

Bosničová, Nina

**Changing perspectives on religion in African American women's autobiographies**

*Brno studies in English*. 2005, vol. 31, iss. 1, pp. [111]-118

ISBN 80-210-3928-0

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104211>

Access Date: 19. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

NINA BOSNIČOVÁ

## CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Religious belief has always played an important role in the lives of African American women and is therefore an inseparable part of a large body of literature produced by them. The genre of autobiography, in particular, proves to be an immensely rich and fruitful field for the exploration of the various responses African American women have had to the questions of spirituality. This paper takes as its focus life stories by three African American women writers living in three different eras of American history. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861) comes from the slavery period, Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) appears in the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance epoch and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) and *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976) are representatives of more contemporary times in U.S. society. The main aim of the paper is to trace if and how, with the passage of time, the role of religion has altered for African American women.

In two of the above-mentioned works, the fervor of religious belief seems to be linked more directly with the figure of the grandmother than with that of the autobiographer. This goes for Jacobs's *Incidents* and Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In addition to other features of her book, Angelou's depiction of the grandmother character in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a sign of the author's acknowledgment and use of the slave narrative tradition in her work. In this respect, Hurston's autobiography stands apart from *Incidents* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

In these books the figures of the autobiographers' grandmothers, Aunt Marthy and Momma Henderson, respectively, appear to be the true embodiments of Christian piety. To these two women, both of whom have witnessed slavery, the belief in God is a true source of perseverance and strength in the morally corrupted world of the American South. About Aunt Marthy we learn that "when sore troubles came upon her, and she had no arm to lean upon, she learned to lean on God, and he lighted her burden" (356). Similarly, the support Momma Henderson finds in religion can best be documented by an episode in which white

“powhitetrash” girls come to harass her and she, instead of losing control, remains dignified, moaning religious hymns to herself. As Dolly A. McPherson put it: “Through the purity of her life and the quality of her discipline, Mrs Anne Henderson demonstrates that, by centering one’s being in God, one can endure and mitigate the effects of an unjust world” (McPherson 1999: 27). Thus, in the case of both Aunt Marthy and Momma Henderson, religion plays an important role as a psychological weapon against the unfairness and racism of white society; it is a way to live and a way to survive.

When compared to her grandmother’s, Jacobs’s faith in God appears to be a little more ambiguous. At times, doubts enter her mind and she admits: “Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my sufferings. At other times, it seemed to me there was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted from youth upward” (Jacobs 1987: 445). Or elsewhere: “I felt as if I was forsaken by God” (385). She admires the “beautiful faith” of her grandmother, the piety of an old slave, Uncle Fred, and the genuine religiosity of a clergyman she meets in the North (401). In these passages, a sense of regret comes through. Jacobs seems to wish that she could, like these people, be able to simply trust in God and be his faithful and unquestioning servant. It would make life less complicated and difficulties easier to overcome.

And yet, despite her occasional religious wavering or inconsistency, Jacobs can be depicted as a religious person. More often than not, she sees God as a source of courage and often prays to him for help. While depicting her escape from Flints’ plantation, she remembers: “how fervently I prayed that God would not forsake me in this hour of utmost need” or further on: “I dropped on my knees, and breathed a short prayer to God for guidance and protection” (Jacobs 1987: 421). Even her admitted feelings of guilt and shame for having had an extramarital relationship with a white man can be listed to represent the sincerity of Jacobs’s religious faith. At one point she writes: “I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day” (Jacobs 1987: 386). She sees her act of “sinning” with Mr Sands as defying purity, not only as defined by the “Cult of True Womanhood,” but also as a Christian ideal. Ann Taves, moreover, sees Jacobs’s “religious convictions about purity” as “a powerful, albeit limited, weapon in service of female autonomy” (Taves 2001: 217). Taves convincingly argues: “They [religious convictions] were powerful in so far as they allowed Jacobs to define herself as a victim with the right to resist and, thus, to assert her autonomy in the face of Flint’s demand for obedience” (217). However, although Jacobs’s religious ideas of purity “allowed her to fight, [...] they did not allow her to win”, as Taves puts it – hence her pregnancy with Sands (217).

Like numerous other slave narratives, Jacobs’s story makes a clear distinction between true Christianity and the religious practices of the American South. The latter are strongly rejected by the author for their hypocrisy and the official sanctioning of the cruelty and inhumanity of the institution of slavery. Likewise,

Jacobs exposes the fact that, despite the popular belief of the times, Christian indoctrination was not the most “effective method of keeping slaves docile and contented” (Stamp 1989: 156). A scene in the narrative, depicting reverend Pike’s sermon to the slaves and their amusement at it, proves that slaves could see through the white clergy’s religious maneuvers and were less gullible than was generally assumed.

Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* offers a reflection of a very different attitude towards religion from Jacobs’s *Incidents*. Although (like Jacobs) living in a period strongly tarnished by sexism and racism, if not slavery, Hurston does not search for emotional support in the realm of religion, a fact which is perhaps a bit surprising when we take into consideration that her father was a religious preacher. Hurston herself admits: “You wouldn’t think that a person who was born with God in the house would ever have any questions to ask on the subject” (Hurston 1995: 754). In the depiction of her childhood memories, the Bible is presented not with the reverence for the sacred, but rather as a book full of adventurous stories put side by side with Andersen’s, Stevenson’s and Swift’s works. As Hurston writes: “There were exciting things in there to a child eager to know the facts of life [...] In that way I found out a number of things the old folks would not have told me” (Hurston 1995: 595). The Bible, therefore, feeds the child’s curiosity, rather than taking part in the formation of its future religious worldview. Later in Hurston’s creative life, it also becomes a source of literary inspiration that can be traced in her employment of biblical allusions and Christian symbology (Plant 1995: 20).

Although not a religious person, in *Dust Tracks* Hurston devotes a whole chapter to her musings on religion. This suggests that she did not underrate the meaning of religious faith for humankind and needed to come to terms with it on an intellectual basis. She starts off rather playfully and amusingly to reveal the beginnings of her doubts about religious faith. Talking about her childhood thoughts, she remembers: “I wanted to know, for instance, why didn’t God make grown babies instead of those little measly things that messed up didies and cried all the time?” (755). Deborah G. Plant finds in this and other similar passages a special strategy developed by Hurston to make a convincing argument. Plant argues that by using “the cover of the naïve [child’s] voice, the narrator questions the believers, their beliefs, and the idea of God itself” (Plant 1995: 28). Hurston further openly admits that religious revivals and baptisms were to her a source of enjoyment not because they would move her in spirit, but rather because they fulfilled her need for “high drama” (Hurston 1995: 759). Although spiritually not convinced by them, Hurston nevertheless describes revivals in great detail and with much innuendo. By doing so, she, in true anthropological fashion, pays tribute to this lively cultural expression of her people.

In the second half of the chapter, the tone commenting on religion becomes more serious and critical. Using her knowledge of world history, the author criticizes the fact that “Military power was to be called in time and time again to carry forward the gospel of peace” (761). Similarly, she rejects organized religion when

she writes: "It seems to me that organized creeds are collections of words around a wish. I feel no need for such" (764). Hurston's rejection of institutional religion might be perceived as a reflection of her strong individualism. As seen in other portions of her autobiography, Hurston wishes to escape pigeonholing herself, or being pigeonholed by others, in rigid categories, such as race and gender (Gates 1985: 43). Religious affiliation, being one such category, is rejected in favor of individual "ponder[ing] [...] [of] life's inexplicability" (Brantley 1993: 210). Instead of accepting other's solutions (the church's, the priest's, etc.) to the mystery of life as well as its hardships, Hurston is determined to think for herself. Another reason why Hurston distances herself from religion is the fact that her book intends to be literature of self-empowerment (Plant 1995: 9; Brantley 1993: 218). Seeing prayer as a "cry of weakness, and an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rule of the game as laid down", Hurston prefers to present herself as a courageous person. She is not afraid "to accept the challenge of responsibility" that life brings with it (Hurston 1995: 764).

When talking about religion in *Dust Tracks*, Hurston's comments on hoodoo and voodoo should not be overlooked. As an anthropologist in New Orleans and Haiti, she actively participated in the ceremonies of both the above-mentioned religions. Her conclusion about them is as follows: "I did not find them any more invalid than any other religion. Rather, I hold that any religion that satisfies the individual urge is valid for that person" (Hurston 1995: 711). Subtly criticizing white western arrogance in assuming that their religion, e.g. Christianity, is the one to be practiced, she comes to raise to an equal level of seriousness and respect black religious expression that she encounters during her anthropological research.

Although Hurston would probably have hated to see herself categorized, Will Brantley nevertheless suggests that her philosophical/religious attitude can be summed up as a fusion of "intellectual skepticism with romantic pantheism" (Brantley 1993: 210). In the conclusion of her chapter on religion, Hurston writes: "I know that nothing is destructible; things merely change forms. When the consciousness we know as life ceases, I know that I shall be part and parcel of the world [...] Why fear? [...] I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance" (Hurston 1995: 764). Such a perspective on human existence not only frees Hurston from fear of death. It also nicely fits into her presentation of herself as post-modern (Walker 1998: 388). All rigidity is rejected and human existence and identity are presented as fluid and changeable in form.

