

# The New Negro and Religion

By HARRY V. RICHARDSON

"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.

## II.

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's or three's 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

*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.*

—The Editor.



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 urge to pretend. He thinks 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 who look the part but live it not.

### III.

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 getting through school. One often sees an atheistic 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 elections come 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 the impotence of Christianity in dealing 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. Today there is a decided tendency among them to look upon all religion as a superstitious and debased hangover from an ignorant and ignoble past. In his effort to get away from ignorant orthodoxy he has gone from one to the other 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 old 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.

### IV.

The great majority of New Negroes are Materialists, but not all of them are. Every age has a handful of people who are blessed or burdened with religious natures. Such a handful at present are to be found among the New Negro, and they constitute what we call the Sincere.

Sometimes the Sincere are liberal, even radical; or they may be quite conservative in make-up, and be perfectly satisfied with the orthodox beliefs of the day. They are distinguished by their determined tendency to find a deeper meaning in life. For them life is more than a mortgaged house, a radio and a second-hand automobile, with a possible membership in some exclusive social club. They take life



and their religion seriously, and their problems in both increase thereby.

If they happen to be religious liberals and turn to white churches where they will be intellectually at home, the spectre of prejudice and discrimination follows them and becomes particularly irksome inside a church. The love of God may be broad enough to embrace all his children, but the church of God has not yet reached that breadth.

Of course the attitude of white churches toward the Negro is not a fixed or uniform thing, varying considerably over the nation as a whole. In the South it is merely the matter of complete rejection. Negroes are not allowed to attend the churches of the whites. In the North the practice varies from rejection, in some cases to the full acceptance of one or two Negroes in others. As a general rule Negroes are welcome to sit at the preaching services, but they are not welcome in the more intimate life of the church. They are not welcome at church socials and in church organizations. Their presence at the Lord's Supper is a most disturbing thing. Even where a minister himself may be unprejudiced a wing of the congregation may completely tie his hands.

True, there are still to be found a few churches in which one or two colored families have held membership for years. But as a matter of fact such membership is rigidly restricted to these few. If there seems to be any danger of a notable increase, something has to be done immediately.

Yet, if the Sincere liberal stays "within the race" and worships in churches of his own, his troubles by no means disappear. To begin with he will have difficulty in finding a minister who will consistently maintain a liberal interpretation of religion. It may probably be that the minister can't. It is no secret that in education and intelligence the pulpit is often far behind the pew. Or even when he discovers a man of excellent training who is capable of the best religious thought, he soon finds that the minister will deviate from his convictions to do what is known as "pay off the old folks." That is, to keep on the good side of the older members who are still the backbone of every church, in each sermon or on special occasions the minister must give them the kind of gospel they like and understand. Thus a man of the most liberal training will be found at times saying the most surprising things.

In one of the larger mid-Western cities one young man deliberately divides each sermon into two parts. The first section is generally a sensible discussion of some phase of morals,

religion, life. The second half is a senseless hodge-podge of Biblical quotations and homiletic old saws. Vivid descriptions of heaven and Sheol, warnings, pleadings, sometimes tears. All delivered with marvelous animation, wild gesticulations and prodigious noise. He justifies this incoherent conduct with the simple explanation, "ministers must eat."

His tactics on one particular Sunday morning are typical of what many trained men do. He had been talking for twenty or twenty-five minutes on the problem of evil and the necessity of faith, when he paused and carefully surveyed his congregation. He noticed that the old "pillars" were gently falling asleep. The observation was his inspiration. Lending himself completely to its force, he leaped to the other end of the rostrum, slapped a foot on the floor with a resounding bang, threw back his arms, raised his eyes skyward and in terrifying tones yelled at the top of his voice:

"Job! Job! Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth! Where were you when all the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God jumped for joy!"

Wagging his head in a manner of complete dejection, but still shouting as though his audience were a block away, he portrayed Job as answering groaningly:

"My God! My God! I was down in the valley of humiliation!"

One aged member who had been patiently awaiting this moment, in his enthusiasm rose to his feet, and exclaimed in a voice shaken with fervor:

"Great God! Now he's preaching!"

The younger element in the congregation felt like sheep who see their shepherd in sudden flight.

## V.

Thus it appears that in his religious attitude the New Negro runs the entire scale. From insincerity and pretense on the one hand to genuine sincerity and religious depth on the other, with a large and more or less irreligious element holding central range.

If we were to end this article with a word of prediction, it would be that the New Negro is due shortly to return in increasing numbers to his church. Two forces will be largely responsible.

First, there are many serious thinkers who believe that America is on the verge of a spiritual awakening. If so, the New Negro cannot escape. He reads the same literature, thinks the same thoughts as all other Americans on his cultural level. Whatever affects others must likewise affect him.



The second and perhaps more powerful factor will be a change in the nature of the church itself. While religion is primarily a subjective experience, a personal relationship between a man and his God, this is not the whole of religion. It has its practical aspects as well. It may be a tremendous influence in the everyday lives and affairs of men. The Negro church has heretofore neglected the application of religion to the problems of the race. The reason is, of course, quite plain. The Negro because of his highly emotional nature naturally leans toward the subjective in religion. He demands of his church primarily spiritual "rousement"—to have his feelings warmed and his faith confirmed. We therefore find the church at present interested mainly in supplying the Negro with these demands.

The change to a more practical interpretation of religion will be a hard one for many Negroes to make, particularly for the older Christians. But the change will come. Religion in practice will have to take precedence over religion enjoyed. And the change will come not as a result of theological reasoning, but in response to the firmer demand of economic necessity. The Negro has not yet reached the point where he can afford to maintain a class of men and institutions whose primary function is to thrill him on Sunday mornings. Our preachers while tending to our inner necessities

will have to give thought to our outer needs as well. Sin and evil will have to be seen in concrete forms such as race prejudice and lack of manhood. In addition to the spear-tailed figure of mythology the devil must be seen as a social system which stifles the hopes and aspirations of young people, thereby killing the progress of the race in the bud.

As to the church itself, in spite of pessimistic predictions, its future seems quite rosy and secure. It is too much of a social force to perish. It is the only institution the Negro has which is truly his own. It has grown out of him, it has grown with him. It is the mother of much of which he is proud. It is out of touch with most New Negroes at present because its intellectual development has been too slow. Also because like all other churches it is loth to change established ideas. But these difficulties are not insurmountable, and give promise of being settled soon. As insurance and the professions become overcrowded, the ministry will draw more of the better young men. They will bring vigor in addition to intelligence. They will change the church into a vital force.

As the church aids in correcting those social disorders which rob the New Negro of everything but life, many will turn to it for purely practical reasons. And in seeking mammon some few may find God.

## Announcement . . .

*You are invited to attend the Annual Meeting of the National Urban League, which will be held at the League Offices, 1133 Broadway, New York City, February 15th, 1933, at 3 P. M. The agenda will include a report of the 1932 accomplishments, plans for 1933 and the audited treasurer's report for 1932. Vacancies on the Executive Board will be filled.*