"Their Souls Made Them Whole": Negro Spirituals and Lessons in Healing and Atonement

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Abstract

The Negro Spirituals of the nineteenth century sustained slaves' faith in God. More importantly, they influenced not only black religion and spirituality of the latter years, but religion and spirituality in general. Denominations across racial lines adopted many of the songs in their modes of worship and revealed a spiritual thread that ran through people of all faiths. These songs had healing power and teach great lessons about forgiveness, atonement, repentance, restoration, and social justice. These Spirituals are empowering and teach a lesson to America on Uplift and living up to its ascribed creed as a nation of liberty and justice. This essay examines two important lessons in the reconciliation of past injustices.

For nearly two and a quarter centuries, from 1619 to 1835, Americans of African descent were transported to the United States of America and the Caribbean to perform the manual labor that developed the New World. These Africans were subjected to inhumane working and living conditions. They were mentally, psychologically, emotionally, and physically dehumanized (Jones, 2004). Throughout the centuries, generations of African Americans were born into, lived, and died in slavery. But their corporate faith in God, as seen in the songs they sang, gave them the assurance of one day being liberated just as the Israelites were liberated from the Egyptians. The Bible is replete with accounts of God's steadfastness and loyalty to His chosen people. The Pentateuch in particular contains several accounts where the Israelites walked away from God, even though God never walked away from the Israelites.

In the midst of their work in a strange land, these slaves developed unique spiritual songs that sustained them in their times of sorrow, loneliness, and hardships. These songs came to be known as Negro Spirituals. They also became a source of strength. As well, these songs formed the bedrock of the Uplift ideology, a unique theory in black leadership ideology with particular meaning for liberating thought and values. As these songs uplifted the slaves in their times of suffering, they also showed their spiritual connectedness (Gaines, 1996). Through these songs, the slaves demonstrated that they were spiritual beings capable of appealing to God directly. The faith and confidence, with which they sang these liberating songs, indicated that they understood the Bible to be the only infallible written word of God. They looked to the Bible as the final answer to all the questions they had about the inhumane condition that was slavery. In a sense, they took solace in the knowledge that the Bible contained the answers to their questions about longsuffering. They believed that it was only a matter of time before God intervened and their situations would then improve. One of their frequent songs while they waited for divine intervention was "Trouble Don't Last Always," which was instructive since they believed that God was longsuffering.

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As the slaves were subjected to the brutality and oppression of slavery, the Negro Spirituals and the scriptures elevated their hearts and validated their faith in God. These Spirituals help to explain how slaves survived the indignities of their times and lay a firm foundation for faith formation within the black community. In essence, the Negro Spirituals of the nineteenth century influenced black religion and spirituality of the latter years; during the most difficult period of their lives in the New [and strange] World, these Spirituals inspired slaves’ belief in the omnipresent God. A protracted consequence of this spiritual exportation to the New World has been the emergence of a new paradigm to examine spirituality, religious fundamentalism to the extent that it has been used as a tool of oppression and social injustice (Sekou, 2007).

Unlike the music and songs after the end of slavery and the twentieth century, Negro Spirituals did not originate in the comfortable settings of recording studios with state-of-the-art instruments. Instead, these songs originated from the “middle of the hot fields” of rice, cotton, tobacco, and sugar plantations (Edwards, 2007). The songs emerged from a labor of faith. The great burdens placed on their persons called up their faith in a higher power in whom resided the grace and strength to make it through their discomfort while in the fields. With the intensity of the plantation work and the attendant consequences on their minds, the slaves needed a momentary psychological distraction to deal with the enormity of the work to be done. To keep their minds sane and occupied, they sang songs with great imaginations of one day making it to freedom land (Joyner, 2006).

During slavery, communication among the slaves presented many challenges. Due to the different tribes in Africa from which the slaves came, they spoke different languages and had different cultural norms and beliefs, which prevented many of them from communicating with one another. This difficulty was further compounded by the forcible imposition of the English language. The non-verbal way that they could communicate and overcome the various barriers was through music that transcended their painful situations (Hickman, 2002). For the slaves, music was essential to the soul. Even the modern world has adopted this thought. It was the one thing that made their souls whole. When they were moved by the music, the spiritual elements contained in the music provided them with temporary relief and helped them heal from the wounds of physical torture, psychological manipulations, and emotional abuse. It was the slave music that helped to restore the wounded souls.

The historian, Joe William Trotter, Jr., (2001) has posited that, “the creation of slave songs was a dynamic social and cultural process. African Americans adopted white hymns and folk songs but changed the words, musical structure, and mode of performance to fit their own vision—for example, by using African call-and-response patterns, which linked the individual to the larger . . . community” (pp.193).

