

Personality Not Pigmentation

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FOR a long time I have felt that I owed the following statement to the people of the Universalist Church. The material which it contains is of so personal a nature that were the purpose in hand the winning of an argument or the placing of a blame it would never see the light. Had the editorials of the *Leader* dealing with Marian Anderson and the D. A. R. and the August utterance on "Idealism and Realism in Mixed Marriages" never appeared, I should probably have delayed the writing for several more years. Although these articles did not reach me in war-time Europe until weeks after they had been written (I refer to the latter editorial here), I have purposely waited until feelings should be sufficiently cooled to permit what I hope will be a more creative slant upon the whole issue.

My purpose is not to defend a Negro people whose American journey needs no defense. Nor does the contralto whose voice will sing her in and out of Hell without argument stand in need of this. The two young people whose wedding ceremony I was honored to perform have their thirteenth chapter of Corinthians. My worry is the Church in whose institutions I have been active for twenty years and the policy of segregation of minority races established in its editorial columns and tacitly accepted by its membership.

My own background includes four generations of marriages between West African and Anglo-Saxon stock. These unions have taken place in England, Africa, and America. They have occurred in slavery and out of it, in wedlock and out of it. Tribal chieftains, English gentlewomen, pre-Civil War governors

of the South, mingle with seventeenth century colonizers of Massachusetts and generals of the American Revolution. In other words, I happen to be one of those products of intermarriage whose anticipation has been invoked for three centuries to smother the love people of differing stocks have felt for one another.

To the people of the Universalist Church and anyone else in doubt about the matter I wish to say that, so far from writhing in the frustration generally sketched for such in second-rate novels, I can trace about eight-tenths of the values I hold dearest in life directly to that factor. Among these values I would list the interpretation of the teaching of Jesus given me by the Universalist Church. Any church which cannot understand that stands in peril of a judgment. It is that judgment I wish to forestall.

I

In this particular respect I think I can do a job for that church no other of its membership is equipped to perform. I say this in the deepest humility. I had nothing more to do about the union of chromosomes responsible for me than any of the rest of us. It merely happens that in my case the smashing paradox between the ideal inescapably implied in the Universalist interpretation of theology and its woeful incapacity to implement that ideal is sharply illustrated. Until that conflict is resolved there can be no progress for the movement.

In a very real sense I have been educated by the Universalist denomination. On personal initiative I

selected its church school before I had passed my first decade. For the ten years prior to my departure for university I attended its services regularly and accepted its right hand of fellowship on the express desire to be more active in its work.

By the time I was twelve years of age the paradox between intention and action of Universalism was shaking that little church. From time to time I have been the innocent cause of shaking it ever since. Self-satisfied, middle-class people that they were, they had nevertheless been attracted by a faith which preached the Fatherhood of God and the Universal Brotherhood of Man. That message had struck sufficiently deep for them to realize that they could not preach or accept that belief while excluding the only youngster of mixed parentage (in the Anglo-African sense) in the neighborhood. With each stage of my development the paradox grew sharper. Should I take a role in this or that pageant? What would a conference say if I were to represent the church? Should I be asked to teach a class? Would it be safe to hold box socials where anyone's daughter might

Time and again I have seen the committees of that church sit down to each minor struggle. I have seen members of that church harden at a concession they could not bring themselves to make, and, because they had to admit defeat of a principle which had begun to remake their lives, grow bitter and unlovely.

Surprisingly often I have seen others achieve a real triumph over their bourgeois fear of doing something "of which the community couldn't be expected to approve." Each time such victory was won I have seen those people grow with a new understanding of life, just because they had come closer to being what *they actually wanted to be* but hadn't had faith that they could. And all through these early days I skipped about that vestry while such struggle was in process knowing perfectly well what a scrap I was creating and impishly chuckling at it, for I had all the mischievousness of the average youngster albeit circumstances channeled it in unaccustomed paths.

Going to a college for the explicit purpose of training for the Universalist ministry only spread the problem with which that church had wrestled over a broader section of the denomination. One keen test of the caliber of a denomination is to be found in the quality of vision in the men who are assigned to train its ministry. If that vision is on the level of the average church member struggling in the slough of a society which it is the mission of the movement to transform, God will need to help that church, for no other force will be able to.

