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### The Substance of Things Hoped For: A Memoir of African-American Faith by Samuel DeWitt Proctor: A Review Essay

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# A Review Essay

by Donald Cunnigen

*The Substance of Things Hoped For: A Memoir of African-American Faith* by Samuel DeWitt Proctor, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996, 243 pp., \$22.95. ISBN 0-399-14089-1.

During a 1960's dinner of the prestigious Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity (also known as the Boule), an exclusive organization founded at the turn of the century by some of the African American community's professional luminaries, an ideological confrontation took place between the Boule, and National Association of Black Educators (NABE) members. Among the distinguished Boule diners was Samuel DeWitt Proctor, who became pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Professor at Rutgers University. The confrontation focused on their different views regarding the role of African-Americans in American society. According to Proctor, "[the NABE] thought the fraternity brothers had bought into dominant culture too deeply, had sacrificed their African identity, and had moved too far—too high—from grassroots blacks."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Proctor said their (Boule) view of "[African-Americans]" destiny was to engage in creating a new culture of their own, a blending of African residuals, survival strategies learned in slavery, and consciousness of their dual personalities—U.S. citizens tacitly aware that they were participating in a unique transition that would lead America to become something entirely new.... They regarded the [NABE] as cop-outs who had recognized how, long and how hard the real struggle would be and chose something quicker and closer.<sup>2</sup>

While the confrontation above represented a very small part of Proctor's life, it was at the heart of his memoir. Throughout the memoir, he discusses the African-American community's spiritual resilience over adversity, particularly racial discrimination and hatred from American whites. He suggested the resilience was derived from a spiritual center created from the African-American religious tradition. Using the New Testament verse from Hebrew (11:1), "now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," he examined his life experiences in relationship with "the larger history of the black struggle for equality" and his faith in an intangible hope for a better future. The verse served as a syllogism which explained inexplicable phenomena throughout his life. Moreover, he viewed it as a universal truth by which many African-Americans lived their lives.

## **We Are All God's Children—**

### **The African-American Religious Tradition**

According to Proctor, the religious world view of many white southern theologians suggested a submissive role for African-Americans based on their reading of the scripture.

He believed the African-American religious tradition did not accept the "self-negating religion offered by the slave masters."<sup>3</sup> Proctor said African-American clergy and believers followed the ideas of African-American ministers, such as, Colored Methodist Episcopal Church founder, Lucius Holsey; Holsey stated every person was the same under God. It was this common belief which sustained African-Americans through the hardships of life. In Proctor's opinion, the church became a refuge where people gathered to "look up." Proctor said churches combined "religious instruction with education in citizenship and cultural history."<sup>4</sup>

While Proctor's view of African-American religion offered many positive descriptions, he acknowledged the fact that the African-American ministry has had its share of charlatans who have exploited the communities religious zeal and offered uncharitable biblical interpretations. Without naming the minister, he cited the example of an anonymous Cape Verdean charismatic minister who wore outlandish garments, drove an expensive automobile, grew long fingernails, and extracted large sums of money for the "divine one."

Although the African-American religious tradition supported freedom and justice issues, Proctor said it has maintained "anti-science sentiments" which limited its "basic theological agenda."<sup>5</sup> His training at Crozer Seminary in Pennsylvania freed him from the strict fundamentalism of the African-American religious tradition. He believed the essential stylistic difference in the African-American and white biblical interpretation and worship had led white Americans to accept slavery; men to accept the subjugation of women; the rich to ignore the poor; and a variety of unChristian acts around the world.

## **Expectation and Hope— The Proctor Family's Life**

The Proctor family's emphasis on education and African-American educational institutions played a pivotal role in his early intellectual development. In addition to acquiring rudimentary educational knowledge, his early schooling afforded exposure to invaluable African-American scholar-activist role models. As a youngster, his high school biology teacher, Alene Black, made an indelible impression on him as a plaintiff in a class action suit for African-American public school teacher's pay equity. The highly trained and competent young teacher was fired by her local school board. Her action made him aware that the Jim Crow system of segregation could and should be challenged by African-Americans.

From his high school years, he entered Virginia State College where African-American intellectuals, such as, Luther Porter Jackson and Tommy Carter trained many of the leading African-American educators. In college, he played in the Virginia State Trojans, a dance orchestra, with Billy Taylor who became an internationally recognized jazz musician. His early college years betrayed the rich high school preparation which he

received in Norfolk. In his own words, "Collecting cute girls, dancing, and fraternity capers crowded my agenda. I had no energy for serious matters."<sup>6</sup> After experiencing a religious conversion, he changed his life. He took a year off from college and worked in Norfolk at various jobs. During the year, he decided to study for the ministry and transfer to Virginia Union University, an African-American Baptist institution.

In 1942 he received his bachelor's degree and became a third-generation African-American college graduate. As the paternal grandson of a former slave who became an 1882 Hampton Institute graduate and the son of two former Norfolk Mission College students, he was imbued with the value of education as an important instrument of personal and social change. His family had very high expectations for him because they believed their children should "hold [their] heads high with expectation and hope."<sup>7</sup> It was those ideas which sustained him as the only African-American student in Crozier