

Juneteenth – June 20, 2021  
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“In God We Trust”. Its fascinating that our money makes an explicit reference to God while the United States Constitution does not make any. The framers of the Constitution were not of one faith or concept of God. In fact, one might say that they were the original “spiritual but not religious.” After all, “Deism” is something you could afford if you owned all of the land and the *people* surrounding the church.

The Declaration of Independence, however, does clearly acknowledge a higher power:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

But it is important to remember that the Declaration was a manifesto being delivered to a king who was monarch of both a country and a church. It makes sense for them to goad him this way. My point is that the 21<sup>st</sup> century assumption that the United States was founded as a “Christian” nation or even as a “God” centered nation, is really false.

But being black in America has always been very, very different than being white where faith is concerned. The African American experience is deeply intertwined with belief, practice and expressions of God. I think this is because the experience of black people in the United States has been so very unholy. Not to be too critical, but where liberal religious traditions can afford to consider the idea of God as an option or a self-directed choice or an intellectual exercise, in black community and experience the idea of there being some great force holding all of

this irrational, messy, raggedy life stuff together has frequently meant the difference between life or death. Whether we call it God or by some other name, having a sense of a binding, greater force at work allows us to survive to the next sunset with peace in our hearts and rise with less dread at the following dawn. In so many ways, so much of black experience has only had God to hang on to when the people and governments of the world have presented us with lies, inconsistencies, denial and ignorance. In God We Trust...For the founders and other white people in the United States, the words might be just propaganda but for black people they are an expression of life.

Really, Juneteenth is a perfect example among many, of why black folks will often be quick to affirm God. Juneteenth, a holiday that commemorates a gross failure in communication and civic enforcement, also took forever to be recognized by our government, until just this past week...156 years. All of this justifies a deeply spiritual stance among black people. What is freedom if no one has ever made the effort to tell you that you were free? The result is that there is no need to seek freedom from whiteness when one is able to know freedom in God.

The whole progression toward ending slavery in the United States was really haphazard. This is one reason many black scholars and colleagues take the position that slavery never really ended. I agree, especially when I look at the way incarceration works and how the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment fully allows for the brutality of slavery to work as punishment for crime even today.

To get the full picture we have to go back to the Emancipation Proclamation. You see, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 only

freed slaves in the confederacy and was largely a military strategy. The goal was to liberate the enslaved population in order for them to fight against the Confederate armies. This becomes clear when looking at how explicit the proclamation is in naming where people were no longer enslaved: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina. It did not free slaves in the slave holding Union states of Maryland, Delaware, Missouri, Kentucky (Tennessee) or in New Orleans and many of the nearby parishes.

But this habit of carefully curating words and actions is as old as the Constitution itself. Prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, slavery was not actually mentioned in the Constitution. This is the tragic elegance of our Federal racism. Although the Constitution mentions “free persons” and “Indians”, it is a document that codifies racial inequality by implication and assumption...and of course by deferring to “states’ rights.”

*Clever.*

But eventually, on December 6, 1865, we got to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment which reads:

*Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.*

And even here, we have to read between the lines. I recently wrote a paper where I raised the simple challenge that the Emancipation Proclamation does not in fact abolish slavery because neither it nor the Constitution acknowledge that slavery has existed; rather it establishes

that slavery “shall” (the expectant future tense) not exist. The concept of this being *abolition* is based on an assumption that slavery has existed, not to an actual admission in the constitution that says “yes, slavery exists in the United States and has been protected and promoted.” The only thing that is clear is that slavery will not exist...going forward. How do you end something that you’ve never acknowledged the existence of? Almost like the complete inverse of not telling people they are free, there is nothing in the Constitution that says people are slaves either. This is the dangerous power of white supremacy at its most volatile...and invisible. If you never say that you are a racist, if you never say that you believe in the inferiority of black people, then there is no need to ever apologize for it or create any kind of recompense...even if your actions all demonstrate a clear distaste for blackness. There is no implication of culpability in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment...no redemption is sought because no guilt is acknowledged.

*“Slavery?...oh, no, there’s nothing like that to see here...keep walking”*

The other thing that does not appear in the Constitution is any kind of language or protection against the thing that fueled and enabled slavery...anti-blackness. The closest we’ve gotten to this are attempts at anti-lynching legislation going back to the Dyer (no relation) Anti-Lynching Bill of 1922. Although it is far from specific to addressing anti-blackness, an anti-lynching law would easily be used to address the violence that results from anti-black bias in policing and other areas of racial intimidation. This is why anti-lynching legislation has never been signed into law...even as recently as last year with the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act. If there was a law on the books that said that extra-

judicial violence is a crime, one of the most powerful tools of white supremacy...racial intimidation, would literally be illegal.