The interview given me by the dean of the Theological School was held in midst of summer when the extra coatings of tan I habitually don for that season were at their thickest: in short, I was as dark at the time as I ever expect to be. The problem presented to my ministry by the present development of American churchianity was put forward as strongly as I have ever heard it stated. So far as the training facilities of the Universalist Church were concerned I was offered the ground floor, to stand or fall on my own merit. I knew then as now that had he done otherwise every principle for which Universalism stands would have gone by the board. And I believe with an

abiding faith that many, who on grounds of material expediency have questioned his wisdom, know in their inmost hearts that this is true.

From start to finish the six years of close fellowship which I knew with the faculty and students of that Theological School has been one of the richest I have known in an experience abundantly blessed with such fellowships. Every opportunity or advantage which the school could make available to any of its students was placed at my disposal. Undergraduates from the South who had stated that the day I entered the building they must leave for good remained to become friends whose esteem I hope to merit to my dying day.

II

Nor was the school alone in the denomination in its policy of absolute fairness. The State Convention from which I had come went out of its way to double the contribution made to young men preparing for its ministry in my case. The home church based a service of worship on my departure for theological study, along with a fellow student. An esteemed Sunday school teacher of mine consumed three handkerchiefs in the process.

I think I can honestly say that at no time in this six-year period of preparation was I blinded to the difficulties at hand. Invariably at church conventions the fathers of the faith would peer sadly at me over their spectacles, murmuring sometimes openly, always inwardly, "My dear young man, how you will be hurt! What are you doing in this ministry? You are brave but unwise." And always I would smile very gently because it seemed to me, with a clarity for which I cannot bring myself to apologize, that they were failing to grasp the genius of their own faith. Had I followed their analysis I should have tried to build my life in terms of a decadent society's estimate of a physical exterior for which I was in no way responsible. This would have involved a complete rejection of personal integrity and placed the whole self in jeopardy. As it was I insisted on striving to build that life in harmony with personal convictions of usefulness which were areas of behavior in which I felt a measure of responsibility. To do so required less courage and involved less danger than their course would actually have made inevitable.

Had any factor been wanting to convince me of the soundness of my course the relations I knew with the people whose parish I was privileged to serve as minister would have supplied that lack. As I type from the little Welsh village where I am studying, there rests on the desk beside me a mass letter of remembrances from people of that church. It is nearly five years since I have been among them, yet there is scarcely a name on that list with which I cannot link a memory of creative fellowship. The Founding Fathers are right only if they have in mind the type of church institution which accepts lock, stock, and barrel the sterile complacency of a crumbling bourgeois mediocrity. This is precisely the type of institution in which I would not care to be found dead, and if the mere item of complexion has saved me from it I feel deeply convinced that that benevolent Providence which gives nature's little wild things a protective

coloring to hide them from the destroyer, has extended its ministrations unto me.

I shall never forget the Committee on Fellowship which examined me for ordination. Thirty minutes on my theology and four hours on my politics and racial attitudes. There was a very serious younger clergyman, newly called to a big task and quietly on fire with zeal for his job. Here alone did I feel a quality which could make me part of a thing vastly bigger than either of us. There was a former classmate, fresh to his first church, terribly anxious to be helpful but galvanized with fear of seeming "radical." At the time there was little danger. An elderly and eminently respectable lawyer came next. In light of the values which had shaped his life he was honest to the very core. Both of us knew perfectly well that inside and out I represented everything antithetical to his views, yet there he sat, determination written in every line of his face to give me a square deal."

There was a State Superintendent. Knowing what little I do about the work of State Superintendents, it has always been a mystery to me that they maintain as much social vision as they do. The assignment of "walking diplomat" without portfolio or power among groups composed of badgered business men, embattled ladies' aids, misfit ministers' wives, neighborhood feuds and clergymen torn in the schizophrenia of material immediacy and prophetic religion, is adequate to destroy prophets (and actually it does). I can hear the thick rich baritone of my interrogator today: "Now Jeffrey, about your politics. . . . Are you a Communist?" "No." "Urrmph! Socialist?" "Yes." "Urrmph! Well, what kind of a Socialist? Do you think Russia is a better place to live in than the U. S. A.?"

