricksterized mode of conversion consciousness demanded that slaves change the either/or mode of defining reality by inverting and confusing it. This mode of consciousness required that they muddle the ethical and the theological boundaries so as to make the re-ordering of reality an imperative.

V. The Secularized Mode

A descriptive analysis of autobiographical slave narratives, such as that of Frederick Douglass, will show how the notion of political

freedom was shaped to include the language of the American Bill of Rights.¹⁷ The personalized and communalized modes of conversion consciousness provided the grid for escaped slaves' new understanding of the political freedom promised by the Declaration of Independence. The personalized mode of conversion consciousness assigned God the right and power of both initiator and achiever of the salvation project in behalf of the individual. Slaves understood that God, by sovereign grace, had adopted them into what God had already perfected. They possessed neither the power of initiators or achievers. The secularized mode of conversion consciousness modified this perspective to the degree that it perceived the idea of freedom in a more complex manner, as a divinely initiated and achieved project requiring humans to become co-partners with God as initiators and achievers of social and political freedom.¹⁸ It is this notion that motivated the leaders of the Underground Railroad, endowing both the personalized and communalized modes of conversion consciousness with new ethical and theological impetus.

The secularized mode of conversion consciousness values the importance of human initiative and achievement in the liberation project as much as it does the idea that God is both the initiator and achiever of human freedom. This accounts for the reason the themes of "work" and "struggle" dominate the autobiographical accounts of ex-slaves. The narrators clearly understand that the realization of social and political freedom is the consequence of human effort in partnership with God. In the plot to escape from the land of slavery and flee to the Promised Land, the narrator ever remembers what it meant to literally cast one's self against the horizon of the unknown. Here God, it seems, gives courage to the fainthearted and hope to the hopeless. God gives

¹⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1962).

¹⁸ See my article "The Genesis of Douglass' Moral Understanding While A Slave: A Methodological Approach to Freedom," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*. Volume IX, Number 1 (Fall, 1981).

the lonely runaway confidence to face an unknown future.

It is my contention that the following theological and ethical dialectic operates in these narratives: "There is no being socially and politically free without doing what is necessary for the realization of freedom; there is no doing the works that make freedom possible without believing that God has already made freedom a realizable possibility." Frederick Douglass must have had this idea in mind when he said: "He who would be free must strike the first blow." That is to say, persons who would actualize what God intended for them initially must accomplish it through their own God-given power.¹⁹

"Work" as a means of achieving social and political freedom is given sacred value by the narrators of these autobiographical accounts. The fulfillment of the unfinished work of the social and political freedom of Black Americans becomes a mission of manifest destiny for those already free. The notion of "work," it must be remembered, is, too often, resident in the idea advocated by trained Black leaders, namely, that Black Americans could solve the race problem if they would only prove themselves worthy of the respect of Whites. Leaders such as Booker T. Washington, following slavery, would all but make "work" the absolute rather than a partial solution to the race problem. "Work" was construed as an act of piety, not so much to advance the toiler as to give him a place in heaven. It is the foundation for what became what I would term "the gospel of salvation by good works era" in Black American consciousness.²⁰

The discussion above has tried to show theoretically that the makers of institutional slavery produced a depersonalized mode of conversion consciousness for the utilitarian purpose of controlling the behavior of slaves. We have shown that slaves countered this phenomenon by creating four alternative modes of response. It must be admitted that,

¹⁹ Douglass, *Life and Times*, p. 144.

²⁰ A sequel volume to this study that the author is presently working on.

consciously and unconsciously, I come to the primary sources of the American slave experience with certain theological and ethical presuppositions by virtue of professional training which would have been alien to the slave. For this reason an explanatory note about methods and interpretative meaning is in order.

