

Black Judgment

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It was an uneasy summer. Yet all seemed usual enough on the crowded freeways, the trailers loaded with the burdens that Americans bear for their annual love affair with what they imagine to be the past: guns and fishing rods, plaid shirts and folksong records, bags of charcoal nuggets for the forest cook-outs, stickers on the rear window of Yosemite, Virginia City and Gettysburg. But the papers they read as they sat at the teakwood tables in Oregon camping grounds or lay by the motel pools in Florida always told the same story: a single theme whose only variations were Bull Connor's police dogs savaging the Negro boys or the high-pressure hoses mowing a black mob down, or, as summer ended, the exploded bomb in Birmingham, Alabama, and the broken bodies of children in the street. And there had been the Washington march and a quarter-of-a-million witnesses to all this huge iniquity.

James Baldwin's book had headed the best-seller list in the *New York Times* all summer long. And *The Fire Next Time*, enraged and apocalyptic, matched the new mood. Somehow the old arguments had become as irrelevant as war-time rationing. And even the high-minded, faithful over the years to the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People (and how suddenly archaic *that* had come to sound!), seemed still to be speaking of another time, another place and certainly another people. The religious leaders, with various degrees of caution, sounded trumpets—mostly of tin, it must be admitted. And Catholic Bishops spoke afresh, or at least again, of the Natural Law.

What had happened? The catalogue of the summer's calamities seemed familiar: trouble about desegregating schools and restaurants and theatres in the South, failure in so many places to implement the simple requirements of justice. And Martin Luther King's techniques of non-violent protest miraculously continued to avert the outbreaks of aggression that had seemed certain everywhere. Violence there was, and much more violence there will surely be in Alabama and Mississippi unless there be a sudden change, beyond all human probability. But so far the wonder is that the record of Negro revolution—and the word begins to be appropriate—is so mild. For the question is no longer just one of civil rights, of equal citizenship and hence of equal opportunities

in education, housing and employment. None, except the crazier white racialists of the Deep South, any longer denies the justice of the Negroes' claims. And the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 has provided a sufficient precedent for removing whatever forms of discrimination may still remain. What is at issue now is not so much a principle but the appalling unreadiness of so many Americans—in the North as well as in the South—to implement it.

It is an unreadiness that relates to the dramatic change in the Negro demands and to the mood in which they are presented. For it had been so easily assumed that education would, with time, be the great healer. Give them the opportunities, it was argued, and they will take their proper place in American society, which, whatever its defects, has never denied the claims of the man who makes good. But it never happened, or perhaps it happened much too late and much too little so that the tidal wave of Negro anger bore all the gradual hopes before it. Justice *now* and not in the good time of paternalist meliorism became the issue. And the sad truth is that, however energetically Washington may act, however desperately local opinion tries to eliminate the grosser wrongs, there is in fact a vast army of Negroes, especially in the large cities of the North, unemployed because unemployable, crammed into ghettos, desperate with the sense of accumulated frustration. In the South the outrages are obvious and the ignorant malice of poor white opinion can be dismissed as a vestigial horror that will wither away in time. But in the North and West, where on paper at least the basic liberties of all are secured, the situation is perhaps ultimately more serious. For the Negro 'problem' is essentially one of true acceptance, and the three issues of housing, education and employment—and they are in effect but one—are still so far from solution that the new anger and the new determination are dangerous if only because 'an end to all discrimination *now*' means nothing less than a revolution—and a revolution whose aims involve a long and painful process that neither Negroes or whites can want to endure.

The unemployment rate among Negroes is twice that of the rest of the population: so, for that matter, is the rate of criminal convictions. But the educational inadequacies of young Negroes, their inability to compete in the increasingly technical world that automation has created, are not just isolated from American education as a whole. Dr Harold Taylor, among the most distinguished of American educationalists, has bluntly stated that 'the education of the Negro people has now revealed itself as a national scandal, and the evidence of years of neglect is now

exploding into public consciousness'. But the defects of the schools of the South, and the appalling overcrowding and poor standards of the public schools in the great cities, reflect a greater problem than that of the Negroes alone—though they are the principal victims. Dr Taylor can go so far as to say that 'at least one-third of the entire population, white and black, is receiving a third-rate education, suited to a poor and backward society. We now have thousands of young men and women roaming the slum streets of our big cities, uneducated, unemployed and unemployable. The favored youth of the suburbs drifts on a tide of affluence to the twin ports of status and security. The general level of teaching in our colleges and universities is such that the best students are bored with it and the rest suffer from intellectual malnutrition'.¹

It would be an impertinence for an outsider to comment on Dr Taylor's judgment except to say that it places the Negro problem in its true context. To isolate the defects of Negro education as though they were due to some sort of tribal aberration—assuming, of course, that one is not a Southern white racist—is to perpetuate the Negro myth, the Negro 'problem'. The only problem in fact is that of American education as a whole, of American society as a whole, and the place therefore, as of right and not as of grudging concession, that the Negro should hold in it. No one now, except in the deepest South, would want to defend the idea of *inherent* Negro inadequacies. The living evidence of countless Negro doctors, lawyers, teachers, writers is there to refute the crudity of anthropological theories which argue from an African past or allegedly inherited brain deficiencies. The Negroes *are* uneducated, they *do* provide far too high a proportion of the prison population, they *do* find it hard to get jobs and harder still to keep them. But is this because they are black? Or is it because they are Americans who have been deprived of the opportunities that, in any civilized society, are the means by which men can be useful and responsible citizens?

