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# Religion and Racial Tension in America Today

WILLIAM STUART NELSON

**T**HIS paper is written in terms of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the tension between the White and Negro people of America.

The increasing tension between White and Negro Americans is of the deepest and most immediate concern to the religious community, for it poses a serious threat to America's internal peace and conceivably to our social and religious structure. A deepening of the antagonisms may quite possibly result in the resignation of the Negro minority to collaboration with forces in our midst which advocate a violent ordering of our social and political framework to the left. There may result also so stubborn a determination on the part of the majority to maintain the status quo that it will formally and completely establish a fascist regime. These possibilities which may now appear remote can easily take serious form in a national crisis stemming from causes entirely apart from racial tension. As a matter of fact, the critical importance which the issue of race assumed in our fall political campaign, sporadic and widely separated violence involving the races, and threats veiled and open from both sides, suggest the possibility that here as elsewhere racial conflict may serve as the decisive factor in precipitating a national crisis. The problem takes on an added and even deeper significance when we recognize that its intensity grows with the increased profession of our political and religious ideals and our increased sacrifice in their behalf.

## I

Dr. W. P. Brown concludes a study of the natural history of race conflict in *Race and Culture Contacts*, edited by Dr. E. B. Reuter, by suggesting two theoretically perfect solutions of race questions: complete isolation and the absolute fusion of races and cultures. "The first," he states, "is no longer possible; and the second, while ultimately inevitable, is immediately improbable. Hence race prob-

lems will continue to harass mankind and intrigue sociologists.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Donald Young, in his *American Minority Peoples*, argues that the only feasible immediate adjustment of relations between Whites and Negroes is the adaptation of the caste system to the needs of both the majority and the minority through the recognition of the impossibility of racial equality. He explains: “Group antagonisms seem to be inevitable when two peoples in contact with each other may be distinguished by differentiating characteristics, either inborn or cultural, and are actual or potential competitors.”<sup>2</sup> Both Dr. Brown and Dr. Young have reckoned without religion. The forces of religion may be content to see sociologists intrigued, but they will never be resigned to the continued harassment of mankind even by racial conflict.

Two important facts become clear to the religious philosopher from the data available to him. The first is that race, biologically interpreted, is not a primary cause of so-called racial antagonisms. Dr. Ruth Benedict has pointed out that while racists have many times derived race prejudice from a race repulsion instinctive in mankind, historians and biologists and anthropologists “have as repetitiously pointed out that such a theory is impossible in view of the universal mixture of races.”<sup>3</sup> Even physical differences weigh far less heavily in racial hatreds than Dr. Young seems to think. Dr. Benedict reminds us that the Huguenot and Albigensian victims of the Inquisition had no differentiating skin color or shape of the nose.<sup>4</sup> Visibility may be an aid to persecution but is not a cause. In the history of persecution no correlation is found between the degrees of its intensity and the presence or absence of racial visibility. Any sense of futility, therefore, from which some religionists may have suffered is clearly groundless. James Bryce, also viewing the prob-

<sup>1</sup> W. P. Brown, “Culture Contact and Race Conflict” in E. B. Reuter, *Race and Culture Contacts* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1934), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Young, *American Minority Peoples* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1932), p. 586.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics* (New York: The Viking Press, 1943), p. 234.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 235, 236.

lem historically, insists the facts show "that down till the days of the French Revolution there had been very little in any country, or at any time, of self-conscious racial feeling. . . . However much men of different races may have striven with one another, it was seldom any sense of racial opposition that caused strife. They fought for land. They plundered one another. They sought glory by conquest. They tried to force religion on one another. . . . In none of these cases did the thought of racial distinctions come to the front."<sup>5</sup> Men of religion must beware of the danger pointed out by Jacques Barzun that an explanation of racial friction in terms of the mystery of heredity shall divert attention from their responsibility in areas where they can act and where they can act efficaciously.