VI. Methods and Interpretations

Over the past twenty-five years scholars of the humanities in general, and of religion in particular, have produced a corpus of literature interpreting the meaning of slave life. A summary of the methodological presuppositions of some of these studies will accent the uniqueness of the foregoing analysis.²¹

In all the scholarly studies of slave sources none has presented them as a creative response to a theological and ethical dilemma consciously created by the White community. In this essay we are involved in a comparative analysis of the behavioral responses of both the oppressor and the oppressed. The makers of slavery interpreted God's nature and action so as to demand servile obedience from their slaves. On their part, the slaves, reflecting on God's nature and action in their own experience, sensed the need for alternative modes of response to their masters' behavior. The basic conclusion that arises from this way of looking at the data is that slave sources reflect more than one kind of ethical and theological response to oppressive religious indoctrination.

My critique of slave sources suggests certain foundational implications for Black theology and ethics in particular, and for theology and ethics in general.

²¹ I am indebted to the best scholarly interpretations of these sources from Eugene D. Genovese *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Vantage Books, 1971), and Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

VII. Foundational Implications

The four modes of conversion consciousness in our study will provide the foundational scenario for a new constructive statement about the task of Black theology and ethics in the contemporary world. The exodus metaphor, while it has served as a point of departure for Black theologians, does not allow for addressing the more complex issues of liberation. It is too exclusive in objective. Our discussion here has shown that the metaphorical language of the different modes of conversion consciousness produced by the slave community, in response to the depersonalized mode of conversion consciousness, more adequately reflects the diversification of the slave mind.

The exodus metaphor points to a God who emancipated the oppressed from the land of the oppressor. Such a notion of God as the liberator of oppressed people once had its own charm. It no longer, however, speaks to the imagination of African Americans in this epoch because it is ideological rather than factual. The question is: Would Black Americans (the impoverished many or the wealthy few) even under divine leadership, leave the United States for some mythic Promised Land? Upwardly mobile Black Americans think that America is the Promised Land. The undeniable fact is that the oppressed have internalized the Egypt of their own oppression.

On the contrary, the God of the different modes of conversion consciousness which reflect the complex versions of the deity represented in salvation history, is perceived as being of a complex character. This God "kills dead"—even the oppressed for the purpose of bringing life out of death. This God appears initially to the oppressed in the world of modernity as enemy and friend; the God who recreates the oppressed and empowers them to return with a new message of life and death to the land of bondage. This God, who authors the life and

death process, is necessary for an oppressed people in a modern pluralistic society.

The implications of this study argue that Black theology and ethics have the following task in the Black community and, indeed, in the modern world in general.

(1) *The personalization of theology and ethics.* Theological and ethical discussions about God cannot, in the name of scholarly objectivity, sacrifice personhood and individuality. The strength of Black theology is that James H. Cone, its noted proponent, has been very subjective in most of his presentations.²² His style is what the theoreticians of the White liberal theological centers call "sermonic" or "confessional." This phraseology, when used by many theologues of the White liberal persuasion, often has negative connotations. They commonly mean that a presentation is something to be enjoyed rather than worked at cognitively.

Rational reflection about the action and nature of God is viewed as an activity which White liberals work at cognitively. Worship is viewed as a ritualistic experience which requires less cognitive and more emotive activity. Ironically, James Cone gave us Black theology from a context that is stylistically antithetical to White liberal theology.²³ It is, in terms of style, more akin to White conservative theology since personal statements about God's encounter in the life of the person are valued above any claim of truth. White liberal theology tends to give more credence to what it terms objective truth claims (i.e., claims void of self-interest) than to confessional truth claims about religious reality. By drawing upon the sociology of knowledge, Cone makes the case that all claims of objective truth about religious reality are conditioned by particular variables of social reality.²⁴

²² James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).

²³ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

²⁴ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). See chapter 5 "Black Theology and Ideology."

The question is: Can the religious contribution of the slave experience save White liberal theology from its narrow understanding of objective truth? This study of slave conversion consciousness shows that emotions and reason are inseparable entities in the religious experience. Theological and ethical reflection that claims to be objective about suffering might very well rationalize it away. For this reason Black theology, along with other minority group theologies, must give theological and ethical reflection the gift of the personal, the gift of human feeling. It must do so because the slave experience teaches that liberated personhood is a gift of God rather than the mere consequence of psychosocial phenomena. The oppressed do not take the gift for granted because they know the marked difference between being a depersonalized self and a personalized self. It is God's gift in Jesus which must potentially be seen in every person.