Finally the committee voted ordination. It did so with more travail of spirit. There was the genuine fear of kindly people who disliked seeing a harmless idealist hurt. At this point they might well have been right had the crux not been a problem of racial prejudice about which the mere accident of birth compelled me to know more than any of them possibly could. There was a second, far deeper, fear. It was so deep I doubt if any of that committee could have placed a finger on it. I felt it in this way. They wanted their church to be the kind of institution which could unite its theory with its practice. Inwardly they knew that it was not, nor, within the limits of their imagination, could they see it becoming such. They feared lest that central weakness be demonstrated to the world. Through no connivance of my own I happened to be a walking demonstration of that weakness. Failure to ordain me would have been an even more flagrant confession of the same failure. In that dilemma they were caught and the whole denomination, not to mention liberal Christianity, with them.

III

I have seen the traces of that conflict, conscious or unconscious, written on the face of every superintendent with whom I have ever spoken. I know how it would simplify matters if I should move a thousand miles south and begin to sing mammy songs and pick cotton (activities which, however commendable, are notoriously outside the habit patterns of New Eng-

landers born and bred). But to do so would betray both my personal integrity and my church; I was called to its ministry.

Actually all America is faced with the same dilemma. Neither the "Great Democracy" nor the Universalist Church can be true to itself without recognizing in word and intention the fact that "He hath made of one blood all nations." The unique factor of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets is that they never say "all men *should* be brothers," but that they already *are*. It is the refusal of men to act on the reality of their common brotherhood which has produced the Hell in which we blindly struggle today.

The rationalizing by which American institutions from the United States Supreme Court down to the editorial columns of *The Christian Leader* seek to escape that conflict would outweigh the tomes of the Judgment Book. One line from the column says: "If a young colored man desires to enter a white theological school . . . and has as his ideal the service of his race . . ." For the sake of bringing out a point I will play guinea pig and assume that I might be the chap in question. Looking first between the lines I see that the writer has jumped to one of two conclusions, either that race is a matter of the preponderant biological inheritance in a man, or that the subject is biologically "pure." Neither of these assumptions happens to be true. My actual inheritance is a ratio of eleven-sixteenths to five, the preponderancy being on the Saxon side. Were I to assume the racial theory of the editor I would immediately proclaim myself a Saxon and proceed to act accordingly. This I shall never do.

But I find an even greater source of disturbance in the terrific race consciousness the writer betrays. He is so much more conscious of my biological construction than I am myself. I shall always remember the editor as a very kindly gentleman who once went out of his way to enable me to attend a summer session at Union Theological School, where I gained many of the ideas reflected in this paper. It never occurred to me to query or even become conscious of the racial characteristics of his grandparents. Had I given the matter thought I should doubtless have felt a vague satisfaction that a fortuitous combination of genes, cells, conditionings and integrated experiences had produced a personality I felt the better for having known. I feel that race consciousness even more than race prejudice will provide an insuperable barrier against the Kingdom of Heaven which is a Universal Brotherhood.

But the editorial goes on: "If, however, he (the young colored man) despises his race, wants to have nothing to do with it, insists that he intends to join the white race, serve white churches, marry a white girl . . ." Let us take the individuals from this school of red herrings one by one.

It is as biologically incorrect to be proud of a race as to be ashamed of it; no one of us has anything whatever to do about it and without a modicum of free will in a matter there can be neither praise nor blame.

As regards what the editor actually means by my race, let me say with all the emphasis at my command, that scarcely a day goes by that I do not humbly thank God that the social consequences of the racial

fusion in my veins compelled me (through no virtue of my own) to start thinking in social terms about ten years ahead of the rest of my generation. I do not mean by this that awareness of social destruction of personality values is limited to products of "mixed marriages." I only know that I can check my own development as a person, and know beyond peradventure of doubt that without the above-mentioned factor the avaricious little entrepreneur I started out to be would by now be going slowly insane within the squirrel-cage of our disintegrating capitalist society where so many of my biologically impeccable contemporaries are stifling. That combination of circumstances has at least made me capable of knowing the fellowship of the band of men and women who, in the increasing chaos, can see "a new heaven and a new earth." It has given me my life's calling and for this I am profoundly grateful. It is only because I wish the Church which helped me on the road to take part in the adventure that I write this paper.

