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II

OUR RACIAL SITUATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

WILLIAM STUART NELSON*

THE Judeo-Christian tradition is clear in its position on racial difference. It treats race as a matter of accident. What else can possibly follow from the doctrine of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man? Just as the circumstances of life may conspire to make a child blond or brunette, short or tall, introvert or extrovert, so they may deliver to society men of one race or another. Climate, perhaps, is the arch conspirator here. The wise and good father knows no distinctions in his children because of the accident of height, or color, or temperament, and expects that his sons shall know none as among themselves. So the Father God enfolds all of his children to his heart alike without regard to race, and his sons are to know no difference among themselves on this account.

The most persuasive documentation of this view is the paucity of comment on race by Jesus. It is as if the principles he taught and the spirit in which he lived left no question as to where he stood. There is indeed no question except where self-interest adroitly and formidably beclouds the issue. Where Jesus did comment by word or act upon race, he left his meaning clear. The story of the Good Samaritan is an excellent illustration. The conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well gives further emphasis to the accidental role which race plays in the true Christian philosophy. Paul, who dwelt upon application more than his Master, dis-

avows any essential difference between followers of Christ whether Jew or Greek, bond or free, and declares that all nations are made of one blood to dwell on all the face of the earth.

While there are few Christians, including the most nominal, who would deny that race relations in America, with their gross injustices rising at moments to sheer brutality, are at fundamental variance with the Christian spirit, there are many among whom serious disagreement will be found with respect to the method of altering these relations. Christianity was born in a forthright attack upon the issues which it confronted. There were prophets and priests in the country preaching amelioration, advocating the patching of a little here and the mending of a little there — petty fixers. This was not the spirit of the founder of the Christian religion.

Jesus did not offer palliatives. He declared without equivocation that the wrong ought to be made right and in one or two noteworthy instances he set about to make it right. His earthly fate is some indication of his approach to wrong. Men do not spit upon gradualists, not to mention hanging them. He seemed never to feel that his leadership was so important that he must do nothing to offend his followers lest they rid themselves of him. An instructive instance of his method was his practice of associating intimately with the publicans and sinners. From this he could easily have excused himself on the ground that such was not the custom among his associates, that they should be given time

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to see the error of their ways, and that they would entirely misunderstand and, perhaps, repudiate him should he be so rash as to eat with men where tradition forbade.

This reformative approach to moral problems is not to be confused with irrational measures. It should be clear to all that there are those who are prepared for meat and those who require milk. The danger in race relations is that we prolong unnecessarily the weaning period. The Christian revolution might have been postponed for centuries or indeed forever by a conservative estimate on the part of Jesus as to what his times could stand. The great difference, one suspects, between Jesus and much of our Christian leadership in matters of race today is in depth of conviction and sheer personal courage. There is also the fact that the long history of Christian compromising in the presence of great moral issues has projected itself subtly into the modern pattern. From a robust, pioneering, almost fanatical first-century religion it has become in many instances a wobbly, conservative, platitudinizing institution of religion. Its institutional quality defines the point of its greatest departure from the Judeo-Christian tradition at its purest.

In matters of race relations it is evident that we must act today within the limits of today's possibilities. The error arises in our judgment of the possible. We tend to move in the hinterland rather than on the frontier of the possible; and we fail to realize our highest moral potentialities. Two or three years ago, a white man in the deep South remarked that the most damnable phrase used in that section with respect to race relations is "We have done the best we can under the circumstances." Such an "under the circumstances" philosophy can cover the most un-Christian irresolution and the most stupid fear.

The Judeo-Christian tradition demands vigorous action and some risk. The signs

of decay within it are fear, extreme caution, fine calculation of the immediate response, excuse-making, and satisfaction in comfortable, chanceless "progress." It is in the presence of such debility that so-called secular movements steal the moral initiative and the following of the people. There is ground for belief, moreover, that God himself may select these movements to further his ends in the moment of failure by his especially chosen instrument.

One of the sources of great concern to Negroes in America is the practice of racial exclusion in the churches. What the Christian community votes in its meetings, or publishes in its journals, or speaks from its platform makes very little impression upon Negroes in the face of the doors of multitudes of churches which are closed to them because of their race. They suspect that there is some truth in the story that God informed one Negro brother that he might well be resigned to exclusion from a certain white church since He, God, had been trying for years to enter it himself and had not yet succeeded. Religion will not forever remain pent in action-defying institutions however powerful and respectable they may have grown to be. To falter for the sake of present peace, security, and the protection of vested interests is to invite the bitterest breaking of the peace.

I have emphasized the departure of the church in matters of race relations from the genuine Judeo-Christian tradition. The individual Christian needs to examine critically his racial attitudes in the light of the demands of his religion. Very serious confusion results from thinking of Christians wholesale, that is, by cultures, geography, nations, or churches. Every Christian is a Christian by virtue of his own character. A man cannot be saved by joining a "Christian" crowd. A weakness of institutionalized religion is that membership in the church, in spite of the frequent accidental and

irresponsible means by which it is assumed, connotes a character in members which may be entirely absent.