Trotter’s contention seems to suggest that these African Americans did not originate the idea of songs that were inspired by hardships as well as their own traditional spiritualisms. A different consideration is that whites adopted black hymns as evidenced by some of the white masters’ attempt to muzzle slaves’ full musical experiences. African spirituality encompasses beliefs, norms, and practices that do not fit into the western or European mold of religious hymns. In the traditional African practices, there are some forms of chants that accompany religious ceremonies. Because these were their way of life, they exported these beliefs, norms, and practices to the “New World” (Hayes, 2000). Although they attempted, whites did not have exclusive control on such ancient African practice. Besides, copying white ways would not have captured the true effect and impact of the spirituals. The disparity in Trotter’s argument is in the fact that whites did not experience similar dehumanizing conditions as blacks. The vast majority of the slave songs lend themselves to the suffering, mistreatment, and working conditions in the plantations, and it was from these conditions that these songs emerged.

Another noted scholar of the African American experience, Benjamin Quarles (1996), wrote that the “American Negro found pleasure in singing while at work. The Negroes who followed [the] sea improvised with boat songs and rowing songs, had much the same rhythms as Spirituals. The rollicking steamboat songs and chanteys sang on the old clipper ships were the products of black-skinned roustabouts and deck hands” (p. 38). In essence, blacks did not have to copy from white rhythm as Trotter seemed to suggest. Comparatively, European folklore is distinctively different from African folklore. Hence, the African folklore is more closely identified to the slave spirituals in terms of style, form, content, and context (Connor, 1996).

However, contrary to the arguments that the origins of spirituals were influenced by the religious denominations of the white Protestant tradition, folklorist Cynthia Hickman argued that,
Spirituals reflect the many influences touching the lives of slaves. These influences include African origins, the English language, Christianity, popular culture, and the oppressive condition of slavery. What is most significant in chronicling the survival of the folk song known as Spirituals is the way that these influences were combined and channeled to form a distinctive type of musical expression. An expression that leaves many historians to recognize Spirituals as America's first authentic music... (Hickman, 2002: p.28).

The debate about the origins of Spirituals can be readily understood as a manifestation of the tendency to question innovative creativity by blacks. There was the sense that blacks or the descendants of slaves were not capable of original creativity. As the Spirituals have influenced many religions, the question has arisen whether in fact these Spirituals actually originated from slaves. The lyrics of the songs bemoan experiences of living in a hostile environment. These songs could not have originated from white-dominated Protestant churches, many of whose members held slaves and used Christianity to justify their mistreatment of their African slaves.

For example, Methodism was born in the 18th century in England. Methodists participated zealously in the crusade to end the English slave trade. However, in America the Methodists (in the former colonies of England), some of whom kept slaves, organized themselves into an autonomous church in 1784 at the Lovely Lane Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. During the conference, the participants vowed to free their slaves, but sadly, such zeal quickly dissipated even after the conferees declared that, “slavery was contrary to the golden laws of God” (Franklin and Moss, 2000:113). In America, Methodists continued holding blacks in slavery and servitude for another twelve months before the slaves were finally liberated (Ibid). However, Methodists in England continued their fight against slavery. In essence, the Spirituals could not have originated from European-centered churches. Instead, the Spirituals were “a desire for freedom, a desire for justice in the judgment upon their betrayers, and a tactic battle, the strategy by which [the slave] expected to gain [an imminent] future” (Cone, 1972:14).

These slaves yearned to live free in the land that touted freedom for all. In a sense, these Spirituals were indictments on the land that failed to keep its promise. In the same vein, the Spirituals deserve particular emphasis as original innovations with unique relevance to black theology in particular and moral theology in general. There are broader implications on all faiths because within the spirituals, there are elements of social justice, human relations, corporate faith, and lessons of atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation, which many denominations readily embrace.

The Negro Spirituals served a religious function. However, such function was not confined to the typical sense of religiosity but more so to the varied ways and the interwoven roles of social, political, and cultural dimensions of a typical African religion (Lovell, 1972). Since the Spirituals can be traced to Africa because the slaves originated from there, it can be posited that African religion has elements of ancestralisms – those norms, beliefs, and practices that are uniquely African in all aspects and are passed down from one generation to the next. Essentially, they constitute a value system that guides and defines authentic African spirituality. The practice of African religion therefore should include traditional rituals that define its Afrocentricity - a theory that examines and analyzes history from the African perspective. This theory further argues that human civilization originated from Africa. Therefore, human experiences, including religion, should be viewed with Africa as the primary unit of analysis. In essence, African religion was central to understanding the religious function of the Spirituals in the American south in particular and the United States in general. A particularly important religious function was that the Negro Spirituals built and firmed slaves’ faith, who, although could not see freedom on the horizons, hoped and believed that freedom was possible.

