

THE NEW NEGRO AND RELIGION

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In last week's issue in the article on the "New Negro," the shammists and materialists were discussed. The Negro church, because of its ignorance, has not understood the New unbending orthodoxy and defiantly has watched its younger element drift away. In assessing the blame for the present Negro's mind. The church has contented itself to stand on irreligion, the church must apportion itself a generous share.

The Sincere

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.

White Church

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.

Gravy Sermons

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 priggish 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

(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.)

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.

Emotionalism

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. He reads the same literature. If so, the New Negro cannot but think the same thoughts as all other Americans on his cultural level. Whatever affects others must likewise affect him.

Change Needed.

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 every day lives and affairs of men. The Negro church has heretofore neglected the applications 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 "rousing"—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 religious theory. And the change will come not as a result of theological reasoning, but in response to the fiercer demand of economic necessity. The Negro has not yet reached that point where he can afford to maintain a class of men and institutions whose primary function is to thrum him on Sunday mornings. 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 hope and aspiration 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 loathe to change established ideas. But these difficulties are not unsurmountable, and give promise of being settled soon. As insurance and the professions become overcrowded, the migrants 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.