

NOTES ON THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUMS ON UNDERSTANDING AND HEALING SPIRITUAL HARM OF DEHUMANISATION

Held in Oxford, UK, Dec. 2023; and Richmond, VA. USA, Jan. 2020

In Dec. 2023 and Jan. 2024, two international symposiums were held in order to better understand the notion of ‘spiritual harm’ as applicable to the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, chattel slavery, and colonisation of people of African descent.

The characterisations of spiritual harm are supposed to bring to light the kinds of harm beyond the material, economic and psychosocial. The Symposiums were opportunities for international scholars, experts and healing practitioners to reflect together on the multidimensional harms caused by the violent atrocities related to transatlantic histories from 1500s onwards and their contemporary dehumanising legacies in the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe. The symposiums were also spaces to share spiritual and collective healing practices that aim to address such harms.

The meetings were co-convened by the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation, the Fetzer Institute, the Global Humanity for Peace Institute at the University of Wales TSD, and Afrospectives. The event in the UK was held in the Global Retreat Centre, Oxford, and the one in the USA took place on the campus of the University of Virginia Union, a historically black college and university, in Richmond, VA.

In part, the aim was that some of the participants might write contributions to an edited volume on the spiritual harm of transatlantic slavery, which would have an impact on thinking and research about the legacies of enslavement. To this end, we invited researchers and practitioners who already had familiarity with the themes, but with a diversity of experience and understanding.

In agreement with Sylvester Jones from Fetzer, we decided to hold two meetings so that scholars living on the African continent might have the opportunity to voice their experiences and perspectives that are distinct from those of African Americans. Also having two separate meetings was better logistically, allowing more experts to join the conversations.

We proposed the following questions for dialogue and divided the sessions accordingly. The wording of the questions was slightly different for the two meetings.

1. What is our understanding of spiritual harm?
2. How should we understand the spiritual harm done to humanity as a whole by transatlantic enslavement?
3. What harm has been done by enslavement to the people of African descent? What are the specificities of the spiritual harm suffered by African and African American communities and what kind of spiritual resistance have they employed?
4. Do European perpetrators and their descendants of transatlantic enslavement suffer spiritual harm and if so, what kind?
5. How has transatlantic slavery system enabled institutions to cause spiritual harm and perpetuate it, after its abolition?
6. Based on our understanding and experiences of spiritual harm, how might we conceive the healing processes that are needed?
7. What should we do to develop a common understanding, collective awareness and appropriate healing practices about spiritual harm arising from the transatlantic enslavement and its continued legacies?

BRIEF REPORT ON THE MEETINGS

In order to facilitate a brief report with less repetition, we will give a general summary of the answers to the questions asked. In the next section, we provide an outline of the main differences between the discussions in the US and the UK. This means that the report will be selective.

1) The Nature of Spiritual Harm

Spiritual harm is manifest as a pack of other harms, such as profound separation, self-hate, dehumanisation. The human spirit, as of the transcendent, cannot be harmed. Therefore, the harm is primarily a separation from the spiritual, and as such it is connected to our self-perception. Participants variously identified it as a fragmentation of mind, body, and spirit; a separation from each other; a detachment from our true self; a separation from the one's native land and from one's ancestors. Several participants mentioned the inability to engage traditional African spiritual practices including rituals. Others emphasized the tendency to find materialistic temptations hard to resist and an attitude of cold indifference to the suffering and dehumanisation of others. Spiritual harm can also be understood as the harm of being objectified, as a result of which, we seldom perceive each other as souls. Furthermore, enslavement was the seedbed and precondition for the current systemic dehumanisation of the current economic system.

2) Harm to humanity as a whole

For humanity as a whole, enslavement was part of a global process that shifted a large part of the world way from the spiritual towards the material. Modern science with its insistence on measurement has led to a reduction of spiritual richness. Europe lost its spiritual roots when it created hierarchies among people, such as white as superior to black people, and Europe superior to the rest of the world. Capitalism increased individualism, and the treatment of the planet as a mere material resource. The fundamental spiritual harm is that we are encased in capitalistic social relations. In this system, whiteness is constructed so that for white people to matter, it means that black people have to matter less.

3) Harm to people on the African Continent

Spiritual harm for communities on the Africa continent is different from spiritual harm experienced by the diaspora. On the continent of Africa, symptoms of spiritual harm include systemic poverty, inner city violence, ethnic tensions and corrupt politicians. These are not widely recognised as having connections with slavery. In contrast, for the diaspora, it includes being cut off from the continent and from one's ancestors.

In Africa, between 20-60 million people were killed during the slave trade. For every person sent to the Americas and the Caribbean, at least five persons were killed in Africa. This had a huge impact on many families and local communities and on the demographics of many countries in Africa. There was agricultural decline and a loss of wisdom. The social and spiritual impact has not yet been documented.

