ROBERT PENN WARREN REVEREND GALAMISON TAPE #3

RPW: This is Tape #3 of the conversation with the Reverend Galamison - proceed. You mentioned demonstrations. Do you distinguish in your mind between an illegitimate type of demonstration and a legitimate? For an example, certain organizations oppose the stall-in demonstration, and many individuals did, as being illegitimate. Yet at the same time supporting other types of demonstrations. What kind of distinction do you make in your mind on such a point?

Rev.G: In my own opinion, any demonstration short of violence is a legitimate demonstration. I think one of the mistakes we make is to suppose that we should only have those kinds of demonstrations that are going to meet with general approval. And my contention is that the demonstrations of the type which meet with general approval are the demonstrations that are least likely to accomplish anything. That is, one doesn't devise a demonstration on the basis of the degree to which it's going to please people. One devises a demonstration on the basis of necessity. That is, will this get the job done. And a civil rights struggle is not a popularity contest that we are waging in hope of winning as many friends as possible. A civil rights struggle is an effort that we're waging in order to bring in justice, and it's not expected that those who advocate injustice or who have stood by the status quo are going to approve of any effort that's exercised to get the job done.

RPW: Well, we can scarcely assume that Mr. Farmer was defending the status quo when he opposed the stall-ins, or Mr. Whitney Young. Their

motives must have been different from that.

Rev.G: Well, I refuse to speculate about Mr. Farmer's motives. I will say this about the stall-ins. The stall-in gave a left wing to other activities on the day of the opening of the World's Fair which meant that the sit-ins and the arrests in which Mr. Farmer participated himself didn't get the kind of general public denouncement that they might have gotten ordinarily. It must be understood, too, that there is a difference between established civil rights groups and the smaller civil rights groups, the local civil rights groups. There's a difference in terms of whom the different groups are responsible to. There's a difference between the kinds of funds that these groups handle, a difference between who contributes these funds to the various organizations. So that every organization is not at liberty to function as every other organization.

RPW: I talked recently with Mr. Farmer about this point. He made a distinction of this sort for the - for my interview - for the record - but the stall-ins would partake of the nature of a general strike, not justified by the occasion. The time might come when a paralyzing tactic would be necessary, but not as long as there was some communication, some basis for, as it were, negotiation, which he felt existed at that time.

Rev.G: Yes. Well, Mr. Farmer is of course entitled to his point of view. It ought to also be remembered, though, that the actual leaders of the stall-in were four CORE branches in New York City which apparently disagree with Mr. Farmer.

RPW: That's quite on the record. This raises another little question. In any popular movement there is bound to be, if not a struggle for leadership, at least a natural competition for leadership, and among the different policies that are proposed. Do you see a drift toward a centralized individualized leadership in the civil rights movement, or may I say more generally the Negro movement? A drift toward The Man, you know.

Rev.G: I would say, first of all, though, that this is not true of the CORE organization. I don't think there are any -

RPW: Not CORE - I mean in general.

Rev.G: Yes, I know, but I want to bring this comment in. I don't think there are any local CORE BRANCH leaders who are trying to displace Mr. Farmer in any way. But generally about a drift toward any individual leadership, I would say no, I don't think that the Negro people will arrive at a point where they have one leader with whom everybody disagrees - I mean, agrees, and whom everybody follows, any more than white people have. All the people following Goldwater or all the people following Johnson, or all the people following anythinker among the white race. In fact, the competition in the civil rights movement gets keener all the time and I think that it's good. I think that the differences may be good. I think it's good in the sense that we should have various strategies and various tactics of operation. I think it's good in the sense that there should always be some groups outside the pale, as it were, who are not controlled and who are not predictable in terms of what they may do next. But my

experience over the past several months working closely with civil rights groups is that the rivalry will continue and that, you know, there will not be any one person who's running the whole show, and I think it's good.

