“The Kingdom Is Always but Coming”:

The Demand for Patience in the American Civil Rights Movement

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In November 1956, the United States Supreme Court upheld Browder v. Gayle, ruling segregation on public buses unconstitutional. Martin Luther King Jr, the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and arguably the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, called off the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, having achieved the victory that the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and the local Black community sought. King rode the first integrated bus, and the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror flared. In a mass meeting shortly after the bombings of Ralph Abernathy's home and church, along with a few other sites in Montgomery, King prayed, "Lord, I hope no one will have to die as a result of our struggle for freedom in Montgomery. Certainly, I don't want to die. But if anyone has to die, let it be me" (King 2010, 169). This sentiment was deeper than an unending dedication to the movement. King practiced and lived a life inspired by nonviolent resistance, which included the idea of "redemptive suffering". King understood that real, transformative change came at a cost. Similarly, AJ Muste, renowned pacifist and civil rights activist, felt strongly that "the core of the nonviolent movement for social change is the willingness of the activist to suffer, even to die, to achieve a more just society" (Raboteau 2016, 27).

Redemptive suffering is a pillar of the Movement and of nonviolent activist ideology. This idea is closely aligned to the belief that God is the Redeemer of the oppressed. Benjamin Mays identified the following theodical framework as one that "can voice political demands": God's Kingdom is one in which all men live as brothers, as "God made human beings in God's image", affirming their equality. Therefore, segregation and other manifestations of hate act in direct opposition to God's will. Only by a "social reconstruction", or emancipation, can we usher in God's Kingdom, and that requires suffering (Azaransky 2017, 62). Redemptive suffering acts as a change agent and perhaps also makes one worthy of the change they seek. Though the

oppressed must suffer, they can do so easier knowing it will bring revolution and redemption. Be patient, for when the Day of Judgement arrives, the oppressed will receive divine justice. Believing in divine justice and that God was on their side offered hope to the disenfranchised Black Americans.

The contemporary discourse on divine justice in nonviolent spheres often encouraged Black Americans to practice patience and restraint in response to violence in the fight for integration. King promoted "[turning] the other cheek", a reference to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (King 2010, 84). In her speech "The Dilemma of the Minority Christian", Fannie Lou Hamer credits Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with renewing her hope in times of doubt, specifically the lines: "O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desires. Commit thy way unto Him, and trust in Him, and fret not thyself because of evil doers" (Collier-Thomas 1998, 257). Figures outside of the movement also advocated for patient activism. White moderates, wanting to uphold the status quo and avoid any turmoil – acting in their own interests – called for a slower, gradual change. This inclination was not exclusive to the Civil Rights Movement, and is a technique of major power regimes to preserve the existing social order and maintain stability. Some Civil Rights Movement organizers recognized these pressures as attempts to delay the Movement, thereby diminishing its power. However, they didn't perceive discussions on divine justice, and the patience it similarly demanded, as potentially detrimental to the Movement.

In a similar vein, many activists encouraged the execution of the Movement's activism in a quiet, well-spoken, well-dressed, and clean manner, evoking respectability politics. Respectability politics describes efforts by marginalized groups to counter negative stereotypes of their race in the context of societal norms. For example, after the Montgomery bus boycotts,

King advocated for a detailed plan to best approach integration in Montgomery – one that would keep tensions as low as possible. This "constructive program" included "a vigorous attempt to improve the Negro's personal standards", for "our standards do often fall short…Our crime rate is far too high. Our level of cleanliness is frequently far too low…We are too often loud and boisterous" (King 2010, 218-219). Some examples of the contemporary stereotypes that the Movement's activists had to counter were that of Black people being dirty or uneducated, and practicing loud, overly emotional religion.

However, these standards were not meant to be met by the disenfranchised; they are ever-moving goalposts that a person could not possibly reach. These standards are not actually about being clean or well-spoken; they are about driving the wedge of division further and exacerbating marginalization. Respectability politics are, therefore, a futile undertaking. The best way to meet white respectability standards is to not at all question the established societal hierarchy, but if one must challenge, do so quietly and slowly, playing by the oppressor's rules. Though the ideas of redemptive suffering and divine justice infused the Civil Rights Movement with purpose and a strengthening patience, I'd argue that the rhetoric surrounding these ideas often conforms to respectability standards, and is reminiscent of calls for slow activism by white moderates, and was therefore counterproductive to the revolution.

