SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

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IT IS SOMETIMES SAID THAT the wealth of the Third World is in the realm of the spiritual. The two works I shall examine in this article both show the primacy of spiritual matters to some Caribbean people. One of the authors is a Jamaican poet-mystic who explores her own experiences of the transcendent. The other is a Trinidadian novelist who sympathetically explores the spirituality of a small religious community in Trinidad and Tobago. Both are artists who see art as a way of advancing spiritual consciousness.

I begin by looking at some poems in *Heartease*,[1] Lorna Goodison's third book of poetry. The persona of this collection is conscious of her spiritual mission. In the opening poem she declares:

> I shall light a candle of understanding in thine heart
> which shall not be put out.
>
> (p 7)

Before the lighting of the candle, debts will be paid and fences mended; the wounds of the past and enemies who appear as friends will be laid to rest. She will no longer put boundaries around her life for she knows that serendipity will always destroy them. The ideal is a harmonious God-centred life:

> All things in their place then, in this many chambered heart.
> For each thing a place and for HIM a place apart.
>
> (p 7)

She states what she hopes to accomplish by her candle with the everlasting flame:

> By the illumination of that candle
> exit, death and fear and doubt
> here love and possibility
> within a lit heart, shining out.
>
> (p 7)

This sense of having a spiritual mission is again expressed in 'Heartease New England 1987'. Here the persona searches for meaning in the contemplation of trees:

> In the fall I search for signs
> a pattern in the New England flaming trees
> 'What is my mission? Speak, leaves'
> (for all journeys have hidden missions)
> The trees before dying, only flame brighter
> maybe that is the answer, live glowing while you can.
> (p 40)

After seeing an African telling himself a story in Harvard Square the persona concludes:

> And I have stories too, until I tell them
> I will not find release, that is my mission.
> (p 40)

The nature of the mission is developed and clarified by the end of the poem:

> For my mission this last life is certainly this
> to be a sojourner poet carolling for peace
> calling lost souls to the way of Heartease.
> (p 41)

The persona also describes her spiritual mission elsewhere in the collection. In 'Heartease III' she declares that her role is not to pass judgement; rather, 'I come only to apply words/to a sore and confused time' (p 38). In the poem 'Because I have been everything' she describes herself as an 'initiate of the order of grace/made keeper of the key of possibility' (p 8).

What someone said of Spinoza may also be said of Goodison: she is intoxicated with God. Her writing about God is often incantatory in tone and focuses mainly on the names of God. She writes:

> And you being so abundantly blessed with names
> I strive to commit each one to memory
> to each is attached a glimpse of your face
> to each a revelation a key to your infinity.
> (p 57)

According to her, a recitation of God's names is a chain that binds humankind to God. The list of God's names is everlasting. Forging new

names for God is 'the life task of wordsmiths' (p 57). Presumably this is also the task of religious poets like Goodison. In her view the list of God's names which we now know is a very modest achievement; it is not equal to God's 'smallest glory' (p 57).

In the poem 'A rosary of your names' Goodison describes a God who is present in nature:

> God your face made manifest
> on surfaces of sand or water.
> In the spring balance of the green
> your face is everything.

She sees God's face in day, night and morning; she sees it in the unfolding of a rose's soul. She sees it in precious stones; and Goodison, the artist, also sees God in 'the armature of bones' and in the 'chiaroscuro' of light and dark which is everywhere (p 58). She writes:

> Lord of trains
> and things flying.
> Creator of ether, land
> and oceans
> let truth now stand.
> (p 58)

Returning to the topic of God's names she declares:

> Your names are infinity
> light and possibility
> and right
> and blessed
> and upfull
> and most of all merciful
> and song
> to you we belong.

God is also 'the last and the hidden/and the wonderful'; she invokes 'the name of what was dead/and now lives', and celebrates resurrection (pp 58–59).

As a rosary, the poem is a series of prayers: of praise, of affirmation of truth, of commitment and of celebration. It concludes with a supplication for release from pain, and a description of the answer to this prayer:

within the stillness of surrender
all striving cease
in the telling of your names rosary
peace be, Heartease.
(p 59)

The most incantatory poem in the collection is 'A rosary of your names (II)'. It consists, for the most part, of a chanting of names of God. This is how it begins:

The Merciful
The Peace
The Source
The Hidden
The All Strivings Cease.
(p 60)

The rhythm of the entire poem is reminiscent of the drumming, chanting and stomping of *Pukkumina*, a Jamaican reivivalist cult group.

