

ROBERT PENN WARREN REVEREND GALAMISON TAPE #4

RPW: Tape #4 - Reverend Galamison - proceed. Perhaps the problem at one level, at an early phase anyway, is not the matter of the extirpation of prejudice, racial prejudice, but a matter of confronting it and deciding what to do about it in the individual or in society. Does that approach seem to wash?

Rev.G: Yes. There's no doubt but that it will take some time for people to be rid of their prejudices. That is, I get the feeling sometimes that the best antidote for prejudice is experience, and unfortunately the people who have the prejudice close the door against the kind of experience that might rescue them from these feelings. There were some studies in the fall of 1963 by a - two at least of the national magazines, which illustrated beyond a doubt that people who had had contact with Negroes had much healthier feelings toward Negroes in terms of jobs and housing and what have you than white people who had never had such contacts. So apparently in order to be rid of the fear and the irrationality one has to somehow take the lion by the tail or face the ghost, as it were, to see how unrealistic these feelings are. But like the people who most need to go to the psychiatrist, the person who most needs to get rid of the prejudices is the least likely to avail himself of such an opportunity.

RPW: What about the fact of the contact in the South with the Negro? There we have in some aspects of life a very massive contact, so mere contact would not -

Rev.G: Oh, no, not mere contact. It must be contact on an equal basis,

Reverend Galamison - Tape #4 - p. 2

on a man to man basis, not on a master-slave basis or on a paternalistic basis which are the only circumstances under which many white people ever deal with Negroes even in the North. I'm glad you pointed that out, because this is certainly vital to the whole question. But the point I want to make here is that Negro children, Negro people generally, should not wait till white people develop healthy attitudes toward Negroes. Therefore, prior perhaps to the eradication of prejudices we want the eradication of discrimination. There's a difference. Discrimination is the denial of the right to have, and prejudice may be the denial of the right to be, as it were - let me put it that way. Because white people entertain these feelings which admittedly are wrong and unhealthy, this is no reason why Negroes should be deprived of jobs and housing and other things which are fundamental to being a human being.

RPW: What about the matter of the Negro prejudice against whites?

Rev.G: Yes, well, of course prejudice isn't good because it's prejudice against whites or wrong because it's prejudice against Negroes. Anywhere prejudice exists it's wrong, and as I pointed out earlier in the interview, not only is racial prejudice wrong, class prejudice is wrong, cultural prejudice is wrong, and these feelings must be outgrown no matter who entertains them.

RPW: What are the responsibilities or obligations of the Negro - whoever that hypothetical Negro is, you know - the Negro - toward the achieving of a society without prejudice or certainly without dis-

crimination, and with a workable integration? What are his responsibilities?

Rev.G: The Negro has a responsibility majorly at this point to fight for the eradication of these external circumstances which oppress him, which victimize him, and which create many Negroes in the society who by virtue of the structure of the society fail or fall. Now, I read these criticisms in the newspaper and in the magazines and in other propaganda areas of white people who talk about the number of Negroes who commit crime and who talk about every - and who exaggerate, really ever anti-social act, you know, in which a Negro might be involved and which is exposed by the newspaper. Now, this gives people a false kind of security in their wrong and in their maltreatment of people. That is, people allow the existence of circumstances which create social failures and then they point to the social failures and say there, see what kind of person you are. People will deny Negroes the right to survive as human beings and yet criticize Negroes and further deprive them of the right of being human beings because of what some of these external circumstances have done. Now, don't misunderstand me. Some Negroes rise above these circumstances. But this does not justify the existence of the circumstances, and far more Negroes are falling victim and people who criticize this out of context just happen to be people who have no comprehension of the cultural and the social and the economic and historic forces which tend to make up all people and help create the kind of people that we find on the American scene. I have said, for example, about the Bedford

Reverend Galamison - Tape #4 - p. 4

Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, which comes under constant criticism in terms of - well, any time a Negro gets arrested or any time anything happens it's dramatized and caricatured by the press. I've said that we couldn't have a community with this kind of behavior if there weren't people outside it who were far worse than the people inside it. And were there time I would go on and catalog an observation like this, but there is this tendency always I think among human beings to overlook and evade injustice and then to criticize or find satisfaction in the products of the injustice.

RPW: Not long ago I heard Dr. King - the last time I heard him - and he wound up his speech at Bridgeport with a "Be the best street sweeper" - that line - something very much like the self improvement line - be the best and so forth. This is to a three quarter or five sixths Negro audience of course. But he was recognizing one kind of responsibility in the whole question of civil rights and in the question of the Negro movement.

Rev.G: Yes, well, I of course do not disagree with this philosophy that everybody ought to be encouraged to be the best of whatever he is. However, I think that we as Negroes have spent far too much time trying to deserve approval, that is, trying to deserve love. Now, as a Protestant clergyman who believes in grace, I don't believe anybody can deserve love, and we run the gamut in our contentions about this. That is, some of us who believe that Negroes should dress a certain way and deport themselves a certain way and talk a certain way, and then white people will open up all the doors. Well, this is not true.

There are just as many white people who resent a cultured comparable well deported Negro as those who resent a disheveled uncultured Negro you see. Or there are some who prefer an unlettered Negro to a lettered one. But I think as long as we operate on this basis that we must do something in order to be equal. We're operating on a fallacious basis, you know. We are people apart - everybody is a person apart from these external values that man might place on another man. That is, a man on relief is still a person, apart from the fact that he's on relief, or a man who has no education is a person in spite of the fact that he may not have an education. And I think that we are operating on a very superficial standard of values and that we fall victim to a very fallacious way of thinking when we contend that the right of the Negro to be treated as a person and the right of the Negro to enjoy equality depends on something that the Negro should do.

RPW: One more question - a tough one, yes. One more question and then we can spring ourselves. In this obligation, suppose a young man, nineteen years old, eighteen years old, a young Negro in school or university, discovers he is a dedicated physicist of great talent.

What should he do? Stay in his laboratory or go on the picket line?

Rev.G: I think he should try to do both, that we don't live in a vacuum, and our most isolated interests are subject ultimately to the urban flow of the social time here in the United States. My feeling about the whole social movement is that nobody is innocent, for example, that nobody is a bystander, and that nobody has a right not to be involved in some way or another. This would apply to both

Reverend Galamison - Tape #4 - p. 6

whites and Negroes, it would apply to an aspiring talented physicist as well as to the pupil who flunks out of school.

RPW: Well, suppose he's a medical student and six months on the picket lines flunks him out of school - to take an extreme case.

Rev.G: Yes, well, this is a determination that an individual exercising his good judgment must make for himself. That is, one is not called upon, I don't believe, to destroy some great good or some effectiveness that he might be able to give society if he develops his aspirations for a momentary thing. But on the other hand, I don't think a man has a right to hide from the social struggle by deluding himself that he one day is going to be able to make a contribution that he wouldn't be able to make if he had let the social struggle go by. My experience has been that the people who don't get in the struggle when it's going on, when they get where they're going don't get in it either, that only an ingrained selfishness allows a man to remain aloof from the problems of his time and not involve himself.

RPW: End - end - end.

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