(2) *The communalization of theology and ethics.* White liberal theology tends to presuppose theological and ethical reflection for a homogenous community. Some might even imply that those who cannot understand truths about God spoken in the language of the professional guild are not worth the bother. This study shows that all theological and ethical reflection which takes liberation seriously must affirm heterogenous community as normative. Heterogenous community must be seen as God's liberated gift to those who live under the oppressive illusion of their own self-made homogenous community. Symbolically, God is viewed as a parent who alone can create human family out of difference; unity out of diversity. "Difference" (otherness) must inform the way in which we reflect on the moral life. Black theological and ethical reflection that merely aims to occupy the same seat of respectability that its White counterpart sits in might be preparing its own demise.

Black theological and ethical reflection must create its own community for the reflective task. This must occur if it would share its gift of

heterogeneous communalization with White theology. While the oppressed know that the liberated gift we are calling heterogeneous communalization is God-given, they are aware of the need for the political empowerment of their reflections about God's actions and their response to that action.

(3) *The tricksterization of theology and ethics.* The slave community understood the capacity for trickery as a liberated gift from God to be used for its own survival. The oppressors always claim that their theologies are void of all pretense. They are considered, therefore, universal truth. Because of the gift of tricksterization the oppressed can see the defect in the oppressors' claim. The capacity for tricksterization allows the oppressed to apply a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to all interpretations of reality which the oppressor calls normative. This "hermeneutic of suspicion" is derived from the need to be, in the face of threatening odds. The symbol for God in this mode of theological and ethical reflection is that of the Cosmic Player.

The oppressed commonly interpreted the action and nature of God as divine trickery. Slave preachers often told Bible stories so as to accent the way God uses what other people make fun of to trick the wily craftsmen of the world (e.g., David and Goliath in I Samuel 17:38-54). The gospel narratives use this same technique to explicate Christological claims. Jesus' life, from birth to death, was a series of upstaging the expectations of what those thought to be wise had expected. The primary implication of this for ethical reflection is that "graceful play" must be perceived as a moral category. In addition to providing a "hermeneutic of suspicion," the capacity for tricksterization provides a "hermeneutic of free play" allowing for a psychological space of fluid motion to exist between the oppressor and the oppressed.

These are two indispensable contributions made by this critique of slave sources to the doing of theology and ethics. The "hermeneutics

of suspicion" and "free play" will warn the oppressed of the danger of worshiping creeds, doctrines, and rituals as ultimate truth. "Free play" will make the fluid motion of psychological space possible between antagonistic parties, thus freeing them potentially to experience the "both/and" of life, rather than merely the "either/or."

(4) *The secularization of theology and ethics.* Black theological and ethical reflection might stand to learn more from White theology and ethics on this issue than is apparent on the surface. This study of the slave sources has shown that the secularized mode of conversion consciousness marked a formal beginning of political consciousness in the slave community. It strongly suggests what it means for the oppressed to come of age theologically and ethically. God, symbolically, is the divine comrade who works alongside the oppressed in their struggle for freedom. The main ethical concept of such an understanding of the nature and action of God is "cooperation." Oppressed persons are not willing to submit to those beliefs and practices about God that have no political relevance for the world in which they live.

The secularization of Black theology means the actual testing of its economic and political viability in the modern world. The secularization of theological and ethical reflection is the consequence of human action. The questions which must be answered may be phrased in this way: How durable is the gift of personhood which Black theology and ethics received from the slave community? How valuable is the gift of heterogenous communalization in the political arena? How valuable is the notion of work, which received its original meaning in an agricultural and pre-industrial society, in a robotic age that is rapidly redefining the concept of work as a value? Questions of this nature need to be applied to the presuppositions of Black theological and ethical reflection.