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THE AMERICAN NEGRO: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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I

GUNNAR MYRDAL asserts in his now classic study of the Negro problem in America, *The American Dilemma*, "It should be clear by this time that it is the popular beliefs (the numerous myths, legends, and stereotypes) that are of primary importance in interracial relations."

Recent surveys of the changing attitudes of the white population toward Negroes have tended to agree that there has been a marked improvement. "Most white Americans," Louis Harris, the opinion sampler, has reported in his recently widely-publicized surveys, "are willing to have far more day-to-day contact with Negroes than they experience now. On the job, in schools, and in public accommodations, white society appears ready to move a long distance toward meeting Negro demands for integration. Much of the white people in the South," Harris adds, "are also increasingly ready to go along with these demands."

Similarly, an interesting study by Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley which compares white Americans attitudes, concerning Negroes in 1963 with those held in 1942, 12 years before the Supreme Court decision on school integration, concludes: "The 1963 study shows conclusively that the long-term trend toward acceptance of integration has not halted or reversed itself but rather has continued and even accelerated.

For the first time, a majority of all white Americans believes that 'white students and Negro students should go to the same schools.' . . . The idea of 'a Negro with the same income and education as you have moving into your block' is also more acceptable now.' . . . Belief that 'Negroes can learn things just as well as white people if they are given the same education and training' is characteristic of majorities in all parts of the nation."

These reports (based on elaborate data and percentages of opinion samplings which can be studied with profit and interest but for which there is not enough room here) are obviously encouraging. But there are also reported the contradictory tendencies of "widespread and deeply rooted anti-Negro prejudice" which exist in a profound state of tension in "the divided conscience" of these interviewed. This leaves one wondering as to whether the nation, and in particular, the religious communities, have begun to face up adequately to the seven-eighths of the iceberg beneath the surface.

There is some point at which most white Americans draw the line at the prospect of closer association with Negroes. One conclusion that can be drawn from the patterns of prejudice is that the greater the suggestion of physical contact, the greater the white antipathy — and even revulsion. One reason seems to be that the image of the Negro in the white mind is a complex of unflattering stereotypes. Three out of four whites, for

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instance, believe that Negroes, as a race, are less ambitious than whites; 71 percent think they "smell different"; 69 per cent say that Negroes have looser morals; 49 per cent that they want to live on handouts; 44 per cent that they breed crime. One in three says Negroes are an inherently inferior race. (Newsweek, Oct. 21, 1963).

THE KEYSTONE issues around which the civil rights struggle rages are those of providing equal opportunities in the areas of employment, housing, education, and public accommodations. The considerable progress that has been made in each of these areas can be attributed primarily to the alliance of forces exerted by official government agencies either in concert with or challenged by the Negro protest movement and the civil rights revolt. Generally, progress has been achieved *against* the tide of much public sentiment. (Hyman and Sheatsley note, "In areas where some measure of integration has taken place, official action has preceded public sentiment and public sentiment has then attempted to accommodate to the existing situation.")

If one examines the public relationals for resisting the movement toward racial equalitarianism, whether articulated in the hate-filled outcries of the White Citizens Councils or in the gradualist pleas of many white moderates, one cannot but help find himself sorting out the "given" reasons from the "real" reasons. And the "real" reasons, those which are expressed with greatest emotion when their nerve-endings are touched, are grounded in misperceptions, distortions, and stereotypes about the Negro which are as much the product of our "national illiteracy" about the social, cultural, and religious history of the Negro as they are the expressions of our twisted psychological fears and anxieties about blackness as a symbol of violence.

James Baldwin, Louis Lomax, and Malcolm X have made the white society painfully conscious of how wide is the gulf that separates the white man's true understanding of the Negro's psyche and social predicament from that of the Negro's understanding of his self, his situation, and his real relation to the white majority. (The

fact that the "big six" civil rights leaders, who, I have no doubt are very much representative of their people, have edged increasingly their public declarations with something of the desperation and urgency of the "militant" Negroes is an insight into the state of the mentality of the Negro masses as much as of the leaders). The most well-intentioned white civil libertarians, in the majority of instances, have not begun to grasp the full visceral reality of the Negro's daily plight, and the conventional liberal rallying cries for "justice" and "freedom" and "equal opportunity," when uttered in that vague, abstract and principled way, fails to find response and trust in the Negro soul.

II

AT THE ROOT of the problem is the failure of the majority of white people to begin to comprehend the magnitude of the tragedy of the Negro in America. It has taken a foreign observer to state the true moral size of this primordial American tragedy. The Netherlands historian, J. W. Schulte Nordholt, spent four years of study and research examining the history of the Negro people in America across three and a half centuries, and epitomized his perception of our race relations in these words:

"A crime had been committed which has never been equaled in size and intensity and is perhaps comparable only with the persecutions of our own times under National Socialism."

In describing the notorious slave trade — in which the English and Dutch exploited African Negroes as much as did the Americans, both of North and South — Nordholt declares:

"A migration of nations had taken place on a scale so vast that it dwarfed completely the migration of nations in ancient times."