In her religious feelings, Maya Angelou can be seen as standing somewhere between her ardently religious grandmother and her "worldly" mother. As George E. Kent put it: "Grandmother Henderson [...] represents the religious traditions; Mother Vivian Baxter, more of the blues-street tradition" (Kent 1993: 166). In a way similar to Hurston, Angelou devotes a portion of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to the description of a revival meeting. She explains its meaning as a communal event strengthening the solidarity of African Americans of different denominations. She also stresses its function as a momentary escape from harsh

reality and a source of optimism and psychological perseverance. Talking about the participants of one such revival she writes: “They had been refreshed with the hope of revenge and the promise of justice” (124), or later “The people inside had forsaken their own distress for a little while” (128). Although clearly understanding the emotional and cultural value of revivals for African Americans living in the South of the Depression years, she also presents herself, echoing Hurston, as a little distanced from their religious impact. She points out that “to small children [including herself] [...], the idea of praising God in a tent was confusing, to say the least” (119). But even more importantly, she makes a parallel between a religious revival with its songs and shouts and a “gay house by the railroad tracks” (128) where the blues is played (McPherson 1999: 38). Angelou does not seem to give more value and preference to the practicing of religion than she does to finding solace in the blues. After all, in her perception, African Americans both in the revival meeting and the bar “asked the same question. How long, oh God? How long?” (128). The author’s implicit suggestion is that these two African American reactions to years of oppression – religion and blues – should be placed on the same level in terms of their function and efficiency. It is perhaps the combination of her rural religious and urban worldly upbringing that helps to create this liberal attitude.

In addition to her depiction of a revival meeting, Angelou offers other perspectives on religious life in the *Caged Bird*. For instance, she represents it in the form of a reverend, Howard Thomas, who, Angelou writes, was “ugly, fat, and he laughed like a hog with the colic” (33). The reason for her own and her brother’s hatred towards him was “that he never remembered our names” (33) and that “he ate the biggest, brownest and best parts of the chicken at every Sunday meal” (34). Similarly, Angelou “finds comedy in the Sunday performances of ‘sisters’ possessed by the spirit” (Braxton 1989: 190). She comments on one such scene as follows: “And this time I would probably die because everything was funny – Sister Monroe, and Momma trying to keep her quiet with those threatening looks, and Bailey whispering ‘Preach it’ and Elder Thomas with his lips flapping loose like tired elastic” (43). When read on the surface, the humor in Angelou’s depiction of African American religious life in the South can be understood as a child’s ability to see elements of amusement in the seriousness with which adults take to their religious faith. Another way to interpret this phenomenon in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* would be to see the folk religious tradition as possessing “serious limitations” (Kent 1993: 167). Kent offers the following explanation: “The church rituals create for the poor a temporary transcendence and an articulation of spirit, but their hardships are so graphically awaiting their re-confrontation with the trials of daily existence that the evoked spiritual beauty seems hard-pressed by the pathos of the grotesque” (167). Angelou’s confession at the end of the chapter seems to confirm this latter reading: “Laughter so easily turns to hysteria for imaginative children. I felt for weeks after that I had been very, very sick [...] Each time Bailey said ‘Preach it’ to me, I hit him as hard as I could and cried” (44). The author realizes that what she had laughed at in the church

was one of the very few sources of psychological survival for her fellow African Americans, and a limited source at that. This causes emotional distress and pain, which, even if not perhaps fully comprehended at the moment, is clearly seen by the narrator in retrospect.

In Angelou's second autobiography *Gather Together in My Name* religion occupies a very small space. In a tone strikingly similar to Hurston's she writes: "I loved the soul-stirring songs and heartily approved of the minister's passions, but being penned shoulder to shoulder with a rocking crowd of strangers for three hours or more did nothing for my soul" (46). Just as in the case of Hurston, the narrator values the lively atmosphere of an African American mass more than its spiritual impact. In *Gather Together*, Angelou recognizes religion as a part of her cultural inheritance. She discovers, for instance, that a lot of her values, despite her life in the North, are the ones of her Southern religious upbringing. At one point she says: "My son had no father – so what did that make me? According to the Book, the bastards were not to be allowed into the congregation of the righteous" (6). In addition, the practice of active church-going is clearly distinguished from an individual's initiation and belonging to her culture and its religion. Talking about the churchgoers she meets in the streets on Sunday afternoons, Angelou points out: "I was a part of that crowd. [...] I was for the rest of my life a member of that righteous band, and would be whether or not I ever went to church again" (46).

