

BY JAMES A. JOSEPH

The Rebellion Against Absolutes

A commencement speech always reminds me of a story from the memoirs of Henry Adams. He was writing about how, in his boyhood, he sat for long evenings around the dining room table in his father's home in Quincy, Massachusetts; around which table came, from time to time, many of the really great men in American life. Mr. Adams records that in all those days of his melancholy youth not once was he really challenged by anything he heard from the guests at his father's table.

The same is often true of commencement occasions. What we commonly get is counsel for the graduates, some witty jokes for their families and some rather dubious remarks about the quality of the institution for the faculty and administration.

I am afraid, however, that I regard the times as far too demanding and an occasion like this as far too significant for us to waste it on anything short of a call to arms.

How ironic it is that today's graduates are about to be formally credentialed as custodians of the moral life at a time of moral bankruptcy in our nation. The tragedy is not just Watergate, nor the alleged payoffs nor even the apparent pattern of political espionage.

The real tragedy is that we are plagued by prophets who pledge to free us by restoring a golden age of absolute boundaries. We are polarized by politicians who pledge to unify us but actually seek to coerce us into conformity.

We are a people with a national messiah complex; always in search of that man or that moment which will give meaning to all moments of time. In the 1950's a man had only to beat his breast and announce that he was not like the rest of men, he was an anti-communist, and he was suddenly hailed as the prototype of the American patriot.

In the 1960's a man had only to wave the flag and announce that he was for law and order and he was regarded as the most moral of men.

In the 1970's a man has only to be against bussing and against quotas and he is assured a place in the pantheon of political deities.

It is no wonder that the American voter has been voting his fears rather than his hopes. It is no wonder that many of the advocates of freedom have been exposed as primarily interested in the extension of freedom's privileges for themselves, rather than the extension of freedom's rights for others.

So it is against this background that those of you who are about to graduate must now take your degrees and your new theological insights to shape a new world, develop a higher reason and build a more human community.

A commencement address at The Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia, May 6, 1973.

And in spite of all the odds against you, I am optimistic about your possibilities. I am optimistic because the last two decades in which you have prepared for this moment have been a period of unusual meaning for Black people. I am optimistic because you have been studying at an institution which has sought to transmit the essence of black heritage. Theology may no longer be the Queen of the Sciences but black theological institutions are by their very nature the repository of the values and visions of our forefathers. I am optimistic because the period in which we now live is very much like the period described by Charles Dickens in *The Tale of Two Cities*. Writing shortly after the French Revolution, he could have been describing the present state of affairs.

"It was the best of time. It was the worst of time. It was the spring of hope. It was the winter of despair. It was an age of wisdom. It was an age of foolishness."

So much of what many considered foolishness in the symbols and slogans of black heritage have turned out to be wisdom. So much of what seemed like reasons for despair are reasons for optimism. We can have hope again not because we are naive, but because we refuse to be driven to hopelessness. Black people continue to live in a good Friday world where our best men die young, but our Good Friday is also post-Easter. We above all should know that to kill the dreamer is not to kill the dream.

I am convinced that the silent legacy of the sixties was a metaphysical rebellion in which black men were calling into question not just inequities in the social order but traditional absolutes and accepted views of reality as well. Many of us have been so busy making the revolution we have often overlooked the fresh insights that were emerging.

But what are these insights? How do they speak to the Black condition? What are their implications for the rest of humanity? These are the questions I want now to address as I isolate what seems to me to be five of the most critical points of challenge to prevailing views of reality.

Consider first the debate between Plato and Aristotle regarding the age old issue of whether the essence of reality is to be ascertained from the starting point of the particular or the universal. Many Americans seem not to understand why we find it necessary to affirm the particularity of the Black condition. Their objections to Black power, Black caucuses and Black theology have been precisely on this point. Yet, how can we preach love in general without loving someone specifically? How can we affirm humanity without first accepting specific humanity? We now realize that the phrase "black is beautiful" was a contextual statement of the biblical doctrine of creation. God looked at his creation and behold it was beautiful. But before I can affirm the beauty of all of created humanity I must first be able to affirm the beauty of black humanity. For without this prior acceptance of my own condition, my affirmations about humanity will only be about *them* and never about *us*.

And so the good news you preach must begin where you are — with the particularity of the circumstances in which you find yourselves.

All of which brings us to the second point of challenge to prevailing views of reality. This has to do with the meaning of the Christ event. The Christology of the Black experience began with the audaciousness of those who dared to affirm the symbolism of a Black Christ. What has often been overlooked is that there are really two kinds of question being asked.

To ask *was* Christ black is to ask a historical question about the ethnicity of Jesus of Nazareth. But to ask *is* Christ black is to ask an existential question about the Christian claim that God comes to man where he is. Most black men are asking the existential question. They are suggesting that if Jesus Christ has meaning, it is in the context of our immediate situation.

A third area of black rebellion is in the casuistry of moral theology. The Western preoccupation with a law ethic is being called into question by a reaffirmation of a love ethic. Western man had come to believe that the law was the fulfillment of love rather than love the fulfillment of law. So we have had not only law and order politicians but law and order moral theologians. We need a new breed of theologians who will examine the historical role of the black church as a liberating community.

