

THERE IS A RIVER: THE BLACK STRUGGLE
FOR FREEDOM IN AMERICA

by Vincent Harding

Reviewed by Ross Bender in New York City *MennoNews*, 1983

BOOK REVIEW

HARDING DELIVERS FIRST VOLUME ON HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE

THERE IS A RIVER: THE BLACK STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN AMERICA (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981; Vintage Books Edition, Random House, 1983), by Vincent Harding.

Hegel claimed that Africa had no history, that it represented the pre-history of the human race. China, he said, was the infancy of the race; India the dreamy adolescence; Greece and Rome the sturdy youth; Western Europe and particularly 19th century Germany the maturity, the finest flowering of human civilization. White supremacist thought lurks in the secret inmost heart of the sick rose of Western culture, and its denial of the history of the peoples America has enslaved or attempted to destroy constitutes one of the gravest pathologies of this monstrous and pestilential empire. James Baldwin, speaking of white people, said, "They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."

In There Is a River Vincent Harding reveals black people in history as active agents rather than passive victims. Black history is subject rather than object--it is the black struggle for freedom in America. From the first slave-ship mutiny off the coast of Africa to the seizure of former plantation lands by slaves at the close of the Civil War, Harding traces a history of resistance to enslavement, demands for freedom, and visions of a new order.

Mutiny, jumping overboard, insurrection, running away, prayer, suicide, poisoning the master, endurance, singing, written petitions to Congress, arson, submission, conventions, murder--this is a partial catalogue of techniques of resistance to slavery in the South and oppression in the North. Amid the carefully documented detail, Harding discourses on broader themes. Those I found most interesting are: the wedge purposely driven

between the white working class and the black slaves and freedmen from earliest colonial times; the fear of black insurrection always lurking beneath the surface of white consciousness, and the effect of that fear on public policy; the problem of the well-meaning white abolitionists who could not accept black leadership in their organizations. Harding's theme throughout is that the black river of struggle, and in particular its more radical, swifter currents, continually posed a challenge to the white racist polity (in North as well as South) and that every act of black resistance denied the legitimacy of the polity.

This first of two volumes ends with the betrayal of the promise of emancipation at the end of the Civil War, as black troops are demobilized, plantations restored to their owners, and the "Black Codes" legislated as a substitute for slavery in the South. Abraham Lincoln was ambivalent about the question of equal citizenship for blacks, but his successor Andrew Johnson was clear enough: "This is a country for white men, and by God, so long as I am President, it shall be a government for white men."

"How in the midst of such death and suffering could we find so much strength to love, so much determination to live, fight on, and be free?" asks Harding in the introduction. How indeed? The experience of struggle produced durable techniques of endurance sustained by a vision of hope. The thrust of this hope, Harding says, is essential if there is to be the transformation of the human spirit necessary, in Martin Luther King's words, "to redeem the soul of America."

Mennonite buffs will be interested to note that Harding mentions help from MCC Peace Section during the '60's in his acknowledgements. Harding is currently adviser to the Afro-American Mennonite Association in organizing this fall's conference "The Black Church, the Third World, and Peace," which may confidently be expected to suggest some fresh directions in Mennonite theology.