The poem goes on, in a series of chants, to describe God as oneness, the first and the last, as bridge, height and ocean, as 'The Promise come to pass' (p 60). God is seen as the most beloved blessing. There are cosmological references to God as the maker of mountains, the architect of planets, as 'The One in charge' (p 60), who orchestrates dawns and sunsets. God is omniscient and all-powerful. Like Picasso, who once referred to God as another artist, Goodison sees God as a 'Painter of limitless palette' (p 60). He is also a maker of harps and a giver of songs. God is seen as an infinite source of blessings.

But the persona of *Heartease* also knows what it is like to be separated from God. The poem 'In anxiety valley' is about someone in a dark valley trying to reach God by telephone. The persona has been there before: 'Down here again/can't see a thing except dark' (p 30). The darkness 'is the fallout from the shadow/and the fear combined, exploding' (p 30). The caller is anxious to get out:

I have to get out of here
before the next plague comes
the plague and other things
which I have been imagining
(That's really what I wanted
to talk to God about,
my terrible imaginings.)
(p 31)

The persona whose black hair is invisible in the darkness is afraid of being mistaken for a bald head (a non-Rastafarian) and being made to wait. But God has the caller on hold, and the receptionist insists that he is not in. The caller decides to plead constantly and let her fluttering fingertips be a hint to God,

> or keep really silent
> till an answer comes.
> God speaks in silence,
> or responds to drums.
> (p 31)

An examination of Goodison's spirituality would be incomplete without pointing out her use of the symbolism of water and light.

Her references to water focus on rivers, rain and the sea. Rivers constitute the basic imagery of the first sections of 'Songs of Release'. There is an appeal to 'Rio Negro' for freedom; to 'redemption river' for release; to the 'Blue Nile' for unbinding (p 12). The persona wishes 'to wash all hurt hearts clean' (p 12). She also wants to be made boundless in space in order 'the creator of all rivers to see' (p 12). There is an appeal for the release of rivers: 'Free and wash, cleanse unbind/release all rivers, free me' (p 12).

In 'Heartease III' she describes the elemental purity and goodness of river water: 'Say of the waters of the Hope River/how much sweeter than the ferment wine'. After the purging of evil and the healing which she describes in the poem she declares that 'we start again clean/from the birthplace/of the stream . . . ' (p 38).

There is a switch from river to rain imagery in 'Songs of release'. Rain is seen as the expression of grace and the source of hope: 'Release grace rains, shower/and water the hope flower' (p 13).

In 'Heartease II' rain is seen as an expression of celestial mercy:

> Set out a wash pan and catch mercy rain
> forget bout drought, catch the mercy rain,
> bathe and catch a light from this meteoric flame
> and sit down cleansed, to tell a rosary of your
> ancestor's names . . . '
> (p 34)

The catching of 'mercy rain' is urged as a response to a meteoric message from the sky – a message that commands a searching of the heart, sincerity and the quest for heartease.

In the poem 'A rosary of your names' there is a reference to the bridegroom, a figure rich in New Testament associations. Rain is a blessing which he brings:

> And behold the bridegroom cometh
> and his sighs are the sound of flutes
> and the benediction
> is the rain falling from his hands.
> (p 59)

There are two powerful images of the sea in the collection. The first occurs in 'Because I have been everything'. Here spiritual self-actualization is described as follows:

> all tides swell and have come
> to flood
> To reborn me bright O crystal sea
> a universe is light in me.
> (p 8)

The varied elements in the persona's experience are represented as tides which climax in their flooding. There is the Christian, indeed universal, image of rebirth through water. The experience illuminates an entire universe in the persona.

The second reference to the sea is more suggestive and occurs in the poem 'Blue peace incantation'. This is one of the most mystical poems in the collection. Although these objects are not mentioned by name, the poem seems to be a meditation on land, sky and sea. These are suggested by expressions like 'in verdant balance/of green', 'by waters of sky blue', 'blue of peace/the azure of calm', and 'cobalt of love deep/indigo of perception . . . ' (p 56). The concluding lines of the poem sum up the spiritual experience:

> By meditations of
> clear waters,
> all strivings cease,
> within all,
> illumination,
> forever, lasting blue peace.
> (p 56)

The book *Heartease* begins and ends with poems about light. In describing the persona's spiritual mission I discussed the opening poem, 'I shall light a candle'. I shall examine the closing poem shortly.

