The Religious Life of the Negro

Booker T. Washington

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IN everything that I have been able to read about the religious life of the Negro, it has seemed to me that writers have been too much disposed to treat of it as something fixed and unchanging. They have not sufficiently emphasized the fact that the Negro people, in respect to their religious life, have been, almost since they landed in America, in a process of change and growth.

The Negro came to America with the pagan idea of his African ancestors; he acquired under slavery a number of Christian ideas, and at the present time he is slowly learning what those ideas mean in practical life. He is learning, not merely what Christians believe, but what they must do to be Christians.

The religious ideas which the Negroes brought with them to America from Africa were the fragments of a system of thought and custom, which, in its general features, is common to most barbarous people. What we call "fetichism" is, I suppose, merely the childish way of looking at and explaining the world, which did not, in the case of the people of West Africa, preclude a belief in the one true God, although He was regarded by them as far away and not interested in the little affairs of men.

But the peculiarity of their primitive religion, as I have learned from a very interesting book written by one who has been many years a missionary in Africa, consists in this, that it sought for its adherents a purely "physical salvation."

In the religion of the native African there was, generally speaking, no place of future reward or punishment, no heaven and no hell, as we are accustomed to conceive them. For this reason, the Negro had little sense of sin. He was not tortured by doubts and fears, which are so common and, we sometimes feel, so necessary a part of the religious experiences of Christians. The evils he knew were present and physical.

During the period of servitude in the New World, the Negro race did not wholly forget the traditions and habits of thought that it brought from Africa. But it added to its ancestral stock certain new ideas.

Slavery, with all its disadvantages, gave the Negro race, by way of recompense, one great consolation, namely, the Christian religion and the hope and belief in a future life. The slave, to whom on this side of the grave the door of hope seemed closed, learned from Christianity to lift his face from earth to heaven, and that made his burden lighter. In the end, the hope and aspiration of the race in slavery fixed themselves on the vision of the resurrection, with its "long white robes and golden slippers."

This hope and this aspiration, which are the theme of so many of the old Negro hymns, found expression in the one institution that slavery permitted to the Negro people — the Negro Church. It was natural and inevitable that the Negro Church, coming into existence as it did under slavery, should permit the religious life of the Negro to express itself in ways almost wholly detached from morality. There was little in slavery to encourage the sense of personal responsibility.

The attitude of some Negro communities in this respect is very clearly illustrated in the story of the slave who was a "professor" of religion, in the current phrase of the time, but made his master so much trouble by his persistence in certain immoral practices that it was finally necessary to call in a clergyman to try to reform him. The clergyman made the attempt, and sought to bring the terrors of the law to bear upon the slave's conscience.

"Look yeah, Massa," said the culprit, "don't de Scripture say, Dem who b'lieves an' is baptize' shall be saved?"

"Certainly," was the reply, and the clergyman went on to explain the passage to him, but the slave interrupted him again.

"Jus' you tell me now, Massa, don't de good book say dese words: 'Dem as b'lieve and is baptize' shall be saved?'"

"Yes, but — "

"Dat's all I want to know, sar. Now, wat's de use of talkin' to me. You ain't ago'n to make me believe wat de blessed Lord say ain't so, not if you tries forever."

This illustrates one of the difficulties that we have to contend with to−day. In our Tuskegee Negro Conference, we have constantly to insist that the people draw moral distinctions within the limits of their own communities, that they get rid of immoral ministers and school−teachers, and refuse to associate with people whom they know to be guilty of immoral practices.

It has been said that the trouble with the Negro Church is that it is too emotional. It seems to me that what the Negro Church needs is a more definite connection with the social and moral life of the Negro people. Could this connection be effected in a large degree, it would give to the movement for the upbuilding of the race the force and inspiration of a religious motive. It would give to the Negro religion more of that missionary spirit, the spirit of service, that it needs to purge it of some of the worst elements that still cling to it.

The struggle to attain a higher level of living, to get land, to build a home, to give their children an education, just because it demands more earnestness and steadfastness of purpose, gives a steadiness and a moral significance to the religious life, which is the thing the Negro people need at present.

A large element of the Negro Church must be recalled from its apocalyptic vision back to the earth; the members of the Negro race must be taught that mere religious emotion that is guided by no definite idea and is devoted to no purpose is vain.

It is encouraging to notice that the leaders of the different denominations of the Negro Church are beginning to recognize the force of the criticism made against it, and that, under their leadership, conditions are changing. In one of these denominations, the A. M. E. Zion Church alone, $2,000,000 was raised, from 1900 to 1904, for the general educational, moral and material improvement of the race. Of this sum, $1,000,000 was contributed for educational purposes alone. The A. M. E. Church and the Baptists did proportionally as well.

The mere fact that this amount of money has been raised for general educational purposes, in addition to the sum expended in each local community for teachers, for building schoolhouses and supplementing the State appropriations for schools, shows that the colored people have spent less money in saloons and dispensaries; that less has been squandered on toys and gimcracks that are of no use. It shows that there has been more saving, more thought for the future, more appreciation of the real value of life.

In this connection, it is well to have in mind that the industrial schools have performed a great and useful service, in so far as they have impressed upon the young men who go out from these schools as preachers the importance of learning a trade, something of agriculture, so that they can give the members of their congregations an example of industrial thrift.

At Tuskegee Institute, we insist upon the importance of service. Every student in this department is expected to do, in connection with his other work either as a teacher or preacher, some part of the social and religious work that is carried on under the direction of the Bible Training School in the surrounding country. We are seeking to imbue these young men who are going forth as leaders of their people with the feeling that the great task of uplifting the race, though it may be for others merely a work of humanity, for them, and every other member of the Negro race, is a work of religion.

In this great modern world, where every individual has so many interests and life is so complicated there is a tendency to let religion and life drift apart. I meet men every day who, honest and upright though they be, have lost in their daily lives this connection with religion, and are striving vainly to regain it. There is no one great dominating motive in their lives which enters into every task and gives it significance and zest.

It is one of the compensations which hardships bring, that the race problem is a thing so real and so present to the Negro people that it enters, as a motive, into everything they do. It is this that makes it possible for them to realize that the acts of every individual have an importance far beyond the measure in which they make or mar his or her personal fortunes.

So soon as a man, white or black, really learns to comprehend that fact, he will cease to whine and complain, and he will be content to do his best, humble though it be, to improve his own condition, and to help his less fortunate fellows.

Slowly but surely, and in ever larger numbers, the members of my race are learning that lesson; they are realizing that God has assigned to their race a man's part in the task of civilization; they are learning to understand their duty, and to face uncomplainingly and with confidence the destiny that awaits them.

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