What is the policy of the individual Christian industrialist with respect to employing Negro labor? What does the Christian member of a labor union say to membership on equal footing of Negro laborers? What is the attitude of a Christian statesman when faced with the problem of suffrage or office-holding by members of certain minority races? There is no end to such questions. The industrialist, union member, statesman each may admit that in these matters he falls short of the Christian ideal and will have to bear appropriate punishment for his sins. There is hope in such truthfulness. On the other hand, he may plead expediency and argue its consistency with Christian character.

This is the kind of subtlety which today threatens the very life of the Christian community. The only hope lies in a revolt against it. It is the kind of revolt daily gathering among the Negro people and a growing section of the white population. It is a revolt marked by decreased dependence upon traditional religious instrumentalities and a turning to economic, political, and social sanctions involving mass movements. It is a revolt including a substantial group of religious philosophers who in tracts of the times and substantial volumes and from the platform have explained and warned and prophesied themselves into a spiritual community which has little in common with institutional Christianity. If the genius of the Judeo-Christian method is forthrightness in the presence of moral issues, it is inevitable that it shall find an instrument suited to that method.

Among the seeming impossibilities which Jesus reconciled in himself and which thus are reconciled in pure Christian doctrine is the imperative to aggressive action and the imperative to the loving spirit. Here we see the great cen-

tral Christian doctrine at work in a most difficult medium. It is, nevertheless, the kind of medium for which this doctrine is designed. Jesus had the deepest and most sympathetic understanding of the order he was superseding and characterized its role as one of the greatest historical significance. He spoke modestly of his way as the fulfillment of what his fathers taught. His chastisements, however sharp, were in the spirit of the elder brother. He was never mean, revengeful, picayune. This is a great lesson for us in interracial relations.

One of the constant pleas of minority racial groups is that their weaknesses be understood sympathetically. Such a plea is fully justified. If Negroes suffer from economic or cultural lags, there are reasons for the most part beyond their control. Valid also, even if more difficult to comprehend, is the Christian requirement that suffering minorities understand persecuting majorities. Minority racial groups are fully justified in the use of every valid social instrument for securing justice. The courts have been established for such a purpose and should be employed. The ballot is presumed to give every man an opportunity to cast his weight into the scales of justice and he ought to use it or, if he hasn't it, move the world to get it. Buying and spending power is one's own and can be employed legitimately in the furtherance of one's cause. Mass protest is an instrument available to all who have the courage to use it, and its underestimated power should not be neglected by the oppressed. Nothing in our religious tradition forbids the employment of these means in a just cause. On the other hand, this religion condemns the use of these or any other means in a spirit of intolerance, hatred, vindictiveness. The grounds for this are many.

First, there is the problem of fixing responsibility for the sins of others against us. The forces which play upon an individual in the course of his life-

time are multitudinous and most often beyond his control. He is the creature of his home, his town, his country, his part of the country, the hour of history in which he came into the world. Granting some freedom, he is still doomed or blessed to a most significant extent beyond any choice he may make. What chance has a little white girl of six who is rebuked when she speaks of a "colored lady" and is told to call her "that nigger?" The hope was not very much greater for the southern white man who explained, "I ain't got nothing against niggers; I was 14 years old before I knowed I was better than a nigger." The awful facts of heritage and environment should temper our attitude toward our bitterest foe.

There is, in the second place, the very uncomfortable fact that for all of our own virtue in one relationship we are probably perpetrators of grievous injustices in others. A race, even as an individual, is not without sin. It is a commonplace that the most serious injustices are often perpetrated by members of a persecuted minority against each other and against innocent members of a dominant majority. The most aggressive seekers after rights for themselves have been known to be the most tyrannical withholders of rights from others. The category of sins of one race will always be applicable to the sins of some in any other race. This fact should in no wise weaken the determination of one group to be free from the oppression of another. It does prove that group hatreds are indefensible.

Finally, a persecuted minority faces the hard doctrine that its sins of hatred

can only serve to keep intact the vicious circle of antagonisms. It is no less self-defeating for Negroes to hate whites than for whites to hate Negroes. On the other hand, there is formidable correcting power in a sweet temper and quickness to forgive and to offer an enabling hand conjoined with skill and persistence in resisting wrong. These will not only break the back of opposition but also tear at the wicked heart. If faith in this is lacking, then there is no faith in one of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian religion.

The Right Reverend Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen, speaking January 2 on the Catholic Hour of the National Broadcasting Company, made a profoundly appropriate and eloquent plea for the uniting of Jews, Protestants, and Catholics in the presence of a great external foe to their religion and described that foe as atheistic, alien to our civilization, and a repudiation of the Christian tradition. An equally eloquent plea should be made to the adherents of these same religions to rid themselves now of a deadly foe within — the bias, apathy, implacableness that characterize the attitudes of millions of them in their relations with men of other races. That a common foe exists without is all the more a reason for the purging of our own ranks. The Judeo-Christian tradition faces one of the most critical periods in its entire history. A test as to whether it will serve the future as one of the world's great instruments of moral and spiritual creativeness is the manner in which it rises now or fails to rise to its real genius in the face of the problem of race relations.