



# Spirituality and Black Culture

by Jerisdan H Jehu-Appiah

*What is the distinctive nature of the expression of spirituality within Black Culture? Perhaps, writes Jeri Jehu-Appiah, when an understanding of spirituality is primarily viewed as a corporate affair then there is something here for all.*

The expression “black culture” is misleading. Are we to consider people coming directly from Africa and those from the Caribbean (and in some instances) from the Asian sub-continent as “the same”? There is of course a lot of commonality between people from Africa and the Caribbean and, in as far as their minority status is concerned, also from Asia. But there are also substantial differences, in perception, in practical everyday expression, and in customs and conventions. Therefore the use of “black” in this context can only be a generalisation, and not an entirely helpful one. From the point of view of a common predominant religion, we will confine ourselves to Africans and Caribbeans, who tend to be Christians in the main, and not Asians, who are more likely to come from other religious traditions.

As a theological term, spirituality is a rather new one, but this does not mean that it is new to Christianity, or for that matter to other religions. One example of how the term has been used in Europe is found in Thomas à Kempis’ book, *The Imitation of Christ*.<sup>1</sup> The author presents spirituality as a growth of the individual in three areas: knowledge of Christ; movement away from the profane and secular toward things more noble and holy; and the deepening of an inner life.

His distinctive emphasis included humility, the readiness to be informed by Scripture, avoidance of sin through the resistance of temptation, and a prayerful life. Both medieval mysticism and monasticism understood spirituality, as indeed did St Paul (Eph 4:13), in this entirely Christ-centred fashion. It was understood as a striving to imitate and partake of the character of Jesus Christ – striving because any attempt or desire on the part of a person to be like Jesus, and to participate in his character, necessarily requires that one moves away from what was considered as natural to humanity – egocentricism, disobedience and sin.

This does not mean, as some think, that one becomes less human and more spiritual. On the contrary, it means striving to become truly human since sinful humanity, or the state of sin and disobedience, is actually an aberration of real humanity, or of “original humanity”.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, we can begin to understand spirituality in terms of a striving to attain to the original human state, being restored to the image of God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

The basic understanding of spirituality in Black churches is not fundamentally different from what has been described above. However, whereas in the main

spirituality has often been perceived in an individualistic sense, in the Black churches spirituality is primarily a corporate affair. This stems from the nature of the spontaneous and participatory structure of those churches.

In his description of Pentecostalism, Walter Hollenweger mentioned five factors that are common to Pentecostal churches. (Most black churches are of the Pentecostal tradition, be they of the Holiness, African Indigenous, or neo-Charismatic persuasion). The common traits include: orality of liturgy; narrativity of theology and witness; maximum participation at levels of reflection, prayer and decision-making; inclusion of dreams and visions into personal and public forms of worship; an understanding of the body/mind relationship, the most striking application of this insight being the ministry of healing through prayer.<sup>3</sup>

The overarching characteristic is, however, the heightened awareness of the working of the Holy Spirit, and the development of particular doctrines of the Holy Spirit arising out of this awareness. Therefore, spirituality is not seen in terms of individual endeavours (even though the individual is expected to benefit from the corporate experience for personal growth and direction), but more in terms of

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the quality of corporate spirituality.

Four elements are crucial to such a corporate spirituality: the corporate life, worship, the individual life and miraculous works.

## The Corporate Life

This first is a reference to the corporate belief about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It refers to how God's revelation of himself is perceived. In line with most Christian bodies, Black Churches are generally Trinitarian and Christocentric. The implication of this for the spiritual life is that God is not worshipped only and purely for his sake; worshipping him is expected to bring benefits to the worshipper, of spiritual as well as material kinds.

Only God chooses how he reveals himself, and how he may be known, and there are, therefore, many ways of arriving at a knowledge of God. We have the Spirit of God in us, and this Spirit is the essential condition for knowing God. God, therefore, directs how he may be worshipped, how one ought to pray, what to do about illness, and so on. There are no fixed references and each occasion or situation is open to new prompting by the Holy Spirit, and requires our intuitive response. The response to John's "test the spirits, to see whether they are from God"<sup>4</sup> is through sharing of the individual experiences of this one Holy Spirit from the basis of such encounters. God being one, and his Spirit being one, the different things revealed about him to us ought all to point to the same truth about him. Those truths about God are about the essential nature of God, which is that God is love, eternally and actively loving.

## Worship

In keeping with Pentecostal tradition, worship in the Black Churches is basically a celebration of praise and re-dedication. At worship, space is created for individual worshippers to recount their stories which show God's

gracious dealings with them in their daily lives. Because God chooses how he may reveal himself and his purposes, worship is not rigidly formalised, allowing for spontaneous response to the Spirit's prompting and assumption.

