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Marching Morally Towards Equality: Perspective of Bishop Richard Allen

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The following essay is written entirely from the perspective of Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a devoted leader of African American abolitionists, as if he were speaking to an assembly of African Americans during the first couple decades of the 19th century. The reader is asked to suspend disbelief, since some events and documents that will be referenced, like the American Colonization Society's pamphlet on Liberia, will have been published or have taken place after the Bishop's death in 1831. As such, this essay aims to represent and to infer Richard Allen's stances on seminal subjects in antebellum America. Though centuries old, Bishop Allen's stances on violence, education, race relations, and various other topics are still grappled with by contemporary America. This essay is not an espousement of the Bishop's stances, but an attempt at a high-fidelity impersonation of a consequential American's attitudes and contributions to the U.S.'s current cultural landscape.

Brothers and Sisters, as a senior to our young nation and a former slave to our fair-skinned brothers, I have witnessed and resisted the spreading of thralldom. Before we move towards actionable decisions, it must be noted that rashly wrought resolutions will only result in the inhibition of abolition and equality. Many white Americans share the spirit of my former owner, Stokely Sturgis, who propelled my religious career and offered me freedom upon earning two-thousand dollars by chopping cordwood (Allen, 1833, p. 7). All Children of God are fundamentally moral beings, so appealing to America's Christian conscience must be held as sacrosanct in our endeavors. Much like cordwood-cutting, this path will be gradual and laborious, but Christ-like disobedience through the bettering of character, moral suasion, and nonviolence is the only route that leads to certain and lasting integration.

The most pernicious enemy we oppose is the ideology that we are an "inferior and distinct race of beings" from whites (Walker, 1830, p. 1). Though slavery shackles our bodies, it

is the hatred of colored persons that squashes our souls and our intellectual creativity; only the Christian values of liberation through uplift, led by the example of black freemen, will “preserve us from that spiritual despotism which we have so recently experienced” (Allen, 1833, p. 21). I echo the concerns of S.S. Jocelyn in rebuking porter houses and all those persons of color who own them, along with the few in our community who patronize them (Quarles, 1991, p. 99). In response to brutish African American behavior,

“the enemies of freedom plead it as a cause why we ought not to be free, and say we are better in a state of servitude, and that giving us our liberty would be an injury to us, and by such conduct we strengthen the bands of oppression, and keep many in bondage who are more worthy than ourselves” (Allen, 1833, p. 48).

Though fret not, Brother and Sisters, for the pious and temperate African is superior in number, and as such, I call upon all congregation leaders to condemn alcohol and all other personal iniquities, enforced by ostracism if necessary. “In contributing towards such works of piety ... as are intended and contrived for the real good and bettering the condition of our indigent brethren,” we will show our white friends that we are equally God-fearing and respectable individuals and that we should be trusted with equality (Allen, 1833, p. 51).

Additionally, as a man who freed himself through manual labor before establishing and leading a largely illiterate congregation of unskilled laborers, I am intimately familiar with the value that vocations have to our community (Newman, 2008, p. 229). Naturally, it is with great clarion that I commend the visions and contributions of African American self-improvement societies like Nathaniel Paul’s Union Society of Albany for the Improvement of Colored People. This organization provides expert lectures on how free colored persons can begin careers in mechanical arts, amongst other pursuits. Importantly, this endeavor accrues funds *vis a vis* our

own community, which not only abides by the law, but also demonstrates to our whites compatriots that we are fiscally and civilly capable of assembling peacefully for the purposes of nonviolent uplift (Quarles, 1991, p. 103).

Our community must also strive for advancements in the classical arts, since knowledge will peaceably refute the notion held by even former President Jefferson: that whites and blacks are distinct species and that blacks “are inferior in the endowments of both body and mind” (Jefferson, 1781, p. 153). Funding should be collected by us for organizations like the PAS (Pennsylvania Abolition Society) and the NYMS (New York Manumission Society) for the expressed purpose of developing more schools that will not only set up apprenticeships for vocations, but also provide formal education (Sinha, 2016, p. 114-118). Personally, I shall be assiduous in improving my own educational organization, the African Society for the Education of Youth, so future black generations may be cultivated as they uplift towards Eudaimonia (African American Registry, 2013).

Despite all these causes for optimism, there exists an unfortunate belief that stunts the blossoming of African American development. The notion is that politics, not moral suasion nor racial uplift, will lead to emancipation and egalitarianism. My friends, I implore you to reject this counterfactual thinking. Racial uplift has been an antithesis to the hypothesis of African inferiority by producing such geniuses like Benjamin Banneker and Phyllis Wheatley, who utterly debunk the claim that being of color is synonymous with lacking exemplary intellectual faculty (Sinha, 2016, p. 29, 121).