In the midst of their suffering, black slaves had hope that could only come from a strong spiritual connectedness. Faith then was their life-line that sustained and kept them as nothing else could do. As evidenced in the lyrics of some of the spirituals such as “Nobody Knows de Trouble I Sees,” which reflected their pain, and “Breddren, Don’ Get Weary, Breddren’ Don’ Get Weary,” which gave them a boost from their difficulty, the noted historian, Colin A. Palmer, opined that, The spirituals and the secular songs were the creative expressions of a people trying to make the best of their situation, creating space for themselves and tending to their own needs. Slavery had not left them bereft of pleasures or means of psychological sustenance. Their songs helped meet their needs, but they could not lighten the physical burdens of their conditions; they provided temporary surcease (Palmer, 1998:179).
Negro Spirituals served as resistance to white rule, oppression, and control. When white slave masters recognized that slaves were communicating with each other through songs, they made attempts to prohibit their slaves from playing musical instruments or singing songs. Despite efforts to separate the slaves from their music, these songs became “a stimulus to courage and a tie to heaven” (Odom and Johnson, 1968:15).

The songs became stimulants and rallying points for slaves to triumph over their sufferings. Songs such as “The Lord Is My Shepherd”, “Lord’s been Here”, and “Hard Trials,” among others, called on the slaves not to Wither in the face of brutality. The slaves were to have the mind of Christ and bear the suffering, knowing that in the end their suffering, along with their hope, would connect them to heaven. The slaves’ suffering could be likened to the New Testament epistle of Apostle Paul, encouraging the young Timothy to endure hardship as a good soldier for Jesus Christ (King James Bible, 2 Timothy 2:3).

The Prophet Isaiah prophesied about the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, as the “Suffering Servant” (Isaiah 53), and He will bear mankind’s sins and nail them to the cross. As Jesus bore these sins and took them to the cross, there is forgiveness of sins because of His righteousness. In a number of the slave songs, there are repeated references to Jesus as a way maker, provider, “comforter, friend, and refuge, rather than as liberator” (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990:351). The view of Jesus as a comforter was a knowledge that gave the slaves hope over despair. Even as Jesus suffered, He found comfort in God’s abundant love and protection. While preserving the distinct and full divinity of Jesus, it is, however, compelling that there were parallels in the human Jesus’ longsuffering with those of slaves. Both went through abuse of the mind, spirit, and soul. But remarkably, they overcame the indignities while staying positive in their outlook for a hopeful future (Vaughn, 1997). In a sense, blacks’ suffering in America inspired them to sing the types of songs that they sang, as they looked to the Lord with hope, believing that God’s children who suffered injustice and other forms of indignities here on earth shall inherit eternal and dignified life in heaven.

Although it has been over a century since slavery officially ended with the passage of the thirteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, some residual effects of slavery remain. For example, Sunday mornings are the most segregated times in America as blacks and whites go to different churches and houses of fellowship. Pastors and leaders of different denominations recognize and speak about this fact. Yet, their congregations are either overwhelmingly white, black, Latino, or Asian. The solution to this nagging issue could lie in a sustained ecumenical interchange amongst leaders of all religious faiths. Although such interchange is unlikely to lead to a mass conversion to one denomination, it can improve the prevalence of religious and spiritual absolutism that is at the center of the worship schism.

In very real terms, blacks and whites see God in their own images. For blacks, the spiritual songs that their ancestors sang in the plantations about faith and belief in a long-suffering God brought them through their suffering. Images from the Old Testament could be seen in the spirituals as they speak and relate to God’s intervention in the suffering of man and the oppressed (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). As for whites, they viewed themselves as the right and true God-like creations. They even argued that God was white (Jacopetti and Prosperi, 1971).

These spirituals have had a positive impact on black homiletics, as many black preachers have focused their sermons on the notion of freedom from fear, humiliation, oppression, subjugation, and diminishment as a way out of society’s confinement (Hardman-Cromwell, 2000). Notwithstanding the long history of brutality and indignity, in many black churches today, forgiveness is infused into the teachings and preaching of black clergy that echo the theology of forgiveness embedded in the songs. The words of forgiveness that echo in the Negro Spirituals were patterned after the Bible with regard to praying for one’s enemies and forgiving those who have wronged them. The spirituals did not focus on resenting or hating whites for their oppression. Instead, most of the Spirituals carried both a healing and forgiving message, which has made an indelible mark on black religion.