The second fact important to the religious philosopher is that the real sources of racial antagonisms in America are clearly amenable to the moral will. These causes can be summarized briefly:

1. We are victims of the transmission and persistence of earlier sentiments and attitudes. It is recognized by the sociologist that habits and folkways tend to persist long beyond the period of their utility. Dr. Guy B. Johnson points trenchantly to the manner in which this tendency has worked in relation to the White-Negro problem in America, declaring that the White people of the South set out to salvage what they could of the old order and above everything else to restore the subordination of the Negro. There is the statement reported by Dr. J. T. Oldham of a southern White man: "I ain't got anything against niggers; *I was fourteen years of age before I knowed I was better than a nigger.*"<sup>6</sup> But he learned, alas! The following incident is a very simple illustration of the manner in which this learning takes place: two small White boys stood on a roadside seeking a ride. A Colored man approached in his car. The younger boy called out: "Mister, please give me a ride." When the driver slowed to take the boys in, he heard the older boy say,

<sup>5</sup> James Bryce, *Race Sentiment as a Factor in History* (Creighton Lecture, London, 1915), pp. 25-6. Quoted by J. H. Oldham, *Christianity and the Race Problem* (Chautauqua: The Chautauqua Press, 1926), p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Oldham, *op. cit.*, p. 33.



“Didn’t papa tell you not to call a nigger Mister?” The car sped away without the boys.<sup>7</sup>

2. Conflict is born of rivalry—economic, political, and cultural. Dr. E. E. Lewis, teacher of Economics at Howard University, writes in *The Journal of Negro Education* for July, 1939: “Casting up the evidence of the relative importance of these two factors (class disadvantage and race disadvantage), one is led to the conclusion that the economic rather than the racial factor is fundamental.”<sup>8</sup>

The fear that Negroes may gain political power, with all of the dangers that implies for those who have controlled and enjoyed so long the emoluments of office, is reflected in current strategies to prevent Negroes from voting. The denial of the ballot openly and avowedly to men of character and education in the face of their constitutional rights and confirming decisions of the Supreme Court is an almost unbelievable spectacle in a supposedly democratic and Christian country. It bespeaks convincingly the utter blindness to ideal and logical considerations with which men fight off their rivals to power.

The effects of cultural rivalry are more subtle, less sinister, but none the less present. It is instructive to watch the difference in the attitudes of certain White audiences when Negroes sing spirituals and when the same group sings music of a classical tradition. A few years ago the report was current that opposition arose to a radio program sponsored by Negroes when to their stereotyped hymn singing there were added brief unstereotyped addresses. Dr. Donald Young reports the effects upon a class in race relations in the University of Pennsylvania of the observation of Negroes of means and culture in their homes and at work in their professions. While there was a lack of uniformity in the results, the expected change for the better in the attitudes of the students did not occur and, significantly, one student who was least antagonistic to the Negro before taking the course exhibited violent prejudices as the result of his experience with exceptional Negroes.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Lasker, *Race Attitudes in Children* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> E. E. Lewis, *The Journal of Negro Education*, VIII, 3 (July, 1939), p. 446.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 16, 17.

3. In terms of treatment, the Negro is an alien. In spite of the Constitution, Supreme Court decisions, platforms of political parties, and the lying-side-by-side of Black and White American dead on the battlefield, the Negro remains effectually an outsider insofar as our own national life is concerned. There are those who plead that in the name of democracy he must be treated decently, which pleading emphasizes his alienage. There are those who know how to yield to any political or economic power which the Negro may have developed, but it is in the mood of men who have been robbed. The Negro on the whole does not enjoy the rights, the power, or the respect of an American citizen. At the same time there is no other power to which he can look for support. Whatever may have been our treatment of Japanese on the west coast before the war, as a nation we walked circumspectly with regards to these people. Their ambassador was in Washington. They possessed an army and a navy. It can be predicted with assurance that after this war immigrants to this country from a defeated Japan will be accorded privileges denied in practice and by law to Negro citizens. It is the difference in the respect generated by genuine and unquestioned citizenship possessed by a man whatever his country and that which is lacking in actual alienage however nominal and theoretical his citizenship may be.