Between the opening and closing poems there are two references to light which I think are worth noting. The first is in 'Songs of release': 'I stand with palms open, salute the sun/the old ways over. I newborn one' (p 13). The idea of being born again recurs, this time with the persona clothed in the sun's light. In the poem 'And you being so abundantly blessed with names' God is described as a 'circle of light' (p 57). One of the most ancient and enduring of religious symbols, the circle is said to symbolize the self or 'ultimate wholeness'.[2]

The closing poem is entitled, 'Always homing now soul towards light'. In it, as the soul travels towards light, its home, it is like having 'wings beating/against the hold-back of dark' (p 61). Seductive city lights are rejected: 'their brilliance is not what/this soul is after' (p 61). The coming of night (or death) makes it seem as if darkness has won a victory, but 'it is only the interim/before the true shining comes' (p 61). According to the persona, there are times when light seems to burnish her limbs. Her love of light is like that of a child who wants to sleep with a light on. The persona prays to be encircled by light while she sleeps: 'light in rings marrying me to/source' (p 61). She commands herself to 'fold the dark dresses' of her youth and to 'let the silver run like comets'/tails' through her hair (p 61). The book closes with words which are reminiscent of the biblical injunction not to put one's light under a bushel:

> For me, I know, the light in me
> does not want to be hidden anymore,
> anywhere.
>
> (p 61)

In Goodison's poetry the persona's spirituality is expressed directly. The point of view, more likely than not, is that of Goodison herself. Earl Lovelace, in contrast, is mainly concerned with the spirituality of his fictional characters. His own point of view is communicated mainly through his sympathy for these characters and in the kinds of questions which are raised in the novel.

From 1917 to 1951 the religious practices of the Spiritual Baptist Church were banned in Trinidad and Tobago. Earl Lovelace's fourth novel, *The wine of astonishment*[3] traces the life of a Spiritual Baptist community during this period. The novel raises a number of philosophical and spiritual questions including the significance of suffering in human life, the ideal of freedom of religion, the defensibility of civil disobedience, the spiritual authenticity of African elements in worship and the links between art and spirituality. I shall examine each of these topics in turn.

By having their religious practices outlawed, the Spiritual Baptists of Bonasse suffer under the oppression of the colonial government. They suffer the frustration of not being able to worship as they wish. Because of their commitment to their faith, they are arrested and brutalized by the police. They live in fear of the magistrate. Eva, the narrator of the novel asks: 'But what sin we commit? What deed our fathers or we do that so vex God that He rain tribulation on us for generations?' (p 1).

The underlying philosophical question is: How are we to make sense of the reality of suffering in the world? Some persons see the existence of widespread suffering as evidence against the existence of a benevolent and all-powerful God. In others, theistic belief persists despite the reality of suffering, and the problem is how to reconcile the two. Eva, who belongs in the second group, tries to do this.

The quotation cited above expresses the view that suffering is punishment for sin. But Eva insists that they have done nothing against God, and that God is not vexed with his children. So why does he allow them to suffer? Eva's answer is that it is because they are able to bear this suffering. It is because their shoulders can bear more weight, their flesh more pain, and their hearts more ache. According to her, 'God don't give you more than you can bear, I say' (p 1). She believes that there is a connection between strength and suffering: 'The strong suffer most, the weak dies' (p 2). Eva refuses to believe that the reality of suffering makes life meaningless. In her view, 'God ain't make this world by guess. Things have meaning' (p 2). She thinks that God has reasons for everything that happens. The purpose of human life, she believes, is to 'praise God and die' (p 2).

It is also her view that good can come out of suffering:

> . . . for hundreds of years we bearing what He send like the earth bear the hot sun and the rains and the dew and the cold, and the earth is still the earth, still here for man to build house on and fall down on, still sending up shoots and flowers and growing things. (p 1)

The period of religious persecution is seen as part of a longer period of suffering. Just as the earth grows things in spite of sun, rain and cold, the victims of persecution too can produce goodness out of suffering. In the novel, they endure their tribulations without losing faith, and in the end achieve their freedom.