In the black religious tradition, forgiveness is a rallying theme in black churches. For example, many black clergy who have fallen short in their conduct and of the glory of God are many times re-absorbed into the church and the community after they have atoned and shown repentance. Black clergy have made collective repentance and forgiveness for the wrongs that were done to blacks during slavery and the Civil Rights periods, a focus of societal atonement, healing, and restoration. This paradigm of forgiveness and re-absorption is imperative in understanding the role of the black church as not just confined to religious and moral dimensions but also that it has a social role to play in American society (Taylor, et al, 1987).

The spirituals have also made an interracial and
denominational impact on religion in general. It is not unusual for predominantly white churches to sing songs from the Negro spiritual hymnals. The inter-racial use and application of these songs speak of God as a non respecter of persons. It was an act of disservice to God that the slaveholders manipulated God’s Word by interpreting the Bible in ways that justified slavery of African Americans.

In fact, slaveholders miscalculated blacks’ ability to comprehend the Bible. Blacks may not have comprehended the medium through which the Bible was presented to them, the English language, but they demonstrated their understanding by being doers of the Word and not just hearers of the Word. They had faith and exercised it through much praying and persistence. Their prayerful stance and lifestyle was evidently heard as God preserved their lives and allowed them to survive the heart wrenching sufferings. It was ironic that the slave masters who purported to know the Bible did not truly understand the biblical implications and its ramifications on God’s creations. Instead of using the Bible as a tool of empowerment, the slave masters used it to suppress, intimidate, and justify the inhumane treatment of black slaves.

The Spirituals have also influenced white and black gospel music. However, black gospel music is very unique (Goff, 1998). Its uniqueness comes from the triumphant Negro Spirituals of the Antebellum and Postbellum periods. To be sure, the Negro Spirituals were not confined to the antebellum and postbellum periods. Even after the Civil War [Postbellum], former black slaves held on to the songs that brought them through these periods. Towards the end of the nineteenth, and into the twentieth centuries, many of the songs were and are still sung in contemporary black and even white churches such as the AME, COGIC, AME Zion, Assemblies of God, United Church of Christ, and Church of God, among others. For example, Thomas Dorsey’s most famous gospel song “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” written in the early 20th century is very similar to the Spirituals that originated during the period of slavery (Weekes, 2005). Biblically, “gospel” means good news. In this sense then, black gospel music holds a different meaning for blacks who were and are acquainted with overcoming trials and tribulations (Jackson, 1995).

Black gospel music builds and focuses on the successes and personal spiritual victories of the post-Negro Spiritual period. Although there are different genres of black gospel music such as call and response, hip pop, classical, etc., traditional gospel music, however, is the genre that most identifies with the Negro Spirituals. Retaining elements of the Spirituals helps blacks remember the past struggles and their unwavering faith in God (Wright, 2006). Most black churches embrace the traditional style because they seem to retain the history and the originality of time and place of black religious experience in the United States.

Conclusion

The Spirituals represented a turbulent chapter of Antebellum and Postbellum America and are as relevant today just as they were a century ago. In actuality, the Negro Spirituals are an American original. They are uniquely American because they emerged and were influenced by people and events in the United States. The lessons of the Spirituals intersect class, gender, racial, religious, and geographical boundaries. The legacies of the Spirituals can be seen in different denominations that have adopted many of the Spirituals, with slight modifications, in their praise and worship and other religious services. For example, the call and response singing technique was a form that slaves used while they worked in the hot fields of cotton and tobacco plantations. Many non-black denominations use this technique to invoke God’s presence in their worship services. In a real sense, the Spirituals were personal and corporate pleas and supplications to God. The songs were also laments and cries. Various denominations have adapted the lyrics of many of these hymns and substituted them with their congregation-specific lyrics to cry out to God to save and deliver them just as the slaves cried out to God in the fields and in their many lonely moments.

The Spirituals have also impacted a unique form of preaching. For example, it is typical and common place for the organ and drums to accompany the preached Word. This style of preaching stirs up the soul and the congregation into moments of intelligible groans and moans that can only be understood by God who knows what’s in the heart of men and women. These responses then produce “joyful noises” to the Lord. The scripture admonishes believers and worshipers to “come into His courts with praise.” Such command required an expressive mode of worship. Black slaves took this command literally when they came together for worship, which in part explains why the singings were accompanied by “strange” periods of excitement even when the words were vivid with pain and could pierce through a heart full of compassion. The expressive
preaching and worship style that has become common in many white evangelical churches was not typical in the pre-Spirituais era.