4. The Negro's social lag places him at a severe disadvantage. The progress the Negro has made since his emancipation is appropriately celebrated by many persons. His deficiencies are explained correctly as due principally to his lack of opportunity. In spite of this, the fact remains that economically, politically, educationally, culturally, the Negro in America suffers in comparison with the White man. White men do not fail to make this an excuse for victimizing him. The Negro is censured for what he does not possess; even that which he does possess is frequently taken away from him. The weak are always subject to abuse by the strong who live side by side with them.

From this brief accounting it is clear that the problem in racial tension by which the religious community is faced is one that presents no difficulties less amenable to moral decision and social engi-

neering than any of the great problems in human relations for which religion has always proposed basic solutions. J. H. Oldham in *Christianity and the Race Problem* expresses this point of view in terms which for me are definitive: "The fundamental causes of racial dislike and hostility, where these exist, are similar to those which give rise to hostility within communities of the same race. They are moral rather than racial. There is no necessity to postulate the existence of a specific and universal instinct of racial antipathy; while on the other hand there is strong, positive evidence that such an instinct does not exist. An adequate explanation of racial antagonisms can be found in the impulses and motives that are independent of race. These impulses and motives, however, though not racial in their origins, may become racial through being connected in the mind with the thought of another race. When this association takes place the feelings may be aroused by contact with any member of that race, and operate with all the force of an instinctive antipathy."<sup>10</sup>

## II

Either the religious community as a whole has failed to recognize this fact or it has deliberately turned away from its moral responsibility. It has not turned away completely. The impetus which religion gave to the anti-slavery movement must never be forgotten. It will not be forgotten that the religious impulse is responsible for the magnificent tide of sympathy and education which flowed toward the freedmen following their emancipation. Except for philanthropy, however, the period since the Civil War has proved almost completely barren of any determined effort initiated and sustained by the religious community to solve the problem of Negro-White relations in America.

There are today deep, widespread, and anxious stirrings in the religious community of America born of our troublous interracial times. These activities may be appraised as follows:

1. Religious interest in the problem of race relations suddenly deepens when our civilization and national safety seem imperiled. In periods of international order and domestic peace, however

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Oldham, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

grievous may be the interracial injustices within the state, the religious conscience is stirred but mildly, if at all. When, however, rebellion begins to foment, when there are riots and rumors of riots, tranquillity is disturbed, and the economy menaced, we discover the religious community moving into action in almost perfect cadence with the state and other secular forces in society. In such circumstances one is disposed to discount the religious intent.

2. Activity by some religious groups is also motivated by the rivalry they sense from secular and other religious sources. In recent years there has been profound concern in the religious community lest communism make heavy inroads upon Negro allegiance. Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin, speaking at the One Hundred Fifty-fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, urged the end of discrimination against Negroes and reminded his listeners that the Communists were amassing party members because they have abolished the color line. Both northern and southern Baptists have raised the question of the effects of race prejudice upon the growth of subversive groups. Certain Protestant activity among Negroes in a center such as New Orleans can be traced to the large Catholic influence upon Colored people there.

3. There are instances of a fearless willingness by religionists to root out the underlying sources of racial tensions in America but on the whole the mood is fearful and action is ameliorative. The Catholic press upon occasion urges the Catholic to be wholly Christian in his attitude toward the Colored man by actively participating in the elimination of every barrier and discrimination confronting the Negro. Dr. Clarence L. Jordan, a southern Baptist minister, has developed in south Georgia a cooperative interracial farm community by virtue of very great imagination and courage. The Protestant press in many instances has spoken unequivocally on the most basic issues raised by our unhappy interracial situation.