Freedom of religion is one of the cornerstones of liberal democracy. Yet the Spiritual Baptists were denied this freedom. According to Thorpe,[4] this was done because the government saw the Spiritual Baptists as a social evil: their noisy meetings made residential areas

difficult to live in and their religious practices were seen as indecent. Given the desirability of the ideal of freedom of religion, the Attorney-General, in presenting the bill outlawing the Spiritual Baptists, stressed the government's reluctance to prohibit them, but argued that they were such a nuisance that the step was necessary.

In the novel, Bee, the protagonist, visits Ivan Morton, the local politician, to request his assistance in getting the law changed. Ivan Morton is a son of the soil, a local boy who has made good, and who has been elected to the Legislative Council to advance the interests of the community. But Morton, who left the Spiritual Baptists for the Catholic Church in order to advance his career, is unsympathetic. Like the Attorney-General he pays lip service to the principle of freedom of religion, but he now regards the members of his former church as heathens living in darkness, and thinks it is his mission to lead them from the dark ages to civilization.

Near the end of the novel, Ivan Morton, seeking re-election to the Council, is instrumental in getting the law changed. Eva's son Reggie brings her a newspaper with a picture of Ivan Morton and the news of their freedom. She rushes to the field where her husband Bee is working to share the news with him. According to her: 'I was happy. And my joy was taller than church bells to see Bee face with the smile bursting out on it like how the sun does come through Bonasse sky in the morning' (p 142).

Do we have an obligation to obey the law? This is one of the oldest questions in political philosophy. Some philosophers have argued that it is never right to break the law, while others have contended that it is sometimes right to disobey the law. The Spiritual Baptists of Bonasse wrestle with this philosophical question. Should they obey the law which proscribes their religious practices, or should they disobey it? They decide to break the law:

> Then one Sunday morning – the Mortons had just pass and gone their way – Bee come into the kitchen where I kneading flour to make a bake.
>
> 'I going to break the law, Eva,' he say.
>
> He was behind me. I didn't turn around to look at him. 'You going to break the law?' I ask him. Because I know the law don't make fun. I know that when the whiteman write down something, it well write down. 'You going to break the law?'
>
> 'I going to break it,' he say. (p 50)

Eva sees Bee's decision to break the law as a way of asserting his manhood, keeping his dwindling congregation together, and earning the respect of his children.

One Sunday, while it is raining, Bee leads his congregation in their customary form of worship. There are loud responses to Bee's preaching. Worshippers bob their heads and clap their hands. There is spirit possession. They ring the bell to the east, west, north and south. They sprinkle flowers and holy water over the congregation. People speak in unknown tongues. They break the law 'like the law was nothing' (p 63).

Having broken the law, Eva reflects on what they have done:

> When you break the law, you don't hurt the law, you don't change the law, you just make the law more the law; you stiffen the heart of the magistrate and set yourself to dodge and peep and every step you make, look over your shoulder for the police. But we *did* break the law. (p 64)

They continue to break the law and worship in their own way. One day the police raid the church and arrest those present. The police are led by Corporal Prince, a brutal policeman who is committed to the enforcement of the law against the Spiritual Baptists. They are led, singing, through the village on their way to the police station. Bolo, a champion stickfighter who is a member of their church, but who was absent when the arrests were made, challenges Prince and protests against the arrest of his mother. This results in a fight. Bolo is beaten by the policemen and then arrested. The arrested worshippers are taken to the police station and then released on their own bond. Bolo is tried and sentenced to three years with hard labour. At the trial of the others, Bee is fined ten pounds; the others are reprimanded and discharged. Bee has to sell his cow to pay the fine.

It can be argued, I think, that the kind of law-breaking described in the novel is an example of civil disobedience. Based on his study of the topic, Wasserstrom[5] claims that civil disobedience is public not covert, peaceful rather than violent, and often, but not always, involves willing submission to the prescribed punishment. The Spiritual Baptists of Bonasse are certainly public and peaceful in their breaking of the law.

Martin Luther King, Jr, one of the best known practitioners of civil disobedience in this century, once said: 'I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all" '.[6] According to King there are two kinds of laws: just laws and unjust laws. Just laws are in harmony with moral law or God's laws and uplift human personality. Unjust laws are out of harmony with God's laws and degrade human personality. According to King's reasoning it is morally right to break unjust laws.

The Spiritual Baptists of Bonasse obviously regard the law which they break as an unjust law. Like St Augustine and King they seem to regard

this unjust law as no law at all; at their trial they plead not guilty to breaking any law. Bee, in his defence at their trial, describes the law as discriminatory. In Trinidad and Tobago, he argues, Hindus, Moslems, Anglicans and Catholics are allowed to worship as they choose. It is therefore unfair, he contends, to prohibit the religious practices of Spiritual Baptists.