In the third of Angelou's autobiographies *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* the shift occurs in the author's attitude towards religion. As a result of her loneliness, Angelou "experiments" with the Christian Science Church, but rejects it in the end. She remembers: "*Science and Health* told me I was never alone. 'There is no place God is not.' But I couldn't make the affirmation real for me" (19). With the assumption that "The Torah couldn't be as foreign as *Science and Health*", she turns toward Judaism, but does not warm to it either (23). Finally, the author returns to Christianity, the religion of her childhood, but not because of her conviction that this particular religion spiritually suits her best. It happens rather as a result of her marriage with a white man, Tosh, who is an atheist. Every Sunday she starts secretly to attend African American masses in the town and to her they are a strongly sensual experience. As she recollects: "The spirituals and gospel songs were sweeter than sugar. I wanted to keep my mouth full of them and the sounds of my people singing fell like sweet oil in my ears" (33). It can be argued that the wakening zeal for religion in this particular period of Angelou's life is not so much a consequence of her need for God as the wish to preserve her own cultural and racial identity. She becomes increasingly afraid that, next to a white partner to whom she was "surrendering more of my territory, my independence", her blackness would soon become dissolved (35). In African American religious expression she finds not only a way to protest against her husband's marital hegemony, but also to confirm her belonging to her racial group and its culture. Her weekly trips to church also become a way of paying respect to her grandmother and all the generations of slaves who worshipped God "on pain of being lashed" (33).

The autobiographies discussed in this paper have covered more than one hundred years of American history. During this period, perspectives on religion and its role in the lives of African American women have changed significantly. For women who have experienced slavery, like Aunt Marthy and Momma Henderson, religious faith seems to be one of the few avenues of psychological and emotional survival in terribly harsh social conditions. God gives these women strength to preserve dignity when faced with moral degradation and injustice. Although Jacobs, a slave woman as well, admits having occasional doubts about the justice of God, she also, in the core of her convictions, is a religious person. A clear intersection of the notion of sexual and spiritual/religious purity is made in her life story. The perspective on religion provided by Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* is radically different from that in the slave narratives. African American religious expression is praised for its liveliness and energy, but its spiritual persuasiveness and efficacy are doubted by the author. Due to her individualism, Hurston prefers to think independently, rather than passively accept the answers Christianity seems to offer. The view that Angelou's autobiographies offer presents religious faith as an important cultural expression that can help African Americans assert and preserve their racial identity under the pressure of assimilationism. Its spiritual impact is, however questioned – as in Hurston's case. One of the confirmations of this is the fact that Angelou considers religious and blues traditions to be equally valid reactions of African Americans to years of racial, gender and class discrimination.

### Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya (1984 [1969]). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. London: Virago, 1984.
- Angelou, Maya (1985 [1974]). *Gather Together in My Name*. London: Virago, 1985.
- Angelou, Maya (1985 [1976]). *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Marry Like Christmas*. London: Virago, 1985.
- Brantley, Will (1993). *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir: Smith, Glasgow, Welty, Hellman, Porter, and Hurston*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993.
- Braxton, Joanne M. (1989). *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. (1985). "A Negro Way of Saying." Rev. of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, by Zora Neale Hurston. *The New York Times* 21 Apr. 1985: 1.
- Hurston, Zora Neale (1995). *Dust Tracks on a Road*. 1942. *Folklore, Momoirs, and Other Writings*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New York: The Library of America, 1995: 559–808.
- Jacobs, Harriet (Linda Brent) (1987 [1861]). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. In *The Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Mentor, 1987: 335–515.
- Kent, George E. (1993). "Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Black Autobiographical Tradition." *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993: 162–170.
- McPherson, Dolly A. (1999). "Initiation and Self-Discovery." *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook*. Ed. Joanne M. Braxton. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Plant, Deborah G. (1995). *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1995.



- Stampp, Kenneth M. (1989). *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Taves, Ann (2001). "Spiritual Purity and Sexual Shame: Religious Themes in the Writings of Harriet Jacobs." *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Francis Smith Foster. New York: Norton, 2001: 209–222.
- Walker, Pierre A. (1998). "Zora Neale Hurston and the Post-Modern Self in *Dust Tracks on a Road*." *African American Review* 32.3 (1998): 387–399. 22 Jun. 2004 <<http://www.jstor.org/>>.