It is also accepted that worship should lead to the qualitative growth of the church which does not refer to the holiness or piety of the individual members. It is the progression of the church to the state where it begins to function as one body, held together by the Spirit.

This understanding of worship as spirituality stems from the idea that God can be experienced in worship. As people worship and consciously abandon themselves to this activity, they transcend themselves, are impressed by the joy of the Lord, are overwhelmed by his presence through his Spirit, and feel completely assumed by the Spirit, often moving into a state which Paul Tillich described as "ecstasy".<sup>5</sup> A more proper description would be 're-conversion'.

Re-conversion describes the dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit whereby believers are brought to new experiences of the working of God and are re-directed toward newer faith and dedication. Re-conversion rejects the notion that conversion is a one-off one-day occurrence, but understands it is a life-long process, leading to maturity in Christ. Corporate worship is seen as the most efficacious means of attaining this gracious state. As the congregation together invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit, individuals become aware of their sin and sinfulness. However, because they are unable to rid themselves of sin and guilt they must abandon themselves to God, who alone can remove sin. In this sense of abandonment they experience God's gracious power. "We can know God through praising Him, for the very nature of God impels praise."<sup>6</sup>

## The Individual Life

Most black people tend to find a religious dimension in everything, as many writers and

commentators have noted.<sup>7</sup> The Spirit of God is by implication operational in the same way at worship, at work, and at recreation, because one is never outside of the oversight of God. Consequently, behaviour cannot be separated from conviction. The motivation for a good life, therefore, stems from the desire to be able always to access God's favour and mercies.

## Miraculous Works

Among black Pentecostals, the reign of God is not just an idea, but a way of describing the activity of God in the world for the good of his children in this life, until the final consummation of all things at the end of time. Churches consequently seek spiritual enabling so that they may follow Jesus' example, not only in preaching, but also in seeking to do what he did in all its charismatic dimensions. This means, among other things, praying for miracles in the lives of the believers.

When Black Christians say that Jesus lives within the heart, this is no mere mystical notion nor some complex use of allegorical language. What it refers to is that collective consciousness of experiences that have remained with them, the enduring consequence of which is an emotive awareness of Jesus and his Holy Spirit. "Emotive" is not here being contrasted with "rational"; they are the two sides of the same human reality. Religion is perceived more to do with emotion than with rationality, with feeling more than thinking, because reason alone limits our knowledge, even our ability to express our knowledge, about God.<sup>8</sup>

If spirituality is directed at the human condition, it is enacted in regular and consistent aspects of the Church's life. The elements of church life that are employed are, among others: prayer, used as a way of "connecting" with God and managing everyday problems and difficulties; fasting, as a corporate act of "wailing and lamenting" for the building up of spiritual power and as a means of accessing God's providence;<sup>9</sup> healing, seen not as attacking sickness or disease, but as the

restoration of health (full life), release from spiritual affliction, strengthening of the body and mind against feelings of anguish, of fear and insecurity, as well as unworthiness because of people's experience of life; preaching – including testimonies by ordinary members – whereby the church is equipped for life and living in the world, including the building up and directing of the faith; music and dance, with intermittent prayer and prophetic utterances, as an expression of re-conversion through the abandonment of the self to God; meditations and vigils, through which the members associate themselves with Jesus' sufferings; and individual lifestyles of pietistic living, believed to assure safety and protection from forces of evil.

If spirituality has to do with the total being relating to God – the striving of the human being towards God, then in the Black Church this is pursued as a corporate activity, as a dynamic and all-involving process of salvation. It aims at the complete assumption of the self and its multifarious circumstances by the Holy Spirit, re-locating the individual person within the being and purposes of a gracious and loving God.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Leo Shirley-Price, Penguin Books, 1988. See also: Bradley P Holt, *A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*, Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1993; Pat Collins, *Spirituality for the 21st Century*, Blackrock: The Columba Press, 1999

<sup>2</sup> See Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992, p.26

<sup>3</sup> Walter Hollenweger, "After Twenty Years' Research on Pentecostalism" p.406

<sup>4</sup> I John 4:1

<sup>5</sup> See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3, London, SCM Press, 1991, p.111–112

<sup>6</sup> Jeridan Jehu-Appiah, *Songs of Inspiration*, London, Musama Church Publications Committee, 1992, Title page.

<sup>7</sup> See for example John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford, Heinemann, 1990 about African religiosity; E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare*, New York, A & B Book Publishers, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Matthew 16: 13-17. Jesus showed that Peter's confession of him as Messiah had come to him not through learning, but by the grace of the Father.

<sup>9</sup> They take examples from, eg, Acts 13:2-3; especially Acts 27:33; also Esther 4:16

## For further reading:

Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.