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BY

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The Civil Rights Movement and the Ecumenical Movement are not new. Our generation cannot claim to have conceived them. We have been building on the foundations constructed by thoughtful and inspired men of other times. It is only when we see the magnitude of the job which remains to be done, that we are inclined to wonder whether any effort has been put forth before.

How is it that the ancient ideas embodied in the Civil Rights and Ecumenical Movements have suddenly become so important to so many? Why, in the Sixties, should these matters be so much more urgent than they seemed earlier? And why is it that these two movements have accelerated simultaneously?

A part of the answer to these questions lies in our fortunate choice of enemies during the Second World War. We found ourselves at war not only with Germany but also with Hitler's concept of the Master Race. So we set out to defeat Germany, and at the same time to destroy the Aryan claim to superiority.

It was not until the world learned the truth about the gas chambers and the crematoria, however, that the full horror of racism penetrated the public conscience. In "the final solution", the Nazis showed us the logical conclusion of racism. Once we understood that, the absolute necessity for reconciliation became obvious.

It requires only brief reflection, therefore, to appreciate that it is not by chance that these two movements have matured together, because inter-racial and inter-religious relations are inextricably intertwined.

Recognizing that is important, but it is becoming increasingly essential that we be able to identify the ways in which they relate to each other; and where the requirements of the movements diverge and converge.

It is fairly easy to see points of convergence. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbids discrimination on grounds of race or religion, it tackles both problems in the same way; a way, I might add, that I consider entirely appropriate and long overdue.

It is also significant to note the Civil Rights issue has been a tremendously unifying force for the religiously oriented people of America. Diverse denominations have joined forces and worked together on this issue in an unprecedented fashion. Illustrative of this was the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race that formalized the coalition of Catholics, Protestants and Jews which subsequently helped pass the Civil Rights Act. That coalition was very much in evidence during the Selma to Montgomery March, and it recently assisted in the enactment of the new Voting Rights Bill. So the race issue has been valuable to the Church, not only for the opportunities it provided for internal renewal, but also because it has tended to promote a highly desirable rapprochement with other religious organizations. By now almost everyone concerned with improving interfaith relations recognizes that a Brotherhood Dinner is considerably less effective than a joint effort on behalf of a common cause.

Minority groups, whether racial or religious, share, or should share, a commitment toward cultural pluralism. When I speak of cultural pluralism, I refer to a social order which accepts it as appropriate that ethnic, religious, nationality, racial and other groups maintain their individual identities and separate institutions while making their unique contribution to a unified nation. Only in a society founded on this principle can minorities in this country hope to maintain their integrity and secure their vital interests. It is theoretically possible to have a homogeneous democracy, and perhaps that ideal has been achieved in Scandinavia, but if we are to have democracy in America, it must be rooted in cultural pluralism. This in turn is based on the simple notion that the other guy has a right to be different, and that difference does not imply inferiority or superiority.

In terms of official public policy, we have come close to accepting that notion on the National level. We will not have adopted it completely, however, until we have so reformed our immigration law that the national origin quota system is completely eliminated from it. (This reform was adopted in October of 1965.) This is the last important vestige of Aryan superiority on the books of the United States Government. It is a downright insult to all Americans who cannot trace their ancestry back to one of those Northern European nations most favored by big quotas.

Of course, on the unofficial level, we have much further to go. Our society is cluttered with exclusive institutions maintained to provide association only with people "like us". When you inquire about the bonds which hold members together in such institutions, about the criteria of congeniality, too often one finds nothing but requirements relating to ethnic origin, religion, race or money.

Don't dismiss this kind of snobbery as inconsequential. It lends status and respectability to bigotry, and provides a standard around which the social climbers and conformists, who are exceedingly numerous, will rally. It is a poison which seeps outward and downward through society polluting wherever it reaches.

This is one of the reasons I think your effort to eliminate segregation in the Church is so important to the moral well-being of the community as a whole. You don't do it for that purpose but it has that effect. You do what you must for internal reasons -- to insure the integrity of Christian doctrine -- but when you are successful in purifying the Church, you are also denying its blessing to criteria which are detrimental to civic life. I want to make it clear, however, that I don't consider racial segregation in a church, or religious discrimination in a country club the kind of issue in which government may properly intervene. From a legal standpoint, they have a right to be snobs and fools. One may have a right without being right.

Everyone knows what a struggle we are having in the South to achieve compliance with the decision of the United States Supreme Court in Brown versus Board of Education. By now it is clear that there are a large number of people, public officials included, who are psychologically in a state of secession. They have adopted a stance of defiance, and dared Washington to try to make school desegregation work. They don't think of "our" Supreme Court but of "their" Supreme Court, not of the "Federal" government but of the "Central" government.

What is little appreciated outside the South, however, is the widespread existence here of exactly the same kind of defiance regarding the Supreme Court decisions on Bible reading and recitations of the Lord's Prayer in the Murray and Schempp cases.

When most Northerners or Westerners think about the problem of Church-State separation, it is in terms of anxiety lest the Roman Catholics get their hands into the public till. That is not our problem in the South. Historically, the public schools in this region have been Protestant institutions to which Catholics and Jews were graciously admitted. In this White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, the educators have not been deliberately offensive to Catholics, Jews or humanists --- they never thought of taking them into account. Almost invariably, however, Southern Protestants are shocked by the observation that our public schools are permeated with a rather heavy Protestant orientation.

It is remarkable, too, how often you will find that the same people who defend religious practices in public education are most vociferous in proclaiming their devotion to strict separation of Church and State. They are the ones most outraged by Headstart classes in a Catholic church.

