

Religion #4 african american spirituals



Reflection on African American Spirituals In his article Paul Harvey (2001) outlines the historical traditions in the African American spirituals. The origins are traced back to the late eighteenth century when Baptists and Methodists movements began to preach to black slaves. Although the mission to bring the Gospel was connected to teach the slaves to be more submissive, they interpreted Christianity values and morals in their own way suiting their physical and emotional purposes. The church was transformed into a unique slave religious culture and African Americans developed distinctive rituals bringing together elements from their African past. The religious life included ring shouts spirituals and chanted sermons. The spirituals in particular resemble an amalgam of evangelical hymns, black traditional songs and black southern folk music.

As the spirituals can not be attributed to any specific author, they represent the communal voice of the slaves who trust their faith in God. The call-and-response pattern followed in the spirituals, speaks that there is a dialogue between them and God. This indicates their innermost hopes for spiritual as well as physical freedom. The interpretational meaning of the spirituals is a decoded message for freedom from slavery. The author provides several examples to prove his argument, showing the Biblical connotations that most of the spirituals have. With the spirituals the African Americans are looking for awakening, to keep the faith both in God and in their hopes for freedom at last. In the article Harvey has listed several spirituals, illustrating the direct relationship between the slave who is singing and God. In the example of spirituals a double meaning can be felt. The word “ home” can be interpreted as safe place, however it may also mean “ Heaven”. Heaven is the place where everyone is free, thus the meanings of the spirituals is

converted to reinforce the dream for a free country.

The African American spirituals can be related to other humanitarian course materials such as anthropological, ethnographical and sociological. The emergence of spiritual churches combines purely ethnographic description together with the song texts and other ritual, religious gestures. One of the general questions that anthropology seeks to answer is “ Why people behave the way they do?” So we can relate this anthropological quest and why to explain why African Americans found shelter for their minds and souls in the spirituals. On another note, cultural anthropology studies the beliefs and cultural practices of people. So we can include a research on African American religious rituals and the spirituals as part of the cultural anthropology. In sociology we can explore how African Americans constructed their own social reality thanks to the spirituals.

Harvey (2001) points out that the spirituals were an active expression and affirmation of African Americans of their humanity as individuals, “ against the dehumanizing system of treating humans as property (140).” The patterns of the spiritual show a dialogue between God or the community and their personal sorrow, joys and aspirations. In the performance of spirituals the African Americans shared the worship to God as well as the act of communal support for each other.

Further reflections on African American spirituals can be related to their role as spirits’ guardians and what historical role they played both for African American religion and the U. S. history. As we know from Harvey’s article the spirituals were incorporated in anthems and freedoms songs during the 1950s and 1960s contributing to the freedom struggle. African American spirituals have a profound community-building power, adding to the heritage

of American culture.

Work cited:

Ed, Collen. Religions of the United States in Practice. Princeton University Press, McDannel, 2001