

7-1-1977

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Recommended Citation

Eriksson, Vincent E. (1977) "The Spirituals and the Blues," *Consensus*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol3/iss3/4>

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

THE SPIRITUALS AND THE BLUES

James H. Cone

New York: Seabury Press, 1972, paper, \$3.75

pp. viii, 152, Notes

James H. Cone is a professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York. He is from the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He previously wrote *Black Theology and Black Power*, and *Black Theology of Liberation*.

The book can be instructive for the Church in Canada, in that it provides insights into the psychology of oppressed peoples. These insights should help us understand contemporary developments among Canadian Indians and past developments in Quebec.

Cone describes the spirituals as having risen in the period of slavery, and the blues as an outgrowth of Black experience since the 1860s. Grossly oversimplified, his theses are: 1) Blacks looked on human nature as a whole. Therefore the spirituals should not be considered as a spiritualized form of escapism: a) they were often symbolic of earthly historical attempts at escape or rebellion; b) the image of the "darkie" as childlike and not very intelligent was one fostered by slaves as a defence-mechanism; c) the spirituals expressed an eschatological hope in God's deliverance, which was soon to be revealed. 2) Since the Blacks looked on God as just and as judging in favour of the oppressed, they looked on themselves as therefore God's people; and because slavery could not be according to the will of God, they looked on whites as not God's people. 3) The blues reflect not so much disillusionment at so-called "freedom" (though a bit of this too), but more the existentialist turmoil of having to make decisions in situations at the same time "free" and still oppressed — often arbitrarily dangerous to life; yet the blues, *particularly* in their sexual aspect, express again a wholeness of human nature absent among whites.

Some quotes may best serve to illustrate the above:

... "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" referred to the "idea of escape by 'chariot', that is, by means which a company could employ to proceed northward." When black slaves sang, "I looked over Jordan and what did I see. Coming for to carry me home," they were looking over the Ohio River. "The band of angels was Harriot [Tubman] or another conductor coming for him; and 'home' was a haven in the free states or Canada." "Steal away" meant to sneak into the woods for a secret slave meeting ...¹ (1a)

"... I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery. Second, I had never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all coloured people of the south, free and slaves, find it peculiarly necessary for their own conduct and safety to observe."² (1b)

Black slaves are expressing the Christian contention that the death and

¹ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, New York: Seabury Press, 1972, p. 90. Quotations are from Earl Conrad, *Harriet Tubman*, New York, 1969.

² p. 28, quoting "Narrative of Lunsford Lane" in W. L. Katz, editor, *Five Slave Narratives*, New York, 1969.

resurrection of Christ bestows upon people a freedom that cannot be taken away by oppressors. They were saying: "We are human beings and not even the slave masters can do anything about that!"³ (1c and 2)

The blues affirm the authenticity of sex as the bodily expression of the black soul. . . . People who destroy physical bodies with guns, whips, and napalm cannot know the power of physical love.⁴ (3)

Hugh Trevor-Roper⁵ points out that heresies of an oppressive society often become the religion of a rising, previously subjugated people. Thus Islam, arising from Christian and Jewish heresies, was accepted by the Arabs; and Marxism, a Western economic heresy, has been adopted in the East. Also, he says, "When a society is conquered, and apparently absorbed by its conquerors, it often retains its identity by insisting on a religious difference."⁶ Cone's book illustrates this latter point. Among U.S. blacks, their conflict with white society led them to *accept* Christianity as a formative force for their society. Their songs were one expression of the resulting culture. It also led them to explain white society as having in reality rejected the Christianity it hypocritically professed.

In Canada, native Indians have recently been attempting to revive their traditional religions, or, alternatively, have argued that they were monotheistic before the coming of the white man. Christianity, these Indians argue, belongs to whites, and its application to them has been accompanied by the destruction of their personhood and of their peoplehood, in destruction of respect of young for elders, in alcoholism and moral degeneration. Therefore, in an attempt to recover the sense of worth of persons and community they assert their own religion over against Christianity.

In Quebec, survival of conquest for a long time expressed itself religiously in terms of Roman Catholic vs. Protestant. Protestants were seen as potential sell-outs on the road to anglicization.⁷ Somewhat like that of the U.S. blacks, Quebec culture has produced a very much greater volume of both folk-songs and literature than has English Canada.

If the Church in Canada is not to continue fractured in spirit as well as in organization, and if it is not to be saddled with the image of being a tool of oppression, we need, to a much greater extent than previously, both to study and even more necessarily to become involved in the needs of oppressed or alienated groups within our country. We have often almost solely turned our attention to such people overseas. The work of Pastor Fulmer around Kenora, and Project North, are steps in this direction. I would see this as the chief lesson from a book like Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues*.

More directly, I shall feel hesitant from now on about singing *any* of the spirituals because of the feeling of the possibility of desecration.

Vincent E. Eriksson

3 p. 92.

4 p. 132.

5 For instance, in *The Rise of Christian Europe*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1965, pp. 57, 84-85, 152. I believe Trevor-Roper's argument can be regarded as a further development of Arnold Toynbee's description of the place of religion (his *Study of History*).

6 Trevor-Roper, p. 84.

7 A recent statement of this point is found in the United Church of Canada's Department of Church & Society's *Issue 11, Quebec*, 1976.