But inconsistency seems to be the rule rather than the exception in matters of this kind. It must be said that frequently the most blatant religious practices occur in the all-Negro public schools in the South, which are unblushingly Protestant. Consider the irony of that for a moment: defiance of the Supreme Court's edict on the First Amendment by the group with the largest stake in promoting compliance with the Supreme Court's edict on the Fourteenth Amendment.

I firmly believe that the South will have racial integration in its schools long before it accords equality to Jewish, Catholic and non-believing children. One Atlanta school had a unique solution to the problem of religion in public education: instead of holding services in the school auditorium at Christmas time, they marched the entire student body to a nearby Christian church. This won't happen again, however, because the school is now racially integrated while the nearby Christian church remains lily white.

As you may have gathered, it is my conviction that affirmative legislation is essential to the achievement of racial equality. But it does not necessarily follow that the same strategy is appropriate to achieve religious parity in America. Indeed, this is the most important and least understood point of divergence between the drive for racial and religious equality.

There has been a widespread and generally accepted tendency in American life for religious groups to employ the machinery of the State -- when they have the power to do it -- in order to further sectarian purposes. Protestants and Catholics both engage in this practice.

We are familiar with Catholic efforts to write their own particular view of divorce, birth control and censorship into law. In doing so, they seek to extend the coverage of Catholic theology to non-Catholics with legal sanction. At the same time, what was voluntary adherence to Catholic dogma by Catholics themselves becomes compulsory.

Prohibition, of course, is an extension of Protestant theology backed up by the police power of government. And as I have pointed out, the Sunday School atmosphere of Southern public schools represents an effort to use state machinery for church purposes.

Whose ox is gored depends entirely upon who wields the greatest power in a particular community. In all of this, the Jews of America come out looking very good for the simple reason that we are always in the minority and never in the majority.

Very frankly, I resent what I consider to be an unwarranted intrusion into my private life by my neighbors' efforts to deprive me of a bourbon and soda after a tough day at the office. Many of you may share my irritation on this score, or perhaps you have an urge to buy a lottery ticket and strike it rich. There is no question about it: this sort of thing does create inter-group tension which is sometimes so bitter that it tears communities apart fully as much as racial conflict.

At the heart of the matter is coercion. Often the coercion is applied in areas which are intensely personal rather than public.

What doth cultural pluralism require of us? I suggest that it requires us to cease and desist from using the State to impose our sectarian viewpoint on others.

Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston provided me with the text when he said,

"It does not seem reasonable to me to forbid in civil law a practice that can be considered a matter of private morality.

Catholics do not need the support of civil law to be faithful to their own religious convictions, and they do not seek to impose by law their moral views on other members of society."

This statement reflects the tremendous change which is taking place in American Roman Catholicism. It is a clear reflection of the Ecumenical spirit, and I commend it to all denominations.

In order to implement our goal of reconciliation among the churches and synagogues, what we must do is embark upon a program of repealing old laws, even while supporting new laws embodying our aspirations for racial justice.

Which are the old laws that are inconsistent with religious rapprochement? They include those already referred to, such as, the highly restrictive measures dealing with birth control, divorce, and prohibition. I would go further than this, however, and include a wide variety of statutes that fall under the general heading of Sunday Blue Laws. The only adults worth having in Church on Sunday are those who come of their own free will and accord. It would be a sad commentary on religion if attendance depended largely on State prohibitions against doing anything else on Sunday morning.

What about the Orthodox Jewish retailer and Seventh Day Adventist who closes on Saturday in obedience to Mosaic law? I sincerely hope it does not offend the Christian conscience to permit him to open on Sunday.

These laws should be repealed even though, in some instances, the Supreme Court has upheld their constitutionality. Certainly the State should regulate hours and working conditions, and perhaps it should insist that business stay closed one day a week. But it can safely leave the determination of the day to individual choice in order to insure the widest latitude for religious liberty.

The most troublesome part of my thesis is its implication for religious involvement in civil rights activity. Does my view of the requirements of cultural pluralism imply that the churches are wrong to seek legislation which embodies their moral position on human dignity? I think not.

When we enact a statute which prohibits murder we are legislating morality and requiring the entire society to abide by the commandment handed down at Mount Sinai. But no one thinks that this law should be repealed. It is distinguishable from the Sunday Blue Law, for example, by the universality of its acceptance, and by the very practical consideration that it is a sine qua non of civilization.

While there are many individuals who argue against racial integration from what they consider to be a religious viewpoint, there are no religions as such that I know of which deny the essential unity of mankind, nor any major faiths which hold, as a matter of theology, that one race should enjoy a favored position in society. Not only do Catholics, Protestants and Jews tend to agree on these matters, but most secular humanists are also with us on this. So we need not worry about imposing a narrow sectarian position because no sect or even any major religious group can claim exclusive possession of racial justice.

Racial justice, however, is only simple justice. It was, after all, a Southerner named Thomas Jefferson who once wrote, by way of declaring our independence from Great Britain, that governments are instituted among men "to secure these rights." And the Preamble to the United States Constitution affirms that we have formed this Union "to establish justice."

I anticipate that Ecumenism will maintain its forward thrust. I am convinced that its internal logic will require that we all voluntarily refrain from coercion in matters of conscience. By supporting repeal of public policies contrary to this principle, we shall be undertaking activity with enormous potential for enhancing group life in America. By supporting compliance with decisions affecting prayer and Bible reading we shall be improving the climate for compliance with decisions on race.

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