

THE MOTE AND BEAM OF BIGOTRY

BY HODDING CARTER

THERE are two ways of interpreting the Biblical injunction to remove the mote from one's own eye before tackling the beam in the eye of one's brother.

The simplest and most frequently invoked interpretation is to paraphrase it as "You're another, so what," and thereby leave both the mote and the beam where they were. The harder and rarer way is to work on the mote and the beam together.

A good many Southerners, confronted with the undeniable fact of their intolerance, riposte by pointing in any direction of the compass, and calling attention to the rest of the nation's bigots. Likewise, many non-Southerners, comfortably oblivious to their own local hate manifestations, take delight in crusading far from home and usually by remote control.

Both of these reactions are defensive, consciously or sub-consciously. Both are human. And both are dangerous.

But, since the South has been historically the region most publicized for its shortcomings — no national

magazine of general circulation is published in the South — the greatest danger in this situation lies in the relative smugness of the South's critics, who, by focusing most of the attention upon Southern bigotry, minimize the extent and menace of racial and religious intolerance in America.

I first discovered this pot-and-kettle relationship — though not its implications — some twenty years ago as an undergraduate in a small and ancient New England college, a place proud, and with considerable justification, of its liberal tradition. (Incidentally, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been written within less than a rebel yell of its campus.) As one of the few Southerners ever to attend that college, I was fair game; and I responded to their criticisms as would most any youngster from the South who had never before questioned that our racial dealings were just and proper. I got angry enough to start another Civil War. And being angry, I began looking around for those beams in the Yankee eye. They weren't hard to

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find. Item: the one Negro student in the college lived alone. Item: Irish Catholics, and almost all other Catholics, were generally barred from the top fraternities. (It took me three years to get a close friend, a Boston Murphy, into our own.) Item: Jews were obviously restricted in numbers, barred from fraternities and, with a few notable exceptions, the target of whispered jokes and worse.

As a small town Louisianian, I had known but one Jew. He had married a Gentile, and had gone anywhere anyone else did. Our town was near New Orleans, and Catholics were not only unidentifiable from the rest of us, but were cousins to most of us. As for the Irish taint, I had always thought the Irish were the salt of the earth, being slightly Irish myself, and had never heard an O'Malley criticized for ducking out on a potato famine a hundred years ago.

So I played "You're another" throughout college, with no apparent success but with considerable satisfaction. And ever since then I have been confirming what I first discovered then; the most recent occasion being last summer, when motor-ing through Ohio, mother of Presidents and center of the pre-Civil War Underground Railroad, we could find no hotel or tourist cabin manager who would house our colored nurse.

II

Not as a professional Southerner, but as an American, I would ask that intolerance in the United States be

put in its proper perspective. The first, and perhaps most startling fact that would emerge is that there are more Americans outside the South who suffer political, social or economic handicaps — or all three — because of their races or religions, than there are in the South itself.

This may be difficult to believe. You say, "But there are nine million Negroes in the South. Certainly there aren't nine million outside the South who are discriminated against!"

Aren't there? Count them.

There are almost four million Negroes living outside the South. They may vote, but there are other ways in which people can suffer politically besides being denied the right to cast a ballot. Discrimination in Harlem may be more subtle — at least to the perpetrator if not to the victim — than it is in Mississippi, but it exists. I have been in Harlem, have seen the filthy stews, mostly white-owned, in which the Harlem Negro lives, and I doubt that any health-conscious Mississippi sharecropper would trade abodes. I have been in the police courts, in the stores, on the streets. To borrow a phrase, I have seen their faces, and have evaluated their opportunities. We neither spawn nor are as indifferent to such a proportion of criminals and degenerates in Mississippi, nor do our segregated Negroes live in such abandoned segregation as they do around Lenox Avenue. And what goes for Harlem goes to much the same extent for Detroit, Chicago, Washington

and all the eastern, midwestern and western metropoli to which the Negro had journeyed seeking a better life. Four million of them. They vote, or in the big cities, more correctly, they are voted. Some of them go to the same schools as the white children. But ask any of them to speak from his heart, if he lives in such a city, and tell you that he has found freedom from hate and suspicion or contempt.