RPW: Do you see any tendency as has been stated to me by Congressman Powell, that the mere fact of white money getting into the big organizations or some of the smaller ones has tended to draw their teeth, to modify their basic policies, to soften them?

Rev.G: I think that this is true of any effort, not only the civil rights effort. I think it's true of the church, I think it's true of any institution that he who pays the piper will call the tune, or try to call it, and if he's not able to call the tune he's going to stop paying. And I think one of the interesting things about our struggle here, as people involved in a civil rights effort, although I don't call myself a civil rights person - I'm a clergyman doing what I ought to be doing - is that we have been able to get so little in the way of funds from people who generally contribute to other organizations and to other efforts which lie at a distance. That is, people who have given generously to movements in the South, people who give generously to major civil rights organizations, people who have supported monetarily for the most part the struggle of Negroes, have not supported this confrontation that we have waged here in this city of New York. And I think there are reasons for it.

RPW: What are those reasons?

Rev.G: I think that they don't welcome it, number one. I think for the first time in many years whites in the North are actually confronted with a problem that they try to pretend only existed in the South, and that many whites have been able to call themselves liberal because they would send money to Mississippi, and if there's a school integration effort in Alabama it appears in the newspaper that the Negroes in Alabama are struggling for equality. If there's a school struggle here in New York City, the New York City newspapers print that some irresponsible leaders are trying to get publicity, you see. There's a distinction when the battle gets nearer to home, and I think that white people in the North have had to sit back and actually examine themselves and they don't like what they see, and I think that they are projecting their anger and their frustration on the people who are making them face this question. And I think basically they have indicated by their failure to support financially the efforts that they're not particularly in favor of the effort. Now they'll say - of course they are all confused about the school desegregation problem, even many of the most liberal white people are confused about this. But in other areas they will say, I'm in favor of the objective but I'm not in favor of the method, as if there were any other way to gain the objective apart from the method that's being employed.

RPW: Switching to the South for a moment, some commentators, including Mr. Evers, Charles Evers, have said that they are optimistic for

settlement in the South before one in the North. Does that make any sense? That speculation?

Rev.G: This may be, and some Northerners say this with a sense of sophistication, but there is a truth in it if the South does not find ways of evading desegregation and integration as the North has found. That is, let me say, there are many tricks and evasions being exercised constantly in the North to which the South may resort. That's why it behooves us in the North to clear up these discrepancies as quickly as possible. We owe it to our Southern brethren rather than to pretend that all is well here and everything is wrong there.

RPW: So they can't be exported. James Baldwin says that the Southern mob, the gang in the streets in Birmingham or Little Rock, does not represent the will of the Southern majority.

Rev.G: This may be true. I would not be in a position to know. (remarks by RPW) Yes. However, a statement like this appears to be predicated on a feeling that it's the majority of people who get things done, and of course this is contrary to truth, and in most instances it's a militant minority in any area that decides the direction of things. And certainly it's a minority of Negroes who are deciding the direction of the civil rights struggle, who are adamant about school desegregation, who support even the major civil rights organizations, the small minority of Negro people man the picket lines, who do the sitting in and what have you. They are creating a rather formidable effect. Well, the same thing is true of the

minority of white people. They are, however vociferous and however in error they may be, certainly creating the major impact on our society at this point. If there's any lesson to be learned from it it's not only that a minority of people gets things done, but that people who straddle the fence and people who don't take a position are not effective in the movements of a society. But no revolution certainly, however baseful or however violence, involves the majority of people.

RPW: Following this line of thought, we would have the notion of a majority of white people, say in Mississippi or the South, who are uninvolved or who have no focus for expressing their opinion or afraid. Over against that would be some massive apathy or lack of concern among a certain percentage of Negroes. Is that a fair description or not? Following what you said.

Rev.G: Yes, I think that there are apathetic people on both sides. I think there are unconcerned people on both sides. I think there are cowardly people on both sides. I would agree.