In *Strive Toward Freedom*, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "American Negroes must come to the point where they can say to their white brothers, paraphrasing the words of Gandhi: 'We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force…But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer'" (Ibid 213). Many of the American Civil Rights Movement activists and mystics took inspiration from Gandhi's fight for the independence of India. King asserted that "the willingness

to accept suffering without retaliation" is necessary to participate in a nonviolent resistance, and said "unearned suffering is redemptive" (Ibid 91). Reverend James Lawson Jr. assessed that Black Americans "faced 'the problem of creative survival' as a persecuted minority with no protection from violence–whether state sanctioned or extralegal" (Siracusa 2021, 149). He knew realistically that "violence was futile, and flight was impossible", leaving nonviolent resistance, and the suffering with which it is associated, as the only option to bring about change. In "God Sends the Negro on a Special Errand", Leslie Pinckney Hill sees suffering as prescriptive for Black people, as they are "commissioned" to have "infinite capacity for pain and suffering… and an abiding faith in God" (Mays 2010, 179). Suffering wasn't just circumstantial, it was a divinely mandated role in the Civil Rights Movement.

AJ Muste added further perspective explaining that neither suffering, nor the evasion of suffering, should be sought out (Raboteau 2016, 48). It was to be "voluntarily accepted" (Ibid 48). King hoped that Black Americans would "make of it a virtue", because "to suffer in a righteous cause is to grow our humanity's full stature" (King 2010, 215-216). Lawson makes clear the difference between suffering through the participation in "active nonviolence" and suffering from the "passive acceptance of…white violence" (Siracusa 2021, 166). The former being redemptive in nature. Nonviolent resistance championed noncooperation. The acceptance of suffering did not necessitate the acceptance of discrimination, nor the "[acquiescence] to the immoral demands of state or society" (Ibid 169). Non-cooperation was perhaps the strongest weapon of the nonviolent tradition, as evidenced by the successes of the Montgomery bus boycotts, marches, sit-ins, and more during the American Civil Rights Movement. Achieving that success was not devoid of hardship. King asserts that "every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle" and acknowledges "the tireless exertions and

passionate concern of dedicated individuals" (King 2010, 191). A movement needs those who feel passionate enough about its cause to sacrifice themselves to it. By the redemptive nature of their suffering, participants would have to wait an indefinitely long amount of time to see the change they sought. Asking justice seekers to sacrifice their all to a movement is lofty demand on its own, but asking them to do so patiently, without knowing when they'd reap the fruits of their labor, is a more formidable appeal. King's critics argued that his "powerless morality", could never match an "immoral power" (Collier-Thomas 1998, 261). They argued that King was leading the fight against an innumerably large enemy, and playing by self-imposed rules, with no perceivable light at the end of the tunnel. To this criticism King would respond "'Those who take to the sword shall be slain by the sword'" (Ibid 261). King didn't see nonviolence as the high road; he saw it as the only road.

Not every activist so easily accepted their prescribed suffering. Pauli Murray, champion of intersectional activism, questioned, "Are we expected to endure injustice submissively?... Not to be rebellious when all around us we see evil and injustice?" (Ibid 261). King, Mays, and Lawson would argue that submitting to injustice was not required of her, but enduring nonviolently was. Murray eventually reconciled her questions through her Christianity, finding that here "lies the ultimate test of our faith in God – a faith that God is in control of the universe and of our own destiny; that God moves in history; that God is continually working to reconcile humankind to Himself and His love; that whatever we suffer is a part of God's ultimate plan; that we are in fact God's Suffering Servants in the salvation history of the world" (Ibid 261). Murray relied on her faith in both God and the biblical canon to reckon with and endure the uphill battle she faced.

Civil Rights activists often leaned on the biblical idea of the "Suffering Son". In her memoir, Mamie Till-Mobley recounts the emotional and religious experience of learning of, and coming to terms with, her son's (Emmett Till) lynching. Till-Mobley conferenced with God to process her trauma and explains: "He spoke to me and said, 'Without the shedding of innocent blood, no cause is won.' And I turned around then and thanked God that He felt that I was worthy to have a son that was worthy to die for such a worthy cause" (Houck & Dixon 2006, 140). Mamie Till-Mobley decided to host an open-casket funeral to elucidate the gruesome crime committed against her son, for "as long as we keep covering these things up, they're going to keep happening" (Ibid 137). She knew displaying Emmett's mangled body would, if nothing more, raise awareness about mass lynching in the South. Many argue that Emmett Till's lynching sparked the Civil Rights Movement. Bishop W. J. Wall of the AME Zion Church in Chicago recognized that "the boy [Till] has become the symbol of the fight in the South and in America at large" (White 2012, 116).

Like God, Mamie Till-Mobley's son had suffered. She prayed, "'Lord, you gave your only son to remedy a condition, but who knows but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching'...'Lord take my soul, show me what you want me to do, and make me able to do it'" (Ibid 117). Till-Mobley wanted her son's murder to mean something, like Jesus's murder. Lawson argued that "it is only when human beings match the level of violence at the heart of such evil with their own suffering", as Jesus did, that social revolution could occur. The Son's suffering would ignite change. Additionally, Lawson preached that "to love as Christ loved meant that we 'must bear atonement in our very own bodies'" (Siracusa 2021, 161). Emmett Till bore that atonement in his own body.

