

Q from Deryl: Howard Thurman and Spirituals (Eileen Guenther)

1. For Thurman, the spirituals seem to have been about both protest, or resistance, and hope. Are they still seen and sung that way today, or have they been “domesticated” over time?

Spirituals are still sung today for the same reasons they were originally created: as songs of freedom and songs of hope and comfort. (There are 40 themes addressed by Spirituals, the most prevalent being songs focusing on hope and freedom.)

Spirituals were sung with new texts during the Civil Rights Movement, texts created to reflect situations and people that challenged the movement and its goals. Today they are still heard in protests — “This Little Light of Mine” and “I Shall Not be Moved” particularly come to mind, which are frequently sung in protests today as people react against police brutality and racial injustice.

Spirituals are sung in a wide variety of venues today, from church services to school, university and community chorus concerts. They remain a vehicle for reaching the hearts of people.

2. How should we think about the legacy of the spirituals – something that almost exclusively belongs to or is claimed by the enslaved community that originated them and their descendants, or to everyone?

This is a multi-faceted question. In spite of their connection to the painful era of historic slavery, Spirituals are rightly claimed and sung by those who are descendants of people who were enslaved. They have broadened their impact, however, as they are sung by those who – regardless of race – look to them for comfort and hope as well as those who look for empowerment in the face of oppression.

3. Churches and persons of many different traditions and racial and ethnic backgrounds now sing and love the spirituals. What should they – and especially those who do not claim any familial link to the slaves who first sang these songs – be aware of in performing and enjoying these powerful songs?

Those who sing Spirituals should be aware of the context from which this powerful music came: slavery. That such music could be created in circumstances of such exploitation, disrespect, and outright abuse, is a miracle. It is also a miracle that those enslaved became Christians at all when Christianity offered them few meaningful models and little incentive for conversion – and this includes both the church itself and owners who claimed to be Christian.

4. How can churches and choirs of all denominations and backgrounds use these songs to enhance their own experience of worship, but also remain true to the testimonies of the songs themselves?

Choirs of all sorts can sing these songs faithfully IF they address the “soil” that gave them birth. Performers should study the history and they delve into the first-person narratives to give themselves a sense of this. The narratives can be read aloud in concerts or services where Spirituals are sung and thereby dramatically deepen the impact of the music as well as demonstrate the faithfulness to its origin that the music requires.

5. The spirituals have, of course, been widely sung and used in “secular” culture, as well as in churches and by religious groups. Are they still “religious” songs? Has their religious message been diluted by wide usage outside the church---especially in social and political movements?

Spirituals are “religious” songs, regardless of the venue of the singing. Some songs are more deeply religious than others and some convey protest that is useful in the “secular world.” If one knows the story behind the music, the integrity of their origin and religious nature are not diluted by the venue of the performance.