RPW: Let's go back to another topic of pure speculation. Muirdahl says in his book, The American Dilemma, that there could have been a decent policy for the Reconstruction after the Civil War. Then he outlines what he would consider a decent policy from '65 on. The first stipulation is compensation to the ex-slaveholders for the Emancipation. Second, expropriation of land for settling the Freedmen, but payment to the ex-landholders. Three, the sale of such land to the Freedman at a very small rate and amortized over a period of

years. Those are the first three elements. I would like to know how you would respond to those three proposals. Not whether they would have worked or not - assume they would have worked, would have helped matters - let's assume that. But would you find - assuming they would have worked, would have helped matters, that we'd be over some of the humps that we're not over yet in the South and elsewhere, would you still object to any of them?

Rev.G: I wouldn't object to any of them. I think that they would have been helpful programs to the plight of the Negro at that juncture. They would not, however, had all three been effective, spoken to the basic problem in which the Negro found himself which made this kind of program impossible. That is the recognition of the Negro as a human being. You see, the difference between other institutions of slavery and the American institution of slavery is that in no other instance, to my best knowledge, was a slave actually de-humanized and deprived of the image of being human, so that in other instances in history when slaves were freed they became people like everyone else. In America this was not true. Apparently in order to justify slavery the early Americans found it necessary to de-humanize and completely emasculate the Negro, so that even after he was free he was not recognized as a human being, and his efforts even in court to gain rights as a human being met with failure. For example, in the Plessey v. Ferguson decision it was adjudicated that no Negro had rights that a white person was bound to respect, and we are living in the backwash

of this concept today. So that no matter what we had given the Negro I don't think it would have brought an ultimate resolution to his problem unless we had also revised our propagandized concept of the Negro.

RPW: You wouldn't have felt any resentment at the notion of compensating the slaveholders, the ex-slaveholders for the Emancipation - this as an affront to your dignity as a Negro? This ex post facto recognition of slavery as property holding?

Rev.G: Oh, no, I would not have objected to his being compensated for the years that he spent as a slave.

RPW: I mean the slaveholder being compensated for the price of the slave who has now been turned into a Freedman.

Rev.G: Oh, well - (remarks by RPW) - yes, well, I think Lincoln intended to do this and proposed it, and it would have been a fulfilled intention had not the slave masters, many of them, through their participation in the Revolution - not the Revolution, the Civil War, violated their right to get these grants from the government. Of course, if the slavery institution were recognized as a moral wrong then no man should have been reimbursed for surrendering what he had no right to in the first place. This intention to even do so was a political connivance based on a hope that the South might somehow be appeased, but it was not of course right.

RPW: We are up against the problem, then, aren't we? If we assume that such a policy would have been of real value, then on one hand we

are recognizing, as you put it, a moral wrong - conniving was your word, I believe. On the other hand, we would be actually advancing the situation of the Negro Freedman.

Rev.G: Yes, well, it's a dilemma. Maybe there's something to be said for both sides. That is, if the nation sanctioned the slavery institution at the outset and people invested their money in the slavery institution, and reimbursement would have quietly ended the thing - of course money would - may be a small price to get ride of the slavery institution ~~in all~~ and also appease those who had been deprived of slaves. I mean, there's something to be said for that fact. But my whole argument is that if this nation had taken a strong position in the beginning, which it never did -

RPW: What kind?

Rev.G: At the time of the Civil War. If it hadn't - if we hadn't taken such a quasi position, such an appeasing position toward the South, and if we had resolved this problem when we fought it out, that we would not be in this predicament today. You see, President Lincoln was not at all as much in favor of emancipating slaves as he was in keeping the nation together, and he said in essence that if to maintain the unity of the country he had to free the slaves, he would free them. If it meant he had to keep the slaves he would keep the institution of slavery. So this was not an altogether - a moral decision on his part. But the North was ready to make any concessions to the South even in terms of slavery. It was only that the South felt driven to the point that nothing the North could do would appease them,

that the South was driven to the brink of the Civil War, as it were. But certainly there was no great emphasis on morality here, or no great emphasis on the rights of Negro people. The whole thing was a kind of freak which grew out of circumstances that nobody had anticipated.