Justice, democracy and freedom are served when Ivan Morton, their own elected leader, is instrumental in getting the law changed.

The religious practices of the Spiritual Baptists were objected to because they were considered both noisy and uncivilized. They worshipped differently from, say, Catholics and Anglicans. Their difference made them unacceptable.

But their difference can be seen as an African approach to Christianity. Their membership consists mainly of black, working-class people who have retained more elements of African culture than their more Europeanized countrymen. The prejudice against them springs from the tendency of West Indians – because of their colonization – to idealize things European and denigrate things African. The religion of the Spiritual Baptists is a syncretic faith which harmonizes the religious cultures of both Europe and Africa. Problems arose because their African practices were regarded as uncivilized; their opponents denied that African religious practices can be spiritually authentic.

Eva reflects with pride on the work of their church:

> We have this church in the village. We have this church. The walls make out of mud, the roof covered with carrat leaves: a simple hut with no steeple or cross or acolytes or white priests or latin ceremonies. But is our own. Black people own it . . .
>
> We have this church where we gather to sing hymns and ring the bell and shout hallelujah and speak in tongues when the Spirit come; and we carry the Word to the downtrodden and the forgotten and the lame and the beaten, and we touch black people soul. (p 32)

Membership in the church grows chiefly as a result of black people having dreams and visions and coming to the church to be baptized. After they are baptized in the river they are put out on the Mourning Ground to fast and pray until they are given a sign as to what their mission should be. There is a constant flow of people coming to the Spiritual Baptists to be baptized, but during the period of the ban they are unable to accept them.

Eva comments on the importance of a free, black church:

> Bee say the church is the key to everything, that if Ivan Morton can't understand that to free the church is to free us, if he can't understand

> that the church is the root for us to grow out from, the church is Africa in us, black in us, if he can't understand that the church is the thing, the instrument to make us legal and legitimate and to free him, Ivan Morton, himself too, if he can't understand that, Bee say, then he don't have any understanding of himself or of black people. (p 133)

The Sunday after the news of their freedom, the Spiritual Baptists of Bonasse attend their church to celebrate. They are led by Bee carrying his shepherd's staff and wearing his white gown, sandals and head-tie of three cloths: black signifying the sustaining earth, white the resurrection and yellow the ascension. The church is painted and decorated for the occasion. Bee preaches his sermon and they perform the rituals. But the Spirit does not come.

Disappointed, they leave for home. As they pass a steel band tent they see some young men playing steel pans and some girls dancing. But it is the music which captures their attention:

> for the music that those boys playing on the steelband have in it that same Spirit that we miss in our church: the same Spirit; and listening to them, my heart swell and it is like resurrection morning. (p 146)

Eva and Bee nod to each other in recognition. The Spirit is now in steelband music, an indigenous art form, and it will be spread and kept alive by this music. Eva and Bee pass the steelband tent as if they are passing 'something holy' (p 146).

I have concentrated on two works by two of the most highly regarded contemporary writers in the English-speaking Caribbean. Lorna Goodison, as we have seen, sets out to enlighten and ease the hearts of her audience. She is focused on God, and explores ways of describing him. By using the imagery of water she writes about purification and regeneration. She uses the imagery of light as a symbol of spiritual illumination and wholeness.

Earl Lovelace seeks and gives answers to philosophical questions about suffering and civil disobedience. He affirms the spiritual authenticity of his African heritage. His novel is also a plea for freedom of worship, and for the recognition of the dignity of his people.

NOTES

[1] Lorna Goodison, *Heartease* (London: New Beacon Books, 1988). Page references are to this volume.

[2] Aniela Jaffé, 'Symbolism in the visual arts' in Carl G. Jung (ed), *Man and his symbols* (New York: Dell, 1964), p 266.

[3] Earl Lovelace, *The wine of astonishment* (London: Heinemann, 1982). Page references are to the volume.

[4] Marjorie Thorpe, Introduction to Earl Lovelace, *The wine of astonishment*, p vii.

[5] Richard Wasserstrom, *Philosophy and social issues* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p 85.

[6] Martin Luther King, Jr, 'Letter from Birmingham City jail' in J. Charles King and James A. McGilvray (eds), *Political and social philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), pp 464–465.