Religious people on the whole, however, have defaulted distressingly in the presence of their clear moral responsibility and singularly fine opportunity. Their philosophies and programs are still projected upon the basis of a segregated society and a segregated religious institution. The exodus of White churches from growing

Negro communities continues. No religious leader is reported to have lost his position because of an insistence upon the admission of Negroes to his institution, for the reason that there has been no such insistence where the question is an issue. While numerous labor unions in the South have a mixed membership, some with Negro officers, I am unaware of a single Protestant church below the Mason Dixon line with a membership of both races. In communities where Negro soldiers have been brutally beaten or killed, obviously without justification, religious folk have been ominously silent. Negroes in their struggles for access to the ballot, for equal educational opportunities, for justice in the courts, have found no widespread, ardent, and sustained support from religious sources. It is a sad commentary upon religion when so simple an act as the entertaining of 79 Colored children by Vermont White families at the suggestion of the Reverend A. Ritchie Low becomes nationwide news. It is bewildering when a representative elected without opposition to a national denominational meeting says on the racial situation: "Down in our state the time for shootin' has come and I'm willing to fire the fust shot." One Pennsylvania minister recently inscribed this note on a questionnaire of the Commission on Church and Minority Peoples of the Federal Council of Churches: "If we continue to strive it may be that the next generation will move a little farther up the ladder and generation after generation will keep on moving up and in the next couple of thousand years we may be somewhere near the goal."

4. The attitude of religious forces toward Negroes is still dominated by the paternalistic and missionary motive. In 1943 the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention expressed its purpose in making expenditures for Negro work as follows: "We believe that through this program we can and are making the best contribution for the Christianizing of the Negroes. . . ."<sup>11</sup> The often quoted statement of Pope Pius XII in *Sertum Laetitia* addressed to the hierarchy of the American Church on November 1, 1939, is illustrative of this point: "We confess that we feel a special paternal affection, which is certainly inspired of Heaven, for the Negro peo-

<sup>11</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 1943, pp. 248-252.

ple dwelling among you; for in the field of religion and education we know that they need special care and comfort and are very deserving of it."

It is clear from this analysis that the religious community in its interracial activity stands conspicuously on the debit side of the ledger. It is confronted with a problem clearly belonging to it, clearly soluble as nearly as any problem of social friction is soluble, and it is making no noteworthy contribution to its solution.

### III

Why is it that the religious community has failed so utterly to comprehend and bear its responsibilities in race relations in America and what are the remedies?

We need to realize at the outset that the genuine religious community is not co-extensive with the nominal religious community. We must not be deceived by religious statistics. Of the fifty-six million church members reported in our latest religious census, many are not even good church-goers. Many who are ecclesiastically dutiful are conscious of little or no ethical implications in what they profess and what they do. The dogmas to which they subscribed in youth and still repeat regularly are without clear meaning to them for action. The various other forms of worship in which they engage serve as emotional stimuli for a little while but die away before areas of delicate and difficult social relations are reached. In some languages these persons may be called religious. If there is insistence upon this, then a cause of the unhappy record of the religious community in race relations can be ascribed to the ethically irrelevant religion professed by many in this community.

It would be more accurate to exclude these from the catalogue of the religious in the Jewish-Christian sense. If religion of this tradition assumes a common fatherhood and a brotherhood defined in terms of love, it is difficult to see on what ground we include those who are initiates only in the forms calculated to inspire the spirit of brotherhood and who know not brotherhood itself. We may think of them as candidates for high religion but as yet uninitiated.

One of the most striking recitals I know of the gulf between religiosity and genuine religion is to be found in Cedric Belfrage's *South of God*. There was Jess, Tennessee mountaineer and father of Claude Williams, the center of the story, who could quote from the Bible at length, for whom "the facts about damniggers, like facts about God and heaven and hell and the sacred Book were basic, and not subject to dispute," who agreed that the Bible "said Thou Shalt Not Kill, but it didn't say Thou Shalt Not Kill a damnigger,"<sup>12</sup> and who felt that Negroes had to be killed once in a while to show them their place. On what basis can this man be called a Christian? To follow the life of Claude Williams, his son, is to see a most striking example of the development out of Bible-idolatry, preacher-idolatry, church-idolatry into the worship of the genuine Christian God. Davis, Gardner, and Gardner in their *Deep South*, illustrate how the religion which enjoins love and brotherhood is actually used by those who speak its language to justify their crimes. Negro prisoners sentenced to die are expected to "get religion" and everything possible is done to help them "make their peace with God," for in this way the White community is symbolically absorbed of any guilt or injustice. The condemned men take it upon themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Belabored explanations of religious failures in race relations would prove unnecessary if we simply admitted that many of those who are charged with religious failure are not even religiously accountable.