A fourth area of rebellion is in the view of God's activity in history. Black men are beginning to suggest that like Adam we are all in on the beginning of creation. For creation was not so much a distant event as a happening now. Truth is not a static absolute but a process — on unfoldingness. If as Teilhard de Chardin suggests "man was created to create" no institution dare be treated as complete, no man dare be treated as infallible and no idea regarded as absolute.

That is the good news you must proclaim. Men must be reminded that a political process loses both its competence and its compassion without continual reform. Even compensatory social programs do things *to* people as well as *for* them. We must, therefore, rebel against all absolutes.

This leads us to the fifth challenge — the need for a new sense of ethics in acquiring and using power. What I have found as I travel from one end of our nation to another is the emergence of a black political culture. It has its own rituals, customs, values, visions and even a quest for transcendent meaning. This new political culture has roots not only in the style and ethics of the Black church but in the cultural and political nationalism which traffic the streets of urban America.

It is a politicizing culture which recognizes the danger of the old politics while having no illusions about the future of the new politics. While conservatives seek to make the world safe for democracy, the new political culture seeks to make it safe for diversity.

I recently spent a day with Immamu Baraka and the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN) and went away not only with a sense of spiritual renewal but with a feeling that here was an example of a very

positive synthesis of political and cultural nationalism. I found at CFUN a political culture with its own symbols and ideology but which was warm and open to a universal humanity. Here was a strong sense of uniqueness without the fear that the beauty of their uniqueness was likely to be corrupted or perverted by interaction with those who differ. Most important of all, however, was the fact that here was a political culture with a track record for getting things done.

To talk, however, about an emerging black political culture is not to imply that there is an embracing ideological absolute which controls and influences the total political direction of the black community. What is happening can best be described as the development of an internal political pluralism which seeks coalition around common political interests while still allowing for disagreement over the issues involved in economic ideology and educational methodology.

We come finally then to the question: What role should the Black church play in sustaining this drive for meaning, value and community? As men once asked what has Athens to do with Jerusalem, many blacks are now asking what has the black preacher to do with the black revolution? Granted, these are people with short memories, but they see your jobs as making men more holy while they are interested in making human life more human.

Your first and most immediate task is to convince men that your mission is not to sanctify yourselves but to save the world — to save it not so much from immoral men as from moralistic, self-religious men. History is almost certain to describe Watergate as a monument to self-righteousness. Those in power were not anti-law. They simply regarded themselves as above the law.

A second urgent task for the Black church is to understand that its role is not to keep the peace but to make the peace. You must be on guard against those who would coopt you into a role of eliminating tension without eliminating injustice. There continues to be two kinds of peace: the peace of the lion who has just eaten a lamb and the peace of the lamb who has just been eaten by a lion. There is a lion in the streets of America.

While the church must always be a liberating and reconciling community, we now know that there can be no reconciliation until there is an awareness of the depth of the alienation.

We now know that there can be no reconciliation between the powerful and the powerless until the powerless have some measure of equity in the distribution of power. But when power becomes an absolute, it is the Black church which must protest; not because we are naive about power politics but because of our concern for the powerless.

When nationalism becomes an absolute it is the Black church which must protest; not because we are unconcerned about the national interest but because like Camus, "We should like to be able to love our country and still love justice."

When patriotism becomes an absolute, it is the Black church which must protest; not because we are unpatriotic but because we know that the preoccupation with the nearer neighbor leads to the exclusion of the distant neighbor.

Can the church once again become the liberating community it was at birth? The answer is yes, but only if we can move away from our own tribalism, only if we can be a community not so much for ourselves but for others.

But we of all people need not fear the shifting sands of change. For our search for a center of meaning has roots in three distinctly different periods of history (so ably described by William Hamilton). The first was the so-called Jewish-Christian age, roughly from Abraham to Luther. It was an age dominated by the naming of the Gods. The fundamental question was "who are thou?" The second age was the so-called modern age, roughly from Luther to yesterday, from 15th century mysticism to Freud or Heidegger or existentialism or Camus. The problem was no longer the naming of the Gods but the naming of the self. Not who are thou, but who am I? The question did not go upward but inward. What is happening today is that we are in a third age which has to do with the naming of the world. Not who art thou, or who am I, but who are you? Who is my neighbor?

Yet, at the same time a fourth age is breaking in on us. It has to do with the naming of the brother's need. The question is no longer what does it mean to be my brother's keeper, but what does it mean to be my brother's brother? Black ecumenism is not a rush to merge black and white churches but an acknowledgment that some roads do not lead to Jerusalem. Many whose faces are turned to Mecca are also our brothers. Like you and me they are in search of values and visions which provide transcendent meaning.

This too is part of the rebellion against absolutes. But before you rush out to join in the struggle, let me warn you in the words of Camus: "A true rebel is one who knows on behalf of what he is rebelling altogether as much as against what he's rebelling."