I think I was nearly twenty before I finally convinced the woman who brought me into the world of the truth of this statement, and showed her that if I had grown up to know that my mother had been able to love a man with the blood of Africa in his veins but had been wanting in the spiritual strength to confess that love in marriage, I should have had cause to be deeply ashamed.

IV

Spiritually I do not worry about the Negro people. Out of its suffering has grown a religious insight which towers over anything America has yet produced. I could have prayed that some flaw in the law which denies the inheritance of acquired characteristics could have given me that heritage. But if I feel any clear call to a ministry, it is leveled against the institutions of segregation which at present hold millions back from knowing their true fraternity. I am not interested in preaching to congregations of brachycephalics, Indo-Aryans, or anything else as such. If there is a single "valley of dried bones" in all the world it is to be found in the smug bourgeois complacency of the middle class which, by accident of belonging to the majority population, generally happens to be called white.

When the young man of our editor's thought comes to marry I have the right to make but one suggestion to him, namely, that he love and respect his wife for the precious bond their mutual personalities has made possible. If that is there all the gestapos in the world cannot destroy it; if it is not no stud pedigree of narrow noses, long heads, or dermal pigmentation will supply it. Likewise let him not insult the social thinking of their children before they are born by deciding the limit of their spiritual stature.

To the rest of the world I would suggest that the message of the Christian faith suffers from its witnesses when the fact that two young people can love each other at a time when millions of youth are being hurled at each other's throats, merits an adverse editorial.

In summary let me reaffirm that America's race problem is rooted in the ideology which was developed during the period when Negro slavery was economi-

cally profitable and therefore had to be ethically justified. Segregation, Jim Crow tactics, and the ugly undertone of lynch law are all part of the vicious hangover. Part of the result is that I can experience a courtesy in London which would be unthinkable in Washington, D. C., and anticipate infinitely less physical danger in Munich, Germany, than I should expect in Savannah, Georgia. Such a statement as Theodore Roosevelt's, "Equality of privilege does not mean identity of privilege," represents nothing more than a politician's effort to quiet two elements in his constituency and maintain office without touching the status quo. Strangely enough, history may forgive such tactics in a politician; I doubt if it will be so lenient where a Church is concerned. It would be an indicator of greater spiritual health were the quotation from John Stuart Mill's essay on Representative Government invoked: "Any prejudice whatever will be insurmountable if those who do not share it themselves truckle to it, and flatter it, and accept it as a law of nature."

Legislation will not serve the occasion. The three husky amendments written into our Constitution nearly a century ago have gone as far as it is possible for laws to venture without practical support in the public conscience. The development of that conscience is the essential task of the Churches in general and, in this instance, I feel the peculiar sphere of the Universalist Church because of its unique gospel. Here again my plea is not for the victims of the system but for the perpetrators of the crime. On every occasion when I see some wretched little hotel clerk trying to protect his bread and butter by hiding behind a lie which will deny me a room I realize what this code has done to the majority group. When we see mobs of ordinarily decent people dancing with the blood crazed faces of tortured fiends about a twitching black corpse suspended from a tree, I realize the awfulness of the judgment visited upon a society which has countenanced segregation. For this is the perfectly logical outcome of a policy which prattles of "Equality and-or identity of privilege." It is the moral rejection of the great gift of God that men *are* brothers.

The job is far from an easy one, but it will be made yet more difficult if we take refuge behind the escape devices of racially separate washstands, theater booths, marriage laws and zoning regulations. In a society such as ours churches must create little oases in which persons from the widest possible variety of racial and cultural backgrounds can know each other as persons. Thence the consciousness of an all-permeating unit must filter out into the shop, the dance hall, the school and the home.

In my own case I feel that the church and its institutions have gone farther than dozens of good men would have believed it possible for them to go. For that reason I cannot submerge and do the comfortable thing which would morally weaken the spiritual stand which the Universalist Church must make or forfeit its reason for existence.

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"Can Satan drive out Satan?" Apparently he can, Scripture to the contrary notwithstanding. For here we read that Hitler has banished the playing of swing music from all of Germany!—*Unity*.