

THE NEW NEGRO AND RELIGION

Writer Claims His Religious Feelings Can Be Divided Into Three Groups Or Attitudes.

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"New Negro" is an expression used so frequently that it deserves at least an attempt at definition. Ordinarily one may take it to mean that stratum of colored Americans who were ushered into this world around the beginning of the present century, who have enjoyed greater opportunities for higher education and cultural development, and who ought now to be evincing some of the fruits of these "blessings" in their lives and their position in this country.

Viewed from this angle, the more we observe the New Negro the less we see about him that is decidedly new. Politically, economically, even socially he stands about where his fathers stood. It is sometimes argued he has actually lost ground. The same old walls of prejudice and discrimination which his parents found so hard to climb are still standing across his path. Therefore it is only natural that in most respects his progress should be extremely difficult and very slow.

In at least one particular, however, the New Negro is radically different from previous generations—he is head and shoulders above them in culture and higher education. There was a time when our few high school graduates and fewer college students were looked upon as valiant young warriors who had won a great victory after a long, hard fight; each was hailed as a prospective savior of his people. Today we have these champions with us in abundance and even superabundance.

Whether or not the New Negro's education has materially helped him is, of course, another question, and like most other questions may be answered in more than one way. There are naturally those who hold that his culture and education have helped him greatly, and that all our future progress is dependent thereon. But there are also those who are less inclined to optimism. They maintain that culture and education have not produced the effects our parents prayed for by a very, very great deal; that they have served mainly to fill the New Negro with a colossal conceit, the grounds for which it is difficult to discover.

They point out that in securing his higher education he has often been both impractical and unwise. He has laid too much stress on fraternities and athletics, on social affairs and the trivial elements of college life, and not enough on suiting his education to his needs.

Our less optimistic observers also point out that there is a general lack of seriousness and purpose about the New Negro as he secures his education which in the face of things is nothing less than sad. It is shown that most of our young men who enter medicine or dentistry do so not because they aspire to lives of scientific labor, but because they are looking for lives with little or no labor at all. These and similar considerations cause many to join with Dr. DuBois in declaring: "We seem to be producing somewhat more than our share of fools."

But to decide this question is properly beyond the scope of our topic. The fact remains that the New Negro is superior in education and culture to any of the generations of the past. It is these which distinguish him from other Negroes and give him just title to the adjective "New."

What then are this New Negro's religious feelings? How does he react to the religion and church of his day? In answer he may be divided into three groups or attitudes:

The Shammists.

The Materialists.

The Sincere: numerically, both last and least.

The Shammists

The Shammists are comparatively few in number. They are so named because their religion presents itself essentially as a system of sham. They freely and rather loudly profess to be religious, but they maintain that it is of the ultra-modern, highly intellectual variety that few Negroes beside themselves can appreciate or comprehend. One often meets them in two or threes around the community churches, the more radical sects, or some of the exclusive semi-religious cults. But never in numbers larger than two or three. If a given religious movement can attract more than that number of Negroes at any one time something must be wrong with it, and so they come out.

As a matter of fact, the Shammist is not moved by any religious motive, but rather by the more irreligious motive but rather by that membership in a more radical movement makes him appear intellectual, "deep." It offers an escape from ordinary Negrodom, from which so many Negroes seem anxious to escape. And thus religious movements along with others have their quota of these people

(Editor's Note—Will the Negro Church meet the challenge of present-day Negro youth? The author of this article now at Tuskegee was formerly a student at the Harvard Divinity School.)

who look the part but live it not.

The Materialists

Quite different are the Materialists. They have no use for spiritual things. If given the chance they will freely admit it. They may or may not be connected with religious institutions, but if so it is purely for practical reasons. They look upon ministers as parasites and tricksters. They regard church-goers as benighted, sheep-like fools who keep alive an outworn custom, sacrificing both their efforts and earnings at the shrine of some unseeing or mythical god.

If they have jobs that are not dependent upon the public, and thus are not so much concerned about what others think, they remain true to their deeper feelings and keep away completely from the church, often looking down upon it with the utmost contempt. Should they come to church at all it is purely for social reasons; sometimes because they wish to be entertained. They feel as they observe what happens in pew and pulpit as a psychiatrist must feel when he watches a group of maniacs at play. This attitude is especially prevalent among those who when in college took Bible 1.

But if their living happens to be derived from the public by business or in some professional field, they force themselves to take part in church work solely for whatever advantage the contact may bring. Thus one frequently sees a young lady singing loudly in the choir. She wants the church to send her off to a musical school. A young man will be very active in the young people's society or will even suffer to teach a Sunday school class. He hopes that for these worthy labors he will be aided financially in betting through school. One often sees an athletic doctor passing the plates at collection time. Dentists become deacons; lawyers serve as trustees; the druggist and tailor assist in raising funds. Yet in all this activity there isn't a shadow of religious sincerity. They are working solely for their selfish aims.

Let a man be moved by a dream of a business project, no matter how wild or impractical it may be, the first thing he does is to make for the churches, as a mule heads for the stable at feeding time. With the fall election came the politicians, each desiring to say "a few words." When one considers the extent to which the Negro Church has been preyed upon by our so-called business and professional leaders he is not surprised at its lack of progress. The wonder is that the church has survived. It's a serious reflection on the morals of our era when such duplicity can be so freely indulged in without causing even a semblance of shame.

It is safe to say that by far most New Negroes are Materialists. The reasons for it are of course quite plain. The recent period of popular religious criticism with its weakening and rejection of many prevalent ideas; the New Negro's rising intelligence, his disregard for dogma, and particularly with race prejudice, have all served to undermine the faith of the present generation or to prevent them from developing what faith they did not have. Then there is a decided tendency among them to look upon all religion as a superstitious and defaced hangover from an ignorant and ignoble past. In his effort to get away from ignorant orthodoxy he has gone from one to the extreme. As he felt the old religion to be the acme of ignorance, he thinks atheism is the height of sense. He has leaped from gods to no gods.

The Negro Church because of its ignorance has not understood the New Negro's mind. It has contented itself to stand on unbending orthodoxy and defiantly has watched its younger element drift away. In assessing the blame for the present irreligion, the church must apportion itself a generous share.

(Continued next week)