Christian civil rights activists drew parallels between Jesus's struggles as a spiritual leader in a marginalized community, oppressed by a larger imperial state, and their own condition. For example, Max Yergan, black internationalist and Social Gospelist, felt that Jesus's "'life and teaching…provides me for the method and spirit of my action'"(Azaransky 2017, 29). Yergan also took inspiration from Jesus's suffering on the cross, as "'it means believing in truth and righteousness so strongly that they are to be suffered for, even until the bitter end'" (Ibid 29). The story of the Christ's Passion, or his suffering and crucifixion leading up to his death, is used as a lesson in unending perseverance against even the most insurmountable circumstances, the value of redemptive suffering. In his essay "What the Bible Teaches About Freedom", Muste instructs:

> "Care enough to be willing to die in order that the evil may be overcome….This is the Way of the Cross…There will be suffering, there will be a fearful price to be paid for removing Jim Crow. There is always the choice of inflicting suffering upon others or taking it upon ourselves. The Christian way is to refuse to cooperate with evil and to accept the consequence. The consequence is the Cross…When we are ready for that, God himself will give us victory" (Muste 1967, 293).

God will see to it that one's suffering does not go unanswered, and reward those with strong faith and dedication. "The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community" (King 2010, 94). Ultimately, the sufferers' redemption was to be delivered by God, as it was the realization of God's Kingdom that they sought, a Kingdom where all men are brothers.

Carved on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama is the verse Amos 5:24: "'Let justice roll down like waters / and righteousness like a mighty stream'" (Raboteau 2016, 15). For Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, prominent Jewish theologian and social activist, this verse confirmed that "the movement for justice is a powerful force charged with the omnipotence of God" (Ibid 15). One of Heschel's most notable theological contributions was the idea of

"divine pathos", in which God is not a removed observer of humanity, but an active participant, moved emotionally by our triumphs and tribulations. Heschel wasn't the only contemporary religious activist who believed that God actively participates in human affairs in order to "bring us to redemption, salvation, and reconciliation with Him, the source of our being" (Collier-Thomas 1998, 242). Part of God's engagement is the deliverance of divine justice and the fulfillment of His will.

In its foundation with religious freedom as a cornerstone, America became perceived as "God's country". For Social Gospelers, "American democracy provided a worldly framework for the coming kingdom because it affirmed equality and fostered a forward-looking optimism … for the coming kingdom". However, "white Social Gospel theologians did not confront one of the most glaring injustices in American life: segregation and antiblack racism" (Azaransky 2017, 21). This is not historically unusual, as Christianity has often been intertwined with imperial, oppressive power structures, precipitating in discrimination and injustice towards marginalized communities. This led Howard Thurman, a mystic whose theology inspired and religiously bolstered the work of many civil rights organizers, to distinguish between Christianity and "the religion of Jesus" (Ibid 45). Jesus's story teaches that God stands on the side of the oppressed, and religious activists were thereby divinely empowered.

"'Great social changes have been accomplished by people who were urged on by a belief that God sanctioned and blessed what they did'", and the Civil Rights Movement is no exception (Ibid 62). Fannie Lou Hamer was fired, evicted, shot at, imprisoned, and physically tortured as she organized to register Black voters. However, she never backed down. In her highly effective and impassioned speeches, "she commonly invoked [Luke 4:17-19]: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the

broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord'" (Brooks 2014, 31). She found fortitude in her faith and patience in the promise of divine justice as she embarked upon her divinely appointed mission. Nonviolent resisters had "cosmic companionship", and held tight to the belief that "the arc of the moral universe, although long, is bending toward justice" (King 2010, 161). This source of hope was vital to the Movement. "[Mays] saw that 'beaten down at every turn, by the white man, as they were, Negroes could perhaps not have survived without this kind of religion'" (Azaransky 2017, 53-54). In the Movement, the Black view of God was compensatory, which was derived from the "dehumanizing social and political realities" in which they lived (Ibid 66). The psychological adjustment in believing that "God is the Master of the ship", and that "despite the troubles and disappointments of life", "he is part of some great plan" is a coping mechanism; it is a survival method (Mays 2010, 184). There had to be something on the other side of the suffering to aspire to, to live and fight for, and often that incentive was eschatological. "Muste believed that 'the kingdom is always but coming,' an ever-beckoning beacon of light amid the darkness of indifference, inaction, and despair" (Raboteau 2016, 47). Patience was therefore mandatory.