The migration began with the importation to this country of 900,000 Negro men, women, and children in the 16th century; and then increased to 2,750,000 in the 1600s; to 7,000,000 in the 1700s; and then declined to 4,000,000 in the 1800s.

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The slaves were driven on board the cargo ships by whipping and caning, and were branded by a hot iron which caused painful swelling in their cheeks, arms or flanks. Many thought they were going to be eaten by the white man, and in their terror, "stabbed, hanged, or drowned themselves."

In the colonies, they were treated as merchandise by the plantation barons, who washed their investments (a sturdy male sold for about \$1800 during a good market), polished and oiled them to enhance their sales appeal in the slave market. Families were torn apart. Women were sold as "breeders" and drew a high price if they were particularly fecund. Eight-year-old children worked from sunrise to sunset on the Louisiana cotton plantations under the whiplash of the brutal overseers. In the wild west violence that reigned in the South, any attempt at rebellion was put down by lynchings, the burning alive in the streets of the slave rebels, and public whippings.

In the midst of this repression and persecution of the Negroes, in 1850 an historian was able to report that the men of the white society has sired 400,000 children, the offspring of miscegenation! This turbulent society, filled with contradictions, afflicted by a huge racial guilt complex, constantly sought to overjustify itself. By the early 1800s, the South was in an overwrought mental condition. Every slave uprising spelled danger to the plantation system. The community could no longer afford differing opinions. The South had grown from a strange and chaotic wild west into a police state.

I REHEARSE briefly this history because I think it is important that we try to understand what must happen to a thoughtful Negro of today who reads of the pilgrimage of his ancestors through the American wilderness. It occurs to me that he must have a reaction akin to that of the Jew of today who reads of what happened to his forebears in Western Christendom — the chain of persecutions, pogroms, expulsions, *auto-da-fés*, and finally genocide. The vast majority of Jews make the necessary dis-

tinctions between the Christians of the current liberal world and their persecuting ancestors. But the "old world" memories die hard. Even to third generation American-born Jews there is a frightening response to the thought: "The people of the cross have made the Jews the cross among the peoples."

In somewhat parallel ways, I find Negroes reacting to the "old world" memories of their ancestors in slavery. And to those who are deeply knowledgeable of their pasts, and who are close to the feelings and experiences of deprivation that their grandfathers underwent, it does not seem too farfetched for them to call for things like "compensation," and "preferential treatment." While privately they may recognize that these claims are strategies or bargaining points for equality, the mercurial reaction of their white allies and the swiftness with which the civil libertarian becomes estranged are another indication to the Negro that he, although an American who believes in Myrdal's "American Creed," continues to live in two civilizations — one of which remains *terra incognita* to the white American.

III

TO RETURN to the relationship of the myths to the practical issues of civil rights: Heine could have meant the Negroes in 1963 when he referred to the Jews of the 1700s, "First, you cripple the Jews and then you blame them for limping." In education, we have crippled the Negro and then we blame him for a limping performance. The crippling process began a long time ago. In the 1830s all the Southern states passed laws prohibiting the Negro from learning to read or write. (The plantation barons feared that literacy would lead to dissatisfaction and rebellion). The first schools that were established for Negroes were segregated in Boston, New York, and New Jersey in the 1800s. What is truly remarkable is that despite these handicaps, a number of slaves learned secretly how to read and write, and that the Negroes gave rise to numerous gifted scholars,

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poets, writers — whose names mean practically nothing to the white American!

In employment, Negroes could not be expected to be enthusiastic workers when for roughly 300 years they were used as doormats. They were prohibited by the slave laws of owning any property or personal possessions and therefore had no reason for incentive or ambition. The stereotype of laziness and passivity more appropriately describes the conditioned response to a repressive condition of the environment and has obviously no justification in attributing this to the character or inborn traits of the people.

In housing, the fear of many white people of integrated housing stems in large measure from their myth of loose morals of Negroes, weak family life, and personal dirty habits, as much as from the presumed loss of property values. Given the history of enforced separation of families of Negroes by white people in the South, the Negro family today in the lower classes is undoubtedly less stable. But evidence is clear that the middle class Negro families are as reliable, conventional, and responsible as any other middle class of any other

color. Housing segregation, observes Myrdal, is a rationalization of the view that the Negro is a menace to orderly society unless "kept in his place" by the caste system.

In public accommodations — or a form of social equality — the prevalent belief in a peculiar odor of the Negro is useful to deny social intercourse and the use of public conveniences that would imply close contact. Myrdal observes: "It is remarkable that it (odor) does not hinder the utilization of Negroes in even the most intimate household work and personal services."

If there is any summary instruction to be derived from this statement, it is in the sense, "that the fault is in ourselves and not in our stars," nor as much in our Negro fellow-citizens. The new frontier in race relations, I firmly believe, beyond the struggle for achieving equality in the legal, political, and social spheres, is that enunciated by the historian Nordholt; namely, that of discovering "a relationship between white man and Negro which does not belittle the human dignity of either" and which enables both together to realize their common sonship under God.

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