If we can imagine such a re-definition of our religion as to include only those who equate the love of God with the love of their fellowmen and who strive with all of their being to live according to the demands of this love, we can now ask what may be done to strengthen these genuinely religious men and women in a successful struggle with racial tension.

1. We can press upon them with prophetic zeal the true and difficult meaning of the brotherly love they profess and are eager to

<sup>12</sup> Cedric Belfrage, *South of God* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1941), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 528-534.



live. A southern White college president is reported to have been greatly relieved when a Colored man assured him that asking the president to be his brother in Christ did not at all mean asking him to be his brother-in-law. This president's relief does not square with a genuinely religious conscience. Love countenances no distinctions of class or caste or race. It is as blind to accidental differences as a good father to the accidents of size or color in his children. This is the love we impute to God; it is the kind of love which the very nature of God and the structure of our universe demand of us. This is a quality which transcends the guaranty of freedom or of equality. It costs infinitely more than sympathy and philanthropy. It requires more than a gift of laws or jobs or money or houses; it demands the gift of one's self. In such a conception there are no sacred social precincts; there is no "South of God."

2. This re-defined religious community should hasten to welcome into it formally those who are unorthodox in terms of credal and other institutional requirements but who meet completely the test of the will to love. Many such persons, encumbered by no religious trappings, have lived lives boiled down to the very essence of brotherhood and thus possess a religious genuineness and power which might set aflame any flickering embers in the recognized religious community. These newcomers would find in the religious community organizational genius, institutional resources, and an art of communion calculated to provide tools for their hands and enrichment of their passions.

3. All of the good will in the world will not compensate for a lack of understanding where delicate adjustments in human relations are concerned. The religious community will profit, therefore, by a knowledge of the facts and the most profound understanding possible of all the underlying factors which enter into racial tensions. Without question many religious men and women are among the sixty-six per cent of the White population, who, according to the National Opinion Research Center, think that Negroes are treated fairly. Such abysmal ignorance or insentitiveness can never serve as a sound basis for constructive action.



A most thoroughgoing campaign of education is here indicated for which no investment of funds would be too great. There is tragic irony in the expenditure of millions of dollars annually upon foreign missions when Americans, including religious Americans, suffer from such lack of knowledge on so critical an issue. One does not suggest less for missions but a greatly expanding budget for education on race relations at home.

The facilities for this are enormous. There are more than two hundred thousand pulpits in the land and approximately a thousand religious periodicals. Hundreds of thousands of pieces of Sunday School literature are published annually. Conferences, institutes, retreats constitute a continuous medium of education. The secular press—big city, small town, and rural—is also available where religious people desire to make use of it. Here is almost unlimited opportunity to develop informed good will.

In the getting of knowledge, the religious community cannot omit that of sound strategy in effecting social change. Science and history already have much to offer. A larger proportion of the expenditures of religious institutions might very profitably go to the encouragement of experimentation, the actual testing on a wide and controlled scale of the principles they enunciate and wish to see effected.

4. Members of the religious community will never prove a decisive factor in eliminating racial tensions unless they act with boldness. Secular society may argue that "this is the best we can do under the circumstances." The role of religion is to change the circumstances. This counsel involves risks—risk of position, risk of loss of following, risk of martyrdom, personal and institutional. This, however, is but one further illustration of the eternal paradox; to save your life, you must lose it. Religion in America has been saving its economic, social, and institutional life from the beginning.