It is reasonable then to opine that the emotional and expressive nature of the slave songs in the way slaves cried out to God had a transformational effect on white religious worship experiences in America. Many of the individual songs minister to believers and worshippers today who are going through difficult times and wilderness experiences. These experiences parallel the times and difficulties of the children of Israel in the wilderness under Moses’ leadership and their release from captivity and eventual entry into the Promised Land. Many people in our society today fit into this category. They are not quite sure about where and how to go about doing things that need to be done. Even believers go through these wilderness experiences—the feeling of being abandoned and left all alone.

The originators of the Spirituals were not just black religious pioneers but also American religious pioneers. The slaves had the gifts to arrange these original, personal songs which came from the heart in ways that conveyed the presence of God in their lives. The songs were and still are powerful. They make one feel as though they have had a direct encounter with God. Ironically, had there not been slavery, there may not have been the Negro Spirituals. One could argue that perhaps God wanted to use Africans and African Americans to teach the world about faith and forgiveness. The Bible instructs that we should forgive so that we may be forgiven. Through these Spirituals, there has been forgiveness. There have been inter-faith dialogues and inter-worship gatherings such as the Miracle of Memphis in 1994 between the Assemblies of God and the Church of God In Christ where atonements were offered. To a large extent, it can be argued that the Spirituals have had the most singular influence in black corporate healing. Just as Jesus’ death on the cross atoned for mankind’s sins, perhaps, a national atonement could carry a redeeming value of love and multi-ethnic consideration and understanding (Cahill, 2007).

In the Old Testament scripture in 2 Chronicles 7:14 [KJV], believers are admonished that, “If my people which are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” There is a connection of this passage to the injustices of the past. This verse speaks about atonement and repentance for past misdeeds. Through atonement, progress, sensitivity, and compassion can be achieved.

An important lesson that the Spirituals teach is that there is forgiveness in atonement. There is reconciliation in atonement. There is harmony in atonement. There is peace in atonement. There is value in atonement. Atonement will go to the core of our national creed as a haven for everyone on these shores. It is very conceivable that atonement after centuries of systemic mistreatment and oppression of slaves and their descendants might bring about lasting and mutually beneficial interracial relations in the society. Our current national discussion on race has been made the more difficult and problematic because there is yet to be a national mea culpa. Australia recently atoned to its aborigines for decades of indignities. Atonement creates an enabling environment for a racially tolerant and less suspicious society.

Atonement has a liberating power. There is a heavy burden to carry when evidence of wrong doing is present and the guilt overwhelming. Atonement does not lead to a loss of power. Instead, atonement frees a nation from the guilt and stain resulting from centuries of deliberate mistreatment and oppression. Atonement can be likened to the law of gravity. When weight is added to something, it weighs it down and keeps it from elevation. The guilt and stain that these Spirituals speak about are weighing heavily on America and are keeping the nation from elevating to greater heights in the area of race relations. But atonement will take the nation higher.

The Bible is replete with stories of lost riches. For example, one story was about Job who had riches but lost it all. In Job’s case, he did not do anything wrong—he was a righteous man. But, his was a test of faith. When he was found to be faithful, God strengthened and restored his riches. America is being tested with offering a corporate atonement and repentance for its past misdeeds against a race of people. Nonetheless these misdeeds, blacks and their ancestors have demonstrated their spiritual-beingness through embedded songs of forgiveness, faith, hope, love, kindness, and healing. The fundamental messages contained in the Negro Spirituals have made the souls of black folks whole. Blacks have been wise to shed the anger from the centuries of indignities, “lay their burdens down and feel so much better,” and not allow anything or anyone to prevent them from seeing their God.

Now America must lay aside every weight and the sin of enslavement that has beset it and be about the business of righting the wrong that necessitated
the Spirituals by atoning and asking for forgiveness. The Spirituals are calling on America to pursue peace with the descendants of the men and women that it mistreated; pursue justice with the descendants of the men and women on whom injustice was perpetrated; pursue Uplift with the descendants of the men and women whom it oppressed, denigrated and confined to second class citizenship. These lessons from the Spirituals will heal the nation from its self-inflicted wounds from protracted slavery, oppression and other indignities. In the end, God shall bless its deeds.

References


* The Literature and works on the Negro Spirituahs are very extensive and too numerous to list here. Instead, only a partial listing of the sources consulted for this work is presented.
