

## DEMOCRACY AND VIRTUE: OPTIMISM OR FAITH?

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I want, paradoxically, to defend the new traditionalists' distrust of liberal democracy, but only by suggesting that the whole notion of tradition is itself ambiguous and, ethically speaking, downright confusing. As David Tracy once commented in relation to tradition, "Ambiguity may be too mild a word to describe the strange mixture of great good and frightening evil that our history reveals."<sup>1</sup> That mixture is powerfully evident within the specific forms of the "democratic tradition" Stout asks us to embrace.

Jeffrey Stout expresses considerable longing for the days of the civil rights movement, when everything seemed to come together—democratic politics, legalized justice, and America's faith traditions. Whatever the lens through which we viewed the world, most of us came (at least in retrospect), to "see" Southern white violence as true evil. Scenes of attack dogs and fire hoses aimed at children provided a moment of shared noninferential knowledge, so to speak. Nevertheless, as Taylor Branch observed in his biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., such moments of transcendent moral clarity are bound to be transitory<sup>2</sup>—discontinuities lurk within, and will inevitably emerge, as we saw in subsequent decades (when, for example, northern racism was challenged). Stout wants to propose a notion of a coherent democratic tradition that allows us, inclusively, to cope peacefully and respectfully with such discontinuities within a shared discursive practice, and he specifically and repeatedly cites the Transcendentalists as exemplars of what we might mean by such a tradition.

Notably, however, in arguing against the so-called new traditionalists, Stout himself indicates exactly how ambiguous and

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1. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* 70 (Harper & Row 1987).

2. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*, at 892 (Simon & Schuster 1988).

elusive the notion of tradition can be from an historical perspective. He notes that most so-called traditions, at any point in time, are really a confusing mix of swirling, contradictory influences. When they are placed in historical context, aspects of any tradition are bound to be quite unlikable by current standards. Moreover, like proximate cause in tort law, the content of any tradition can be described, rhetorically, either narrowly or broadly, with selections and exclusions up to the describer. By its very nature, a tradition cannot be reduced to a single essentialist definition.

I'm not sure such criticism, from the perspective of modernist history, matters a lot to the new traditionalists, who are some combination of pre- and post modern anyway, and are fully aware of hermeneutic dilemmas. Historical argument obviously matters to Stout himself, however (although it relates somewhat ambiguously to his own philosophic pragmatism); and I think it causes some difficulty if we try to locate the origins of a coherent American democratic tradition in Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

It helps, for purposes of background, to point out that academic theology in this pre-Civil War period had pretty much divided up between the rationalists (centered at Harvard) and the strict Calvinists of the Jonathan Edwards variety, who remained dominant at Andover, Princeton, and Yale. The rationalists believed in human agency and in a kind of juridical model of social (and heavenly) life. Human beings, as free, autonomous actors, should receive exactly what they are due, or deserve, from God and from society, as based on the individual choices they have freely made. This emphasis on "deserving" formed the basis of the old Roman model of justice, which Stout himself cites with approval. In the early nineteenth century it was linked to the inexorably rational laws of Newtonian cause and effect. One *causes* one's just punishment by transgressing the rules of reason. (This was a Hegelian as well as a Kantian description, underscoring Stout's approval, for Stout also invokes Hegel in support of his argument.)

In contrast, of course, Calvinism still held to the Augustinian position that, as fallen creatures, we *all* deserve, or are due, only condemnation. Through redemption—through Christ—we therefore receive from God infinitely more than we could ever deserve. Moreover, as forgiven creatures, we then owe to God and neighbor (whether "deserving" or not) an equally boundless love—we owe our whole selves. Hence, as Tom Shaffer has stressed, the importance of the prodigal son parable—we're all prodigal *and* we should model ourselves

on the father's boundless love for his undeserving son.<sup>3</sup> The corresponding Calvinist view of the natural world was not one of Newtonian cause and effect, but of nature transfigured—nature as constant communication of God's grace in a fallen world. Thus the ultimate Edwardsean reality was a reality of triune love that sustained the universe, not the cause and effect mechanics of pre-Einstein, pre-quantum physics.

It's long been recognized that Emerson put these two contradictory influences together. He reinvigorated the transfigured view of nature from New England Calvinism, but refused to give up on the Harvard celebration of free human agency. God became expendable because, Emerson argued, the unaided individual human agent could, by his or her own powers, apprehend nature as transfiguration. More to the point for Stout and the democratic tradition he invokes, however, is the fact that the most serious and almost only *non-racist*, radical white abolitionists, whom Stout often celebrates, did not in fact come from the ranks of the Transcendentalists. They came instead from those who adhered quite strictly to the pre-Revolutionary model of New England Calvinism. This is the finding of David Reynolds in his new, insightful biography of John Brown.<sup>4</sup> At the risk of taking a cheap shot, here are Emerson and Thoreau on the question of race.