RPW: That is, the Emancipation was a historical accident then. Is that the idea?

Rev.G: I would call it that - yes. It was a historical accident. Yes, it was. That almost nobody could foresee. In fact, Frederic Douglas spells out in his autobiography his despair, his absolute and abject despair after the hanging of John Brown at Harper's Ferry, that the Negro problem in this country, the slavery problem would be resolved. And the Civil War to him was as much an amazement as it was to anybody because it was something that could not be foreseen. But through this peculiar convergence of circumstances when the North realized that as long as the South had free labor and a slave institution to help the South support its war, that the North decided that the Negro had to be involved in the war and began to move to the point where they recruited free Negroes, even from the slavery areas of the South, to help fight for their own freedom.

RPW: Against the will of the top brass of the federal army, of course.

Rev.G: Oh, yes. There were many problems in the army. There were many instances when the Negro was first involved in the army where the Negro was relegated to the worst and most subservient positions, and

only after much protest on the part of some Negroes like Frederic Douglas, and only after some white people like General Grant put their foot down, did the Negro find himself designated to a station of any stature in the army.

RPW : Your remark about the Emancipation being an accident relates to a theory of all Negro gains in this country up to the present, not including the present, that Negro gains by and large have been a by-product of a general historical situation. But the present situation is different. It is not a by-product. It is created by the Negro will to create it. Does this make any sense?

Rev.G: I think I'd be inclined to agree with the premise that the Negro gains have basically been a by-product. But I would carry the premise straight through. I think even the Negro gains in America currently have been pretty much due to by-product - you know, have been pretty much a by-product of what is transpiring in the world. I think the rise of the black nations in Africa to positions of independence and freedom, the feeling in Asia against America because of America's treatment of Negro people, the widespread knowledge of the heinousness of race relations in our country, the threat of Communism and our effort to maintain on our side the black nations and the yellow nations of the world, against the Communist camp - all these have been I think factors in creating an atmosphere in which the Negro could carry on this struggle.

RPW: Do you detect a change in the atmosphere, the general atmosphere, say, attitudes of the white society toward the legitimate aspirations

and moral claims of the Negroes - some actual change of attitude - or not? In your time?

Rev.G: Yes, I think there's been a decided change - perceptible in many areas. It's only since I've been an adult, for example, that these public service commercials were played on radio and television invoking people to a concept of brotherhood and exhorting people against feelings of prejudice and discrimination against other people, not only so there have been many other developments which have created a change of attitude and reflected in the daily press, reflected in the kinds of programming one sees on television and hears on the radio today which are race relation stories spelled out in a race relations context. There are in our time too - yes, well, let me put it this way - nearly every pronouncement of church and government today bears the words - without regard to race, religion, color, national origin. In other words, there is a growing atmosphere in which hatred and discrimination and prejudice are becoming less popular. Let me put it that way. And it's just evident in so many areas that, you know, I can very easily see attitudinal differences today as over against when I was a boy growing up.

RPW: How much optimism does this give you in considering the whole matter?

Rev.G: Let me say I really don't know, and let me place my agnosticism over against what I understand to be the pessimism of the most rabid racist in the South. That is, my understanding is that even the rabid racist in the South feels that the dawn must inevitably break,

and that the Negro must achieve full equality here, and that the most he is doing with his activities is procrastinating and holding back the inevitable. This is the way he feels. I am not sure I feel this way. I take the position that I don't know, and that my struggle in the school effort is a confrontation that I am trying to put America to the test so that I can learn for myself whether those who, you know, advocate isolation and separation are right, or whether those who advocate the idealisms of democracy are right.

RPW: This is the end of Tape #3 of the conversation with Reverend Galamison. Proceed.

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