And this is the question the Negroes are furiously asking now, and to which they want an honest answer. They are in effect providing the whole of America with the humiliating evidence of what can happen when a hitherto unregarded minority becomes conscious of its power. For the Negro protest says more about America as a whole than it says about Negroes as such. It reveals some radical truths about a democracy that has not faced the full cost of its appeal to freedom. For the paralysis

¹*New York Herald Tribune*, Sunday, September 15, 1963, reviewing *The Education of American Teachers*, by James Bryant Conant.

that seems to have come over American education—and it is not ungenerous to say this, since so many Americans are saying it so often—is only one example of the illusion that systems of themselves can serve human interests and the true needs of the community. Reform the system? It is, in the end, the same dilemma as that of civil rights themselves, for no amount of statutory provisions can as such change human attitudes, and endless appeals to a Constitution may resolve a legal debate but do they touch the human heart?

For it is, in a strange and troubled way, a matter of the heart. That is why the anger of the Negroes now is so much more than a campaign for this or that item of justice. The Negro leaders, of N.A.A.C.P. and C.O.R.E., are indeed concerned with fighting the legal battles that are necessary to assure Negro rights in housing, fair employment and the desegregation of schools and public facilities. But the new militancy, which has found so eloquent an expression in all that James Baldwin writes, has overtones that are even more serious. Behind the bitter indignation there is a meaning that reaches beyond the question of black and white. Here, voiced in the accents of a particular people's agony, is a universal statement about love and hate and the roots of them both. In a most serious way the Negroes of the United States have made a judgment about us all. That is not because they are wiser or holier than the rest of us: it is just that the protest they make against the injustice under which they have suffered is a protest against injustice everywhere. And if their anger seems to grow beyond measure, then that is what we must expect when men, insulted, denied of their manhood, put off with easy words and an appeal to the Constitution, no longer trust us, and perhaps no longer trust themselves.

And here one cannot evade the Christian implications. The heaving Baptist multitudes, singing their hymns in the temples of the South, might still seem a bastion for the way of peace and acceptance. And no one can deny the extraordinary power of Martin Luther King's appeal to that world of traditional Southern piety, gradually moulding the old evangelical loyalties to the new crusade. And so far his gospel of non-violence has largely prevailed. But it is not to decry the simple faith of the Negro South to say that it is little fitted to meet the crisis of the North, where old allegiances matter not at all and where the new leaders—the Black Muslims among them—jeer at the Christian passivity that so long accepted insult and ignominy as the Negro's natural lot. For Catholics, there is a special irony in the virtual absence of the Church in the Southern battle. The number of Negro Catholics is certainly

small, and proprietary interests, as it were, are therefore little involved.²

But what is at issue is more than a sectional interest, whether of Church or community or race. And the work of many admirable Catholic Interracial Councils throughout the country has consistently stressed the larger, human implications of the struggle. If official episcopal statements have seemed colourless and academic, that is perhaps only a reflection of the Chancery mind and of the habitual caution of those whose training has been so exclusively concerned with ecclesiastical law. Perhaps the great opportunity for the Church in the United States at this moment in the history of the country is to bring to bear her awareness of the true dimensions of the Negro tragedy. The rising Negro desperation is a judgment, not simply on isolated acts of cruelty and injustice but on the human situation as such. It is an invitation to consider anew the meaning of such readily brandished terms as 'freedom', 'responsibility' and 'justice'. It was a quite special providence that gave Pope John's *Pacem in Terris* to the world—and to America in particular—when its message was most urgent and the solutions it proposes most necessary. Those, said the Pope, who are trying to restore the relations of social life according to the norms of justice and charity are not many: but theirs 'is an imperative duty, it is a requirement of love'. And 'every believer in this world of ours must be a spark of light, a centre of love, a vivifying leaven amidst his fellow men'. It may be that the hideous agonies of the Negro struggle can yet stir the consciences of all men who care for truth and peace and goodness. For the Negro today stands as a reproach, not merely to the demented racialists of Birmingham, Alabama, but to all who have heard the word and now must try to keep it.

²There are of course individual cases, such as the infamy of Ploquemines Parish, Louisiana, where an old-time political boss, Leander Perez, has been excommunicated by the Archbishop of New Orleans for his share in opposing the desegregation of the parochial school. The scandalous incidents in this affair, culminating in the bombing of the school last August, have been overshadowed by the more publicized events in Alabama, and the heroic stand of the pastor, Fr Christopher Schneider, O.F.M., has hardly been acknowledged, even by Catholics themselves.