There are some four million Jews in America. Only a small fraction of them live in the South. The great majority dwell in the cities of the Eastern seaboard, and particularly in New York. I have dropped in on Yorkville's bierabends, both in the days of Fritz Kuhn's brownshirts and since. I have read the discreetly worded classified ads, that cut to the heart like a stiletto: "Restricted clientele," or, more bluntly, like a bludgeon: "Gentiles only." I have seen smeared, defiled synagogue walls and the ruined showcases in greater Boston, where a once-persecuted people, the Boston Irish, now make their own full and evil contribution to persecution. I have heard the unctuous phrases of the well-bred: "Of course, some of my best friends are Jews, but these refugees are taking the country over. . . ."

Four million non-Southern Negroes. Four million Jews. That's eight million.

In the Southwest and the far West live a million and a half Mexican-Americans. Some of them come yearly to our Delta country in Mississippi

to help pick our cotton crop. I have talked to them. Do you know about California's zoot suit riots, and the habits of landlords and landowners and police and politicians in those sun-kissed states which Spanish-speaking adventurers first settled? They can tell you, these brown, dirty, bewildered-looking folk, what it means to have in one's being the mixed blood of the Yaqui and Andalusia.

Eight million and a million and a half. Nine and a half million. Nor are these all.

III

Principally on the West coast there lives a parchment-colored people with high cheek bones and slanted eyes. We went to war with their kinsmen, and we put many of them in concentration camps. Others we put in the Army. Read the story of Ben Kuroki, Japanese-American, who fought as hard for the right to fight as he fought after he was admitted to the Air Corps. Read of their struggle to retain their farms, or to be admitted to the Legion, or to be accepted as citizens of this country. Add to their numbers, the Filipinos and the Chinese. Together, probably a million, though I do not have the figures. They live far to the west of the Mississippi River and a line that runs between Pennsylvania and Maryland, but they too know something of discrimination and persecution.

Ten and a half million all told. Perhaps more.

It would be easier to stop here, hav-

ing called attention to those beams, and let it go at that. But such would be only a sectional counterblast. Or, it would be more comforting to say wishfully that the newer Americans are not infected with the virus that lingers so stubbornly among the descendants of our first, freedom-seeking settlers. But this is not true. Among the professional liberals it is currently fashionable to believe that prejudice in America is principally a vice of the Anglo-Saxon (or, more correctly, the Scotch-Irish) Americans. That would be good, if true, since their numbers are diminishing in proportion to the more prolific later-comers from the Slavic and Latin and Levantine countries. But, regrettably, this isn't true. The error stems from the fact that the South, the almost exclusive target of the non-Southern bigot-haters, is populated principally by people with English-Scotch-Irish forbears. The white participants in the Sojourner Truth housing project riots were principally Polish-Americans. And I am reminded of a sorrowful statement of Theodore Andrica, the liberal Rumanian-born newspaperman who specialized in news of foreign-born Americans for the Cleveland Press. We participated in a forum at Harvard a year ago on the problems of minorities, and Andrica said this: "The later-comers are dropping some of their old world prejudices perhaps, such as anti-Semitism, but they are adopting the American prejudice against the Negro instead."

What, then, are the valid conclu-

sions as to this poisonous growth which spreads over America? It is easier to state them than to suggest a remedy for them.

The first is, obviously, that intolerance is not confined to the South, nor is it primarily a Southern failing. In intensity if not in outward expression, it flourishes equally in each other section of the country.

The second and corollary fact is that prejudice is not directed against a single race or a single religion.

The third is that it thrives most in those areas where the submerged or suspect racial or religious groups exist in such numbers as to infringe, imaginarily or actually, upon the social, political and/or economic dominance of the established majority group. Where there are only a handful of Jews, as in Mississippi, there is little anti-Semitism. Where there are few Negroes, as in New England, there is little discrimination against them. Where there are few Oriental or Mexican-Americans, these are not subjected to isolation, exploitation and suspicion.

The fourth fact is that intolerance is most dangerously expressed in those areas of intense economic competition between racial and religious groups, especially if such competition is carried on at sub-marginal levels or in times of depression. Industrial cities are the usual locale of race riots; and the South's lynchings are almost always perpetrated by mobs made up of the lowest-income white groups, whose skin color is the badge which

distinguishes them from the victims with whom they are in economic competition.

And the final terrible fact is that intolerance is stronger today than ever in the history of our country. In every state in the union, hate organizations are growing in numbers and in strength, from the Christian Fronters of New York and Boston, to the Columbians of Georgia, to the Society of Forward Men of the West Coast. They exist in your town and mine, unknown to us perhaps, but not unknown to the wicked, stupid and potentially dangerous men and women who join them. And they are growing too in boldness. My mail has a foul leavening from such as these. An Indianian (the Klan was strongest in Indiana) writes that I am in the pay of the Jews, else I would reveal that dirty, fat kikes hide on every street in New York to attack pure Christian girls. A Californian speculates jeeringly as to whether the first racial "blood bath" will take place in San Francisco or Atlanta. A Connecticut fanatic promises that my kind will be the first to be put away when the day of the white Protestant American dawns. An Alabamian suggests that I'd better go to some safer and more congenial spot, say Africa. And so on. The rats no longer fear to come out of their holes. And their holes are everywhere.

IV

But, you say, the Southern bigot is safest in his discrimination. That is true. Racial discrimination is legalized

by the constitutions of every Southern state and there is no defense for it, save an emotional one, no explanation for it save that these constitutions were put into force by a frightened, vengeful South, emerging from the longest military occupation in modern history, and determined upon a political and social philosophy of white supremacy. But racially discriminatory laws in the South, and laws against discrimination in the North are brought about by the same thing — the spirit of intolerance which the one protects and the other seeks to end. Had not discrimination against the Jews and Negroes attained scandalous proportions in New York, that state would not have put a fair employment practices act on its books. Nor would the proponents of a federal fair employment law have won so many supporters — or made so many opponents — if their purpose were directed against the South alone.

Are laws or the repeal of laws the answer? Only in part. Certainly where the states fail — and many have failed — the full power of the Federal government should be exerted to protect the citizen in his constitutional rights and in his personal safety. The Georgia massacre is a passionate argument for a Federal anti-lynching law. The decrease in lynching in the South is an argument against one. But while it is possible to legislate against the outward and illegal manifestations of prejudice, it is impossible to legislate against prejudice itself. A Federal Fair Employment

Practices Act may provide equal job opportunities, though even this is highly doubtful. It cannot eradicate the spirit which deprives a man of a job because of his race or religion.

There is no legal blueprint for brotherhood. Nor is it practical to think in terms of an absolute solution of a tragic problem which has hounded and degraded mankind throughout our recorded history. Legislation can, at best, only ameliorate. And legislation, especially punitive legislation, can be successful only if other ameliorating factors accompany the power of the law: education, security and implemented religion.

So obvious are these three requirements that it is unnecessary to embroider them. If all men were secure in their jobs, if the frictional rub of the sub-marginal labor competition could be ended, the seeds of bigotry

would fall upon less fertile ground. A South whose per capita income matched the rest of the country's instead of being forty per cent beneath it, would be a less hospitable host to the Klan. If education in the United States became functional to the degree that every schoolchild were taught from the primary grades the dignity, the contribution to civilization and the interdependence of each of the races that populate our country and the world, the cruel myths of racism would disappear. If the churches made the Sermon on the Mount a code for everyday living, the concept of brotherhood and man's responsibility for his brother would give to religion the vitality it lacks.

Wishful thinking? Of course. But no more so than the belief that America can survive as a democracy without these things.

FARM FOR SALE

BY FRANCES FROST

The sign has hung so long on the heavy maple,
it has tipped sidewise on its rusty nail.

The board has turned as silver as the barn,
weathered to beauty although doomed to fail.

Faded but still unblurred speak the straight green letters,
the words he painted carefully, with pain.

Her eyes that watched him at his hard surrender
now have for tears earth's deep slow searching rain.

He is the only man who wants his farm,
but still he keeps the old sign there above
the grass to remind him someone might come asking
for the final thing that he has left to love.