*But we can't have that...we can't possibly allow black people to play.*

And so I turn to sports. Sports really are a fine analogy to think about the evolution of racism. Like the country, segregation was the law of the land in sports until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

But now we can look at the list of names and see what happens when you let black people play...Serena Williams, Venus Williams, Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neil, Muhammad Ali, Naomi Osaka, Wilma Rudolph, Jesse Owens, Hank Aaron, Wilt Chamberlain, Magic Johnson, Arthur Ashe, Debi Thomas, Surya Bonaly, Gabby Douglas, Tai Babilonia, Simone Biles...

When black people and people of African decent are told that they can play...in essence when we are told there is no slavery and that we have a full right to participation...when we are actually granted freedom...we not only play, but we can win. Not just in terms of competitive winning but in terms of life thriving. Given the opportunity to be toe-to-toe with white and other counterparts, we are fully equal. No, we are not superhuman. We are not hyper-athletic (which is often harmfully used to imply being hypersexual)...we are not hyper anything. We simply expand the possibilities of human achievement because more people competing will always do that. Everyone has to play better and smarter, both black and white because there are more possibilities of more outcomes when more people have access to the game.

US Ladies Figure Skating, still a sport disturbingly out of reach to black athletes, is a perfect example of this. It demonstrates how just among white people, a bigger pool, will change the possibilities. In the early

days, skating was relegated to a certain elite class of white people. One had to be wealthy and socially connected to be able to have out-of-season ice, equipment, training and custom skating dresses. The pool of competitors was tiny...and as a result so was the skill set. But in the mid 1950's the working-class child of German immigrants from Queens, New York got access to the sport and by 1960, Carol Heiss was Olympic Champion. Coming from outside the class structure of wealth and assumptions about a pre-prescribed "ladylike" physicality, she drove the sport to an entirely new athletic level. In the next decade, two more working class white women, Peggy Fleming and Janet Lynn continued to transform the sport...one with artistry, the other with speed and triple jumps. Today, we remember Tonya Harding for the wrong reason. We should remember her because she was one of only two women in the world who was landing all of the same jumps as the men in the early 90s. Harding, who grew up outright poor, should never have had access to figure skating, but because she did, the sport had to evolve to fit her. More skaters, more skills. Likewise, more people, more possibilities for achievement.

And yes, figure skating is still super white.

I believe the reason for anti-blackness is because its easy. Its an easy way to keep the pool of talent (so to speak) small and limited to a privileged few. In a society based on market competition, a smaller pool of competitors means higher odds of winning for those who are allowed in the game. To bar an entire segment of the population based on an immutable fact of their being is offensively simple. It has proven its effectiveness. Beginning with slavery, through Jim Crow and on to today's anti-blackness which is as explicit as government officials who

will happily deny that “black lives matter” means that anyone who is anything but black continues to have a better chance of success.

If you ever wonder why black people, music, faith centers around deeply spiritual ideas and beliefs...why we talk about God, then just listen to this partial list:

- The failure of reconstruction
- Jim Crow
- KKK
- 4000 lynchings
- Exclusions from Social Security
- Segregated Military and government
- Racially biased GI Bill
- Racial housing covenants
- Urban renewal
- Mass incarceration and the “war on drugs”
- Police violence
- Repeal of voting rights

“In God we Trust...”

On the heels of Juneteenth finally being declared a national holiday, one has to wonder what the world would be like with just a few subtle differences:

- Imagine if the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment said: neither slavery nor involuntary servitude...shall exist *anymore...*”
- Imagine if anti-lynching legislation was signed into law?
- Imagine if the words “Black Lives Matter” didn’t stick in the throat of 50% of the white population?

- Imagine if black people actually had a full right to play this game called America?

Out of necessity, black people have not had the luxury to be satisfied with just imagining these things. We can't wait for white freedom, because if Galveston 1865 or Washington, D.C. 2021 is any example, it might arrive woefully late, after too many lives have been lost...if it ever comes at all. Over these long centuries, and using countless many different names for it, black people have had to learn everywhere that it is better that in God we trust.

May it be so.