

Blacks, Jews And Gentiles: Conclusion

By Prof. McKinley Burt

This series has brought an interesting response from all segments of Portland's very diverse population. I would mention a communication from a Jewish family informing that when I write of ethnic dislocations by "Urban Renewal (removal) Programs", I might consider the scattering of Jewish homes, shops and places of worship by the 1960 "South Auditorium Urban Renewal Project."

Many of the calls I got expressed concern that I had not yet addressed the "critical" or "momentous" issues that were "disastrously divisive" in current Black/Jewish relations. I suppose that it is perfectly natural that each reader would consider the concerns upper most in his or her mind as 'the' most critical or momentous. My viewpoint, established over a period of a lot of years and through close social or economic contact at various times, is something entirely different.

I think that this is good because,

as my reflections have so far indicated, there is a several-centuries-old inter-action between the races that not only produces realistic evaluations in the respective groups--but, in each, a body of tradition and even folklore that can yield more truths than all the scary headlines generated by the 'media circus'. This lays the groundwork for productive dialogue as opposed to the contemporary frame of reference established by those submerged in heated debate over the pronouncements of Minister Farrakhan.

Several black readers have reminded me of comments I made in these columns almost a decade ago. In particular I had described a friction at the interface between Jewish theatrical producers, playwrights, agents, etc. and the African American actors, actresses and other performers who they packaged, publicized and sold to the great American public; On Broadway, in Hollywood, on the airwaves and, early-on, the

vaudeville circuit.

The absolute, ethnic "Kosher Wall of Separation" between controller and controllee occasionally produced flareups that were never reported in the black media as the Pittsburgh Courier or the Los Angeles Sentinel newspapers which had large, widely-read theatrical sections.

I remember that several decades ago these papers carried a review of the book, "Negro Caravan." In it, the following statement was attributed to Katherine Dunham, famous African American dancer and anthropologist: "Frohman, the famed theatrical producer coined the saying 'Never give a nigger a line'." Since that time, of course, many blacks have insisted they have found a similar theme throughout American life. The denigrating "Amos and Andy" series (Freeman Gosden and Company) produced much louder complaints and even in the white 'liberal press'.

Interestingly, this early on there was not a unified resentment of this low comedy and millions of African Americans first, listened to this farce and later watched two white men in black face perform on television before blacks were hired. There is still bitter resentment at this in many quarters and we have many blacks from this generation saying this is how "we" helped pay to establish Israel and add Abe Saperstein and the "Globetrotters" and Norman Granz and "Jazz at the Philharmonic". They say, "Mo Town" was not soon enough to be set free.

So we have it that, like those continental plates rubbing together in the tectonic process, the relationship between Blacks and Jews ebbs and wanes in cultural tides of opinions and issues -- blocks of dialogue tie up like those continental plates, and then are released in giant spasms where everyone lets it all hang out.

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