The fear from which religion needs now to be delivered is not fear of boldness but fear of timidity. Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam declared in his 1944 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale that revolution is a cup that must be drunk in these days and that the day of march

is upon us. Should boldness result in the deflection of a majority, it may be that it will be the destiny of the remnant to bear the cross and bring salvation. The religious community needs constantly to be reminded that its major gifts to social reconstruction have come through the voice and acts of its occasional prophets and reformers. Its record during the long stretches between their peak insights and labors has been singularly barren. It should bear in mind, further, that there are those in secular society who have a passionate will to act, who are undisturbed by the possible cost, and who may at any hour seize the moral initiative of our time.

It is strange that men should look back on history and choose as their heroes those who defied their times and at the same instant yield themselves complacently as slaves to their own times and crucify those who live in the future. This is explained by the fact that there is no penalty in praising the past while discomfort or even martyrdom threatens the prophet in his own day. The genuinely religious mood does not cast a cautious eye upon this latter prospect. It is not religion in the Judaeo-Christian sense that uses religion as a means of escape from conditions which it ought to be foremost in uprooting.

5. The counsel of boldness does not overlook the problem of what is possible at a given moment. The purest in heart face problems in the social context which present the dilemma of expediency and complete frustration. There are some things in matters of race relations in some places which even the saint cannot change immediately. One is forced to live today within the limits of today's possibilities. The difference, however, between the religious and the non-religious man is that the latter lives well within the hinterland of the possible while the former lives upon its frontier and at risks pushes that frontier always out and out. This is the imperative for the religious community. It will discover, moreover, that the frontier is not as fraught with danger as has been imagined. Hundreds of ministers with the inspiration of the Reverend A. Ritchie Low of Vermont would quickly have abandoned it upon the assumption that the time was not ripe, the people not ready, and the boat must

not be rocked. Even Mr. Low declared he was surprised at the response of the people when the idea of entertaining Negro children was announced in the Vermont newspapers. Farmers from more than a half dozen counties asked for one or more children. This minister has proved what he believed and stated, namely, that there is a great amount of liberalism in the people which their religious leaders have not tapped. He declared: "All of this beautiful response was lying nascent here until it was awakened. It must be like that elsewhere, perhaps all over the North." The point is that this and many far more significant experiments in race relations would be discovered easily feasible in hundreds of places if leadership could be found. Religious leaders who fear the response of their followers to radical proposals will often discover among these followers a strong and numerous group who long since have harbored the same notions and have failed to act upon them only because they lacked leadership. Inertia at the top is the stuff out of which revolt is made.

6. It must be borne in mind that racial tensions do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be treated apart from our general social ills. We have seen that these in reality constitute the soil out of which so-called racial maladjustments spring. David L. Cohn, describing the South in the *Atlantic Monthly* of January 1944, puts this tragic fact convincingly: "In this area the economic struggle is often of the most pathetic and pitiless kind, because it is the poor against the poor, the dispossessed against the dispossessed, the hungry against the hungry, the poor white man against the poor Negro."<sup>14</sup> "Whatever reduces conflict, curtails irresponsible power, and allows people to obtain a decent livelihood will," says Dr. Ruth Benedict, "reduce race conflict. Nothing less will accomplish the task."<sup>15</sup> Men and women of religion may never hope to alter in any basic way the tension between races when, at the same moment, they participate in and often are the causes of the very social inequities in which racial antagonisms are bred.

<sup>14</sup> David L. Cohn, *Atlantic Monthly*, CLXXIII, 1 (January, 1944), p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Benedict, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

7. The first great transforming act by the religious community should be performed within itself. As Dr. Henry Slonimsky said in a paper prepared for the fourth meeting of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, "If the Church would put its own house in order, everything else could be expected to follow in due course."<sup>16</sup> It is within the religious community that the Kingdom should first appear, where no distinctions would be thinkable between Black men and White men, where men would in reality be brothers in Christ and, if they chose, brothers-in-law.

The thesis here presented is that religion of the Judaeo-Christian tradition can, if it will, affect fundamentally the relations between the Negro and White races in America, that at this moment it is failing to do so, and, finally, that in this failure it is proving apostate to its genius and is imperiling its very life.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Slonimsky, "The Religious Foundations for Enduring Peace," p. 8.