Furthermore, the efficacy of moral suasion in uniting all peoples is evinced by the contributions of white organizations like the NYMS and the PAS in progressing the education of our people and defending our legal rights in runaway slave cases like the suits filed by Quock

Walker and Jenny Slew (Sinha, 2016, p. 64-69). Let us not forget the contributions of our friends, the Quakers, who have used moral suasion since the 18th century in their advocacy for our rights and have succeeded in persuading politicians to work towards our freedom through gradual emancipation (Sinha, 2016, p. 44). It was moral suasion, not political stratagems, which caused President Washington to “view our degraded and afflicted state with compassion and pity – his heart not insensitive to our sufferings” (Newman, 2008, p. 137). Moral suasion’s effect on him walks in the form of his manumitted slaves and stands resolutely in the African American Church that he funded (Newman, 2008, p. 136-138).

While pure moral suasion has unequivocally united our nation and progressed our mission, politics have been a medium for racists to legislate ways of undermining our people and, thus, slowed suasion’s efficiency. A prime example is the hatred from the ACS, which ignores the aforementioned examples of African American civility and ingenuity by peddling that persons of color can only find “dignity” and “honor” through life on the colony of Liberia (American Colonization Society, 1852, p. 8). They further claim that matters would be best if we moved to Africa, as to avoid our “‘baneful and contaminating’ influence of free blacks on the slaves” (Sinha, 2016, p. 164). The ACS willfully ignores how most blacks were born in America and know nothing of Africa. To expect us to assimilate with the natives of colonies like Liberia or Sierra Leone, whilst knowing nothing of their culture, is utterly unreasonable (A Colored Philadelphian, 1831, p. 1).

What must be remembered is that freedom and equality are moral matters that are beyond the scope of politics and must not be compromised. “Once reason predominates, government actions and policies are transformed as they bear the imprints of divinity, resulting in universal peace and love” (Adeleke, 1998, p. 132). Unfortunately, the effects of compromise on politicians

are not simply a peculiarity of the ACS. The blunt reality our community faces is that a majority of us are not freemen, so we cannot vote. Even free blacks are discriminated against and disenfranchised by states that want to appease the more powerful slaveholders. Well intentioned abolitionist politicians are forced into compromising with pro-slaveryites; if they do not, they will not appeal to enough voters to enact their policies. This is the fundamental issue faced by parties like the Liberty Party, who admit that they find most of their paltry success in elections when calling for “moral action at the ballot box” (Sinha, 2016, 462-464).

Ultimately, the preponderate problem with politics is that it encourages aggression from both blacks and whites. Returning to the issue of compromise, when political deals are struck that do harm to individuals that were meant to be represented by those politicians, citizens feel as though their voices have been squelched, leading to statements made by violence. For example, when slaveholders became disgruntled over politicians endeavoring for emancipation, Southern legislators allowed for more stringent punishments for disobedient slaves. These political decisions, combined with members of our community calling for slave insurrections, led a slave named Gabriel Prosser to organize a rebellion (Garnet, 1843). He would be foiled by his fellow slaves, who realized that violence would simply antagonize their masters and worsen their condition (The Library of Virginia, 2016).

While violence is deleterious and ineffective, peaceful forms of protecting the enslaved do exist. The Underground Railroad has successfully mobilized slaves out of Southern states and found them sanctuaries amongst family members and abolitionist societies in the North, my Bethel Church being one of them (Newman, 2008, p. 77). However, due to the threat of the Fugitive Slave Act, I suggest that freemen seriously consider setting up a colony in Canada, home to over 60,000 fugitives, as an asylum for runaway slaves to reside beyond the jurisdiction

of the vile law (Siebert, 1898, p. 212, 221). Not only has slavery been abolished in Canada since 1833, but it would be a much easier journey than Africa, in addition to housing a similar culture and environment to America's (Delany, 1852, p. 173-176).

Brothers and Sisters, as we come together to seek freedom, let us remember that our enemy is not the white race, but a malignant quest for power which corrupts good people. This has led many of us to become blinded by rage and to promote uprising. By falling victim to this temptation, we alienate our sympathizers and jeopardize our ability to prosper in this young and improving nation. The onus is on us, as a community, to strive for uplift, morality, and pacifism as we become living examples of God's love for us and of our love for liberty. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, sayeth the Lord," and if we allow him this monopoly, we will stand unyieldingly with the rest of America as true equals and true patriots (Romans 12:19, King James Version).

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