As Africa continent is huge, the spiritual harm impacted the various regions differently. We need a separate meeting focused on Africa only, to see how the different areas have suffered spiritual harm from slavery.

4) Harm to African Americans

Spiritual harm consists in not being treated as a human being. The narrative that some people are not fully human was part of the way colonizers tried to justify taking land from people around the world. Core to spiritual harm is the separation from the land. Relationship with the land is something spiritual. Thus people of African descent feel righteous anger, and this must be acknowledged. People of African descent need time to recuperate from their grief and to heal together.

For many, spiritual harm consists of the separation from who we were, from one's African roots and ancestry. To understand spiritual harm, the diasporas have to return to African ways. The denial of African spirituality is itself a form of spiritual harm. It has led to the imposition of Christianity and Islam in Africa, without recognition of the African roots of these religions. Christian and Islamic teachings have tended to demonize African spiritual practices. With slavery, there followed Christian missionaries. The Christian religions went through a degradation with slavery and capitalism. For instance, salvation becomes understood as a financial contract. Furthermore, this defined spirituality in the terms of the colonisers. There is no African religious *system* but rather very diverse practices, which are not institutionalised. Churches often replaced traditional healers and practices, which were driven underground.

5) Harm to people of European descents

White people suffer from the middle-class illnesses of being empty, having lack of solidarity. This masquerades as success. There has been a lot of denial. For example, the UK tends to perceive slavery and its legacy as more of a US problem. The harm to Europeans and white Americans includes a lack of the intention to become more aware: to acknowledge, accept and understand. In this sense, European culture tends to be arrogant, and this is a form of self-alienation.

Slavery arrived because of the birth of capitalism. With it and with the accompanying individualism, living as a community has largely lost all its meaning. With the domination of the material, the connection to the Divine has also been lost. Amongst the people of European descent, the common symptoms of spiritual harm include: indifference; alienation and the loss of meaning; arrogance; fierce competition for privilege; a transactional view of relationships and separation from history.

Such harm tends to be invisible to white people. For this reason, white communities tend not to be motivated to take action towards healing. There is a lack of empathy for others in white communities. For these reasons, Pablo Freire suggested that the invitation to re-affirm humanity might come from the open-heartedness of the oppressed.

6) Harm to Institutions

Spiritual harm is not separated from systemic injustice and inequity. This applies to religious institutions; schools and the educational system; Governance processes; the judicial and legal systems and the economic.

Young people often realise that we are subject to the control of dehumanising institutions, and that it is difficult to imagine political and other systems that serve healing and well-being. Usually, the economic, political and social institutions that were developed during and after slavery and colonization continue to perform acts of dehumanization and injustice as this is part of their conception and birth. In this way, they continue the various legacies of spiritual harm.

7) Healing spiritual harm

For people of African and indigenous descent, spiritual harm tends to prompt a spiritual response. For instance, the loss of self-identity is counteracted by greater solidarity and stronger local communities. The key to staying whole is to be tethered to the power of the Spirit or the divine. Ceremonies and rituals can nourish the soul. Music is consistently present in spiritual practices because it is an accessible way to connect with each other and the Spirit. Such practices build resilience. Remembering who we are strengthens resilience. Connecting to God is to stay close to humanity.

Racial-healing processes must link personal healing to social transformation. Spirituality is important because in this way, when we struggle against a dehumanising system, we can avoid antagonism through the action of the spirit or divine. Collective political processes supplement spiritual efforts.

It was noted that a safe space starts from separate conversations, e.g. people of African descent need conversations amongst themselves; and people of European descent also must share amongst themselves. There is a need for white people to do their own healing work. Interracial dialogues can only happen after these separated processes.

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO SYMPOSIUMS

There were a few significant differences between the meetings in Oxford and Richmond.

- The physical space in Oxford was characterised by beauty, openness, hospitality and caring. All was set in nature, and surrounded by a spiritual serenity. There were regular meditative and contemplative silence to punctuate the day. By contrast, in Richmond, the symposium was held in a typical university seminar room.
- There were more contributors from African continents in Oxford; whereas all contributors in Richmond were African Americans.
- The discussions in Oxford were more often explicitly directed to the questions as asked (see full notes), whereas the Richmond discussions were sometimes more personal. For instance, in Richmond, there was more explicit discussion about white privilege and the nature of whiteness. There was more direct expression of the difficulties involved with interracial dialogues.
- In Richmond, there was a rich and extended discussion comparing the spiritual traditions of Christianity with local African traditions. This included the complicit role of the various Christian churches in slavery.
- There was a thorough examination of the spiritual harms caused by capitalism in both places.
- In Richmond, there were questions posed to the idea of racial reconciliation, which was seen by some as embodying a Eurocentric perspective. Instead, there was more emphasis on the need for social justice.