Emerson commented:

"I think that it cannot be maintained by any candid person that the African race have ever occupied or do promise ever to occupy a very high place in the human family. Their present condition is the strongest proof that they cannot. The Irish cannot; the American Indian cannot; the Chinese cannot. Before the energy of the Caucasian race all the other races have quailed and done obeisance."<sup>5</sup>

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Thoreau said:

"The history of the white man . . . is the history of improvement, that of the red man a history of fixed habits of stagnation. . . ."<sup>6</sup> The

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3. For a recent meditation on the centrality of that parable, and its importance in relation specifically to abolitionism and to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Calvinism generally, see Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2004).

4. David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked The Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* 19 (Alfred A. Knopf 2005).

5. *Id.* at 220 (quoting *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* vol. 12, 152 (Linda Allart ed., Harv. U. Press 1976).

6. *Id.* (quoting *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau* vol. 10, 252 (Bradford Torrey & Francis H. Allen ed., Dover 1962)).

African will survive, for he is docile, and is patiently learning his trade and dancing at his labor; but the Indian does not often dance, unless it be the war dance. . . .<sup>7</sup>

In addition:

Thoreau's poem "Our Country" asserted that the "red race with sullen step retreats," and "the Afric [sic] race [is] brought here to curse its fate" along with Irish and Germans, while the "manly Saxon" is "leading all the rest."<sup>8</sup>

Such statements, of course, are not different from those of most white abolitionists of the time. Some people had simply proved themselves, by natural category, as more deserving than others. In contrast, John Brown's family read Jonathan Edwards's sermons, such as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*,<sup>9</sup> right along with the Bible, and considered the races absolutely equal *because* each person was by nature equally fallen in relation to God. Brown, like the father of the parable, also gave of himself with drastic, boundless selflessness, for the sake of his neighbors, the slaves.

Interestingly, Brown's example of complete selflessness inspired the Transcendentalists to the point that they helped to make him famous—but only by invoking very traditional religious imagery which in theory they had abandoned. Thoreau implicitly likened Brown to Christ crucified after he was hung,<sup>10</sup> and Emerson, while Brown was still in prison, referred to his future gallows as "glorious as the cross."<sup>11</sup>

Why, having rejected his Christianity, did they then take up his cause? Because (and here there is further, confusing, irony) they liked his violence. The Transcendentalists by then had given up on legality and constitutionalism in relation to political reform generally, and were calling for a kind of popular anarchistic vigilante violence—as in California after the gold rush, explained Emerson.<sup>12</sup> And they considered Brown a kind of reincarnation of Oliver Cromwell, whom Brown in fact admired and whose violent destruction of the Irish Catholics was considered so splendid.

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7. *Id.* (quoting *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, *supra*, n. 6, at vol. 1, 446).

8. *Id.* at 220-221 (quoting *The Collected Poems of Henry Thoreau* 134-135 (Johns Hopkins U. Press 1964)).

9. *Id.* at 25, 48. For Brown's explicit use in relation to abolitionism, *see id.* at 151-152.

10. *Id.* at 432-433. *See also id.* at 406 for Emerson and Thoreau as opening the "floodgates to comparisons between Brown and Christ."

11. *Id.* at 366.

12. *Id.* at 228. On the celebration of the Cromwell model, and of violence generally, *see id.* at 229-232.

Indeed, Brown *was* violent. He did not share Stout's qualms about dirty hands; in Kansas, he countered pro-slavery violence by hacking people to pieces alive, for terrorist effect. And his model for a post-slavery America was the model of a pre-Revolutionary New England Calvinist community—established church, anti-blasphemy laws, etc. Brown, one of the very few whites of his time really committed to equality, yearned for the religious authority that Stout claims the democratic tradition has rejected. Of all the white abolitionists at the time, Brown was the one truly beloved by African Americans, as the Transcendentalists were not. Indeed, if we move back, historically, from Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement, we arrive not at the doorstep of the Transcendentalists, but at Harper's Ferry. That's where, for example, Storer College was located, in 1867 and where the Second Niagara Movement, later the NAACP, first met in honor of Brown.<sup>13</sup>

I draw only two conclusions from all of this. Tradition, when located in its actual historical context, is confusing and ambiguous. As historians have recognized, the past is a different place. Nevertheless, there also really is a difference between, on the one hand, a juridical model that separates the deserving from the undeserving, and, on the other, the (utterly tradition-dependent) message of boundless Christian love.

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13. *Id.* at 494.