Eleanor Roosevelt once advised Pauli Murray that "'great change comes slowly. I think they are coming, however, and sometimes it is better to fight hard with conciliatory methods. The South is changing, but don't push too fast'" (Azaransky 2017, 87). The Civil Rights Movement challenged the stasis of racial politics for the first time in America in a meaningful, large-scale way. Change to the established order cannot precipitate without challenge nor upheaval, thereby threatening the power structures and those that benefitted. As a result, white moderates called for slow activism in the interest of protecting those in power. Roosevelt wasn't

interested in “great change”, nor any sort of “fight”; she wanted to slow down the Movement and minimize any disturbances to the status quo. However, organizers within the Movement were astute enough to recognize these efforts to impede progress, knowing that slowing down the movement could diminish its impact. King encouraged activists “to not be deterred by the propaganda and subtle words of those who say, ‘Slow up for a while; you are pushing things too fast’” (King 2010, 194). The Civil Rights Movement activists tried to work within the framework of American democracy, standing up for their rights by registering Black Americans to vote, and thereby bring about integration through elections and law. However, they were almost always met with expansive, convoluted, strategic methods of voter suppression. “‘You know the ballot is good,’ [Hamer] reasoned. ‘If it wasn’t good how come he trying to keep you from it and he still using it?’” (Brooks 2014, 45). Racist politicians were threatened by the idea of more Black voters, and collective Black power overall.

At the March on Washington, John Lewis expressed his frustration with the “those who have said, ‘Be patient and wait’”. “We must say that we cannot be patient. We do not want our freedom gradually, but we want to be free now! … They’re talkin’ ‘bout slow down and stop. We will not stop” (Houck & Dixon 2006, 587). John Lewis didn’t address the fact that calls for patience were effectively coming from both within and outside the Movement. It was not just the White moderates trying to safeguard their power. It was also those who believed deeply in divine justice, “‘sitting down waiting for somebody to deliver them, waiting for their second emancipator’” (Savage 2008, 172).

Being assured of forthcoming redemption is a slippery slope to waiting for said redemption, especially when one is expected to tolerate suffering and injustice with “wise restraint and calm reasonableness” (King 2010, 217). Why did King demand that his followers

be reasonable when addressing their own oppression? What is reasonable about the marginalization of millions, in every aspect of life, often under the guise, and complete misrepresentation, of Christianity? Though the same activists who preached patience for divine deliverance also often encouraged active noncooperation, the emphasis on patience could have been detrimental to the already restrained resistance.

King implored the Black community of Montgomery to "'be quiet but friendly; proud, but not arrogant; joyous, but not boisterous'", when reintegrating on the buses (King 2010, 158). Rosa Parks, the famed activist who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger, and whose arrest began the Montgomery Bus Boycott, was "one of the most respected people in the Negro community", and thereby a figurehead for the boycott, partly because she was "soft-spoken and calm in all situations" (Ibid 31). Students of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were trained by Reverend Lawson in the theology of nonviolence, and the practice of noncooperation. "The quiet dignity of well-dressed students who sat in or picketed, not retaliating even while being attacked" was credited with winning "sympathy for the civil rights movement and [inspiring] other student activists to follow their lead" (Cobb 2014, 156). Their "quiet dignity" was associated with their lack of retaliation when facing physical violence. Thus, quietness was intrinsically tied into nonviolent resistance, dissonant with the stereotype of Black people being too loud. The attempt to counter this stereotype by being quiet in one's resistance (or encouraging quietness in others) is a clear example of respectability politics.

King best understood nonviolence as "a way of humility and self-restraint" (King 2010, 216). After the bus integration order reached Montgomery, King insisted, "This is the time that we must evince calm dignity and wise restraint. Emotions must not run wild. Violence must not

come from any of us" (Ibid 162). That which was to be restrained against was violence, which would be seen as an over-emotional response, and affirm the stereotype that Black people, due to their traditions of emotionalist religiosity, are over-emotional. To counter this stereotype was to be constantly calm and level-headed, and that was what was required to be respected by one's political opponents in the civil rights era. Finally, the greatest violation of respectability would be to commit violence against those to whom you are supposed to conform. Therefore, and by the association of nonviolence with quietness and emotionalism, the choice of nonviolence by religious activists as the manner in which this revolutionary resistance was to be conducted is the ultimate respectability politic.

The emphasis on redemptive suffering and divine justice in nonviolent theology, while empowering Black Americans to endure the injustices they faced, inadvertently blunted the edge of the Movement. The rhetoric surrounding these concepts often resulted in conclusions akin to those of white moderates who spoke out to quell the disturbance. Similarly, the encouragement by Civil Rights activists of respectable resistance through quiet and unemotional noncoperation accommodated the values and desires of White society. This patience for redemption and justice compounds with the slow activism called for by White moderates, along with the conformation to respectability politics, to, in essence, both meet the demands of the dominant force, and slow the progress of the revolution.

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