

A Theology of the Spirits

Kurt Buhring*

ABSTRACT

Anthony Reddie has said that while Black Theology has always spent a great deal of time and effort on Jesus, there has been “comparatively little on the Holy Spirit.” Recognizing this reality, one hope of this paper is to invigorate and contribute to a conversation on the Spirit in Black Theology. After a brief examination of the intriguing work of Jawanza Eric Clark, who challenges taken-for-granted views of original sin and Christocentrism, the paper will explore understandings of spirit(s) within select religions of Africa and the African diaspora. The study will build from these pieces with a consideration of possibilities for constructive pneumatologies within contemporary Black Theology. The paper’s interest in the Holy Spirit is concerned primarily with the relationship between divine power and presence and human potential and responsibility, and especially in creative formulations of this dynamic that call for human action toward social justice, wholeness, and positive transformation.

Keywords: Black Theology, Holy Spirit (pneumatology), African religions, African diaspora religions

INTRODUCTION

Drawing from ideas of the spirit(s) in African Traditional Religions (ATRs), Afro-Caribbean religions, and modern and contemporary Black Theology, this paper will begin to lay out a Theology of the Spirit(s). I believe this theology may help to address what I perceive to be an underdeveloped aspect of Black Theology, namely pneumatology. The Theology of the Spirit(s) I suggest here draws from these rich resources and conveys the idea of the Spirit(s) as vibrantly present and dynamically active in the world. This theological perspective offers a vision of a God who is one, though experienced in many ways; a God who is infinite, but is also immanently present within the world and lovingly active; and a God who is enormously powerful, yet is interactive and even interdependent with humanity in the journey toward liberation, wholeness, and positive transformation.

There has not been enough attention paid to the Holy Spirit within contemporary Black Theology. To be clear, within the religious lives of many African Americans the Holy Spirit is alive and well!. However, this phenomenal reality has rarely been reflected in the published works of academic Black theologians. This lacuna was noted decades ago by prominent thinkers such as J. Deotis Roberts and Major Jones. More recently, Anthony Reddie has concurred, saying that while Black Theology has always spent a great deal of time and effort on Jesus, there has been “comparatively little on the Holy Spirit.”¹

*Kurt Buhring is Associate Professor of Religious Studies & Theology at Saint Mary’s College (IN). He is the author of *Spirit(s) in Black Religion: Fire on the Inside* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) and *Conceptions of God, Freedom, and Ethics in African American and Jewish Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Both of these texts are a part of Palgrave Macmillan’s “Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice” series.

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This matters, Reddie argues, because “greater attention to the Spirit can provide a helpful means for enabling Black Theology to better engage with the lived realities of ordinary Black people.”ⁱⁱⁱ One way to bring about such greater attention to the Spirit is for Black Theology to be more progressive theologically. As Reddie admits, this may sound odd. But, he says, “One of the ironies of Black Theology as a largely Christian movement committed to radical, liberative change is that, while its central reworking of Christian faith and doctrine is radical in thought and practice, this work has still largely operated from within conventional Christian-inspired frameworks.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Though not exactly what Reddie means, his idea might be used as a stepping off point for more radical theological moves. Black Theology could adopt and adapt many theological and anthropological ideas from ATRs and African-derived religions while still remaining Christian. By incorporating ideas from these sources, I am calling for a broader, fuller, and stronger sense of Spirit. This Spirit is evident within the divine, the ancestors, and humanity.

A THEOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT(S)

A Theology of the Spirit(s) draws from a range of sources, including liberative aspects of the Christian tradition, ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions, particularly Vodou and Santeria, and the experiences of black and other oppressed peoples. In a significant sense, this last element is not only a source for my theology, but also the norm. While certainly not simple or monolithic, the experiences of oppressed people are the lens through which I try to encounter the above sources and the measure of various religious insights. In this, I have been influenced profoundly by thinkers such as James Cone and Dwight Hopkins. As asserted by Anthony Pinn, this source includes not only Christian, but also non-Christian and secular experiences as well. With the very self-conscious acknowledgement that I am white, male, upper middle-class, and straight, my work is rooted in African-American thought and history and strives to participate in the conversation driven by black theologians regarding liberation and justice-oriented positive transformation of society.

I will now unpack a Theology of the Spirit(s) by exploring concepts of God, subdivinities, the ancestors, and humanity.

In a Theology of the Spirit(s) God is understood as loving, just, powerful, immanently present, active, and relational. As expressed in ATRs, God is in all. And, while the Spirit(s) pervade all that is, even greater presence can be evoked by human activity, including in rituals and activities that move toward liberation, wholeness, and justice-based positive transformation, on both micro- and macro-levels.

Furthermore, God may be understood as an energy, force, or power in all. While in many West African cultures the idea of this force or energy is not identified with the divine, I am advocating for the idea that this energy or force is in fact God, which is rooted in perspectives found in East and South African cultures. Along these lines, a Theology of the Spirit(s) is pantheistic and understands God as an energy or force that both transcends creation and immanently pervades the universe, including manifestations among spirits, ancestors, humans, and other aspects of nature.

In its transcendence, God in this Theology of the Spirit(s) may be likened to the High God or Supreme Being in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions. It is the aforementioned energy, force, or power of the world, the first principle of the universe. Like an African Supreme Being this God is the impersonal God beyond God, or at least beyond human conceptions of God. Unlike West African ideas of the Supreme Being, God is not aloof or distant, but rather omnipresent. In part, this divine omnipresence is manifested most dynamically through the Spirit(s).

Just as in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions, in its immanence, the one God in a Theology of the Spirit(s) is also manifested in a multiplicity of particular, personal, anthropomorphic, and sometimes tangible or incarnate ways to humanity. In other words, in the form of subdivinities. This would include *vodun*, *loa*, *orisa*, *orisha*, and ancestors, as well as Yahweh, Allah, Hindu avatars, and the three persons of the Christian Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From the pluralistic perspective of a Theology of the Spirit(s) these multiple divine personae are simply

particularized ways that God interacts with humanity through a range of historical and cultural contexts. Importantly, such revelation is always partial and fragmentary.

This is one way in which I believe that African-based ideas of the spirit(s) may enrich not only the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit, but also Christian conceptions of God more broadly. In ATRs and Afro-Caribbean traditions, subdivinities are understood in at least three ways: as agents independent from the Supreme Being, as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the world, and as manifestations of God. I am encouraging a consideration of this third theological model of relation between God and divine expressions of the Spirit(s). For example, in the third vision, the Vodou *loa* are viewed as manifestations of Bondye (bohn dee ay), the “one cosmic Principle.” Likewise, in Santeria the *orisha* may be understood as different modes, paths, or *caminos* of God. In Joseph Murphy’s words, the subdivinities “derive their power from one source, a power so beyond categorization that it can be conceived only as a unity. They are different in the ways that people of different cultures approach them.”^{iv} Put differently, there is one God who is expressed, manifested, and understood in a variety of ways. As described in Vodou, no one *loa* encompasses the entirety of God, but each gives a fragmentary glimpse of the divine.

Taken individually and separately, the subdivinities are limited, flawed, and imperfect. While this notion of the divine might seem problematic to some Christians, in Santeria such flaws are appreciated as indicative of the ability and willingness of the divine to relate genuinely with humanity. In Christian terms this is part of the powerful appeal of a God incarnate as Jesus. As fully human, Jesus can literally embody and empathize with the human condition. While separately the subdivinities are imperfect, it is in community and in interrelationship that they are better and stronger. This sense of God as communal and relational provides a powerful model for humanity to emulate.

From this perspective the persons of the Christian Trinity may be likened to the subdivinities or lesser deities of ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions. I believe this may be consistent with how the authors of the Synoptic Gospels in the New Testament refer to the Spirit (*pneuma*) of God *in* Jesus, or even the way in which Jesus “gives” the Spirit, referred to as the Spirit of Christ, to his followers, who are then able to manifest it.^v For Christians, Jesus may be the way that the divine is manifested; however, that need not mean that Jesus is the only way the divine manifests. One may also recognize divine presence and activity not only among the conceptions of the divine among multiple religions, but also within and throughout the ancestors and humanity.

In a Theology of the Spirit(s) the idea of the ancestors is very much like that found in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions, as well as that expressed in the work of Jawanza Clark^{vi} and Monica Coleman. The ancestors are those who are no longer physically embodied, but who are still alive and active after physical death. Effectively they can operate in ways similar to subdivinities, interacting with both the divine and the physically living. Clark explains, “The ancestors model human fulfillment and simultaneously work to save individuals from destruction, chaos, and confusion in life.”^{vii}

Though still holding to a sense of salvation, Clark helpfully envisions the ancestors as mediators between the divine and human, as role models for us to emulate, as well as vibrant and dynamically active forces within the world, helping to foster freedom, justice, peace, and positive transformation. While Clark expresses a sense of Jesus as an ancestor,^{viii} and Coleman says the Holy Spirit may be understood as such,^{ix} I would categorize Jesus and the Holy Spirit as subdivinities,^x though the lines between such categories are often blurred. Finally, as in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions, the relationship between the ancestors and humans is reciprocal. The ancestors help us and we in turn can bring the ancestors to life through our remembrance and actions that evoke and honor them. This sense of the ancestors and the Spirit(s) more broadly places a great deal of responsibility on humanity.

The human in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions is understood to be valuable, capable of goodness, an integrated whole of the spiritual and physical, and able to assert free agency within the bounds set by one’s destiny. Further, there is a much stronger sense of the presence of the divine within humanity and the rest of creation as well as a more robust call for human action and responsibility for the development of the self and the well-being of others.

While some elements of African views of the human are evident within African American theology, for the most part Black Theology has assumed traditional Protestant concepts of the person, including the doctrine of original sin. Instead, drawn from ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions, a more positive appraisal of human character and potential can go hand

in hand with a sense of the Spirit(s) that is immanent, good, and powerful, in subtle and persuasive ways as well as a sense of responsibility and a call to action as we evoke and interact with the Spirit(s) in the drive toward liberation, wholeness, and positive transformation.

Integrating these African and African-based views of God and humanity into a Theology of the Spirit(s), one recognizes the reciprocal relationship between the divine and human. God is within us and all creation. We depend on God and God, effectively, depends on us. In short, we are interdependent. In *Working the Spirit*, Joseph Murphy highlights these ideas especially in ceremonies of religions in the African diaspora. He explains,

In the language of candomblé and santería, the spirit is ‘made’ by human action. This means that the spirit is made present by gestural metaphors, and can be localized or ‘fixed’ into physical objects and human bodies. But it also suggests that the spirit is manufactured by human action, ‘worked’ from more basic spiritual force into the special force or personality to be revered. Its life as ‘a’ spirit depends on the service of its devotees. A Yoruba proverb states this interdependence most emphatically: ‘Where there is no human being, there is no divinity.’^{xi}

So, God is already present, while fuller, more dynamic and powerful presence may be evoked by human action; here, Murphy emphasizes the actions of communal religious ceremonies. He calls this a “spirituality of incarnation” that “reveals a special reciprocity of spirit and human being,” which “seeks to empower the community.”^{xii}

Two broad ways that we may see such interaction of the Spirit(s) with humanity are possession and divination. Possession may be conceived of in different ways in various traditions; typically though, possession involves the divine as the primary agent who overwhelms the human. However understood, whether one is fully, though temporarily, displaced by the Spirit(s) or one is filled with the fire of the Spirit(s) and transformed, “When an individual receives the spirit, a part [of] his or her inner nature is also transformed to partake of the spirit’s divinity.”^{xiii} Again, in each of the traditions examined here, we already have God within us; possession or being filled with the Holy Spirit involves a focused or concentrated presence of the Spirit(s) within humanity. In distinction, in divination, or in more Christian terms one might speak of prayer and discernment, the human drives the interaction with the Spirit(s) and must interpret the signs of the divine and the corresponding appropriate response. Though the Spirit(s) may be active and present when humans act in religious ceremonies and communally, it is not restricted to these forms.

God may be present and active in very subtle, seemingly ordinary times and places, as well as in human actions that move toward liberation, wholeness, and positive transformation on individual and communal levels.

While a Theology of the Spirit(s) shares much with the rest of black liberation theology, I believe these theological currents are enriched by the sense of God and humanity developed in this work. In this theology, God acts as Liberator, but fundamentally it is humans who must work toward transformation. Such efforts are understood as inspired and sustained by God, who is active and present in the work. Again, in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions, we are flawed, but not so broken by sin that we must be “saved” by an external entity. In fact, we are responsible for and capable of contributing mightily to making the world a better place. We are interdependent co-workers with God. Such a view also benefits from the fuller sense of the spirit(s) evident in ATRs and Afro-Caribbean religions. God should not be understood primarily as transcendent and omnipotent. Coupled with the doctrine of original sin, such a view of God has long undermined human efforts of social justice and positive transformation. Humans working with one another and God toward liberation, wholeness, and positive transformation may take the form of resistance against oppression and actions that move us toward wholeness. These may be overt and “big,” but, significantly, they may also be subtle, and “small.”^{xiv}

In order to give a better sense of a Theology of the Spirit(s) I would like to close by highlighting one example, from Kelly Brown Douglas. In her essay, “To Reflect the Image of God,” Douglas examines the actions and beliefs of some enslaved African American women that display aspects of what I have in mind. While I am not claiming Douglas herself expresses a Theology of the Spirit(s), her work provides specific, historical examples that model notions of God and humanity that I would emphasize. Working off of Alice Walker’s definition of a womanist as one who strives for the “survival and wholeness for entire people, male and

female,”^{xv} Douglas details ways in which enslaved women would foster “networking and strong bonds”^{xvi} among one another as a means of surviving as well as moving toward wholeness.

In such communal networks women cared for themselves, their families, and other enslaved people as ways of resisting the dehumanization of slavery and fostering survival, healing, and positive transformation. She explains that this “enslaved women’s culture of resistance” and sense of family were based in African culture and further developed during slavery.^{xvii} Likewise, these women displayed an African-based wider sense of family that included anyone of African descent and was especially focused on the care and well-being of all enslaved children.^{xviii} Douglas writes, “The enslaved woman cared for and nurtured the children. Even in the face of enormous odds, she was the one who provided for their daily needs, such as food and clothing.”^{xix} For example, Douglas cites an account of a woman who would work late at night “to sew and mend” the clothes of children.^{xx} Such actions have theological grounding for Douglas, who asserts, “as enslaved women nurtured a womanist way of relating to their families and especially their men, they were reflecting what it meant for them to have been created in the image of God.”^{xxi} She also explains that for many of these enslaved women the presence and activity of God were “affirmed . . . in their efforts to promote life and wholeness for themselves and their families.”^{xxii} Given a Trinitarian sense of God as relational, Douglas adds, “For us then to reflect what it means to be in the image of God, is for us to be in relationship.”^{xxiii} I agree with Douglas’s interpretation of the theological significance of these activities and push even further.

Through the lens of a Theology of the Spirit(s), while God was already present, perhaps inspiring and sustaining these acts of survival and care in the first place, I would argue that such actions *were* effectively the presence and activity of the divine in these instances. That is, a transcendent, all-powerful God did not “swoop down” and “save” these women. Instead, a loving, immanently present God acted interdependently with these women in efforts to bring about survival, if not liberation, wholeness, and positive transformation. In these relationships of mutual care that Douglas details the image of God is made manifest and God in Godself is actualized. Such an interpretation is enhanced by a Theology of the Spirit(s)’ understanding of human potential and responsibility as well as its sense of the divine as loving, just, immanent, and powerful in subtle and persuasive ways that complement human efforts to bring about liberation, wholeness, and positive transformation.^{xxiv}

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Anthony G. Reddie, *Black Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 114.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Reddie, *Black Theology*, 123.
- ^{iv} Joseph M. Murphy, *Santeria: An African Religion in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 124.
- ^v Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 18; Heron, *Holy Spirit*, 42-47. Such “Spirit Christology” is more heavily Jewish-based and in distinction from the “Logos Christology” of the Gospel of John, which is Greek-based.
- ^{vi} Clark highlights three Atlanta churches that practice the sort of the theology he advocates. For example, these communities hold to African views of the human and deny the doctrine of original sin. They also envision Jesus as an ancestor and “make the ancestors central to the worship experience” (20). See Clark, *Indigenous*, 150-162.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 73.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 115.
- ^{ix} Monica A. Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 121.
- ^x Caleb Oluremi Oladipo, *The Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Yoruba (African) Indigenous Christian Movement* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 107-111. Oladipo explains how ideas of the Holy Spirit among some Nigerian Christians are very similar to ideas of ancestors in Yoruba traditions.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 180.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 199-200.
- ^{xiii} Murphy, *Working*, 184-185.
- ^{xiv} For more on my understanding of resistance see my earlier work, *Conceptions*.
- ^{xv} Kelly Brown Douglas, “To Reflect the Image of God: A Womanist Perspective on Right Relationship,” in *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology*, ed. Cheryl J. Sanders (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 68.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 72.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 68-69.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 69-71.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 70.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.* In fascinating ways, there are many parallels between Douglas’ work and that of Melissa Raphael’s treatment Jewish women’s mutual care networks in Holocaust concentration camps. Raphael argues that God as *Shekhinah* was present in such activities and that these actions further evoked greater divine presence. Raphael builds off the idea of mending of clothing especially as illustrative of how these seemingly ordinary actions were actually extraordinarily cosmic in scope as they served to mend the world and even God. While I am not suggesting any direct influence of ideas, the similarities between the activities described by Douglas and Raphael are remarkable to me.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 77.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 76.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 77.
- ^{xxiv} To be sure, there are dangers in making the claim to know the will of God or that one’s actions are carrying out such a clear directive. Reddie writes of Cone speaking during an address at the Queen’s Foundation in Birmingham in 1997 and paraphrases him as saying, “the most dangerous people in the world are those who claim to have an untrammled line of communication to God and know exactly what God wants and what can be construed as God’s will. In effect, these are the scary people who later claim, ‘God told me to do it,’ when they are arrested for some extreme atrocity” (*Black Theology*, 54). Both Cone and Reddie appeal to a communal and skeptical sense of discernment as helpfully, though not entirely, moving closer to more reasonable claims of efforts to try to bring about liberation, wholeness, and positive transformation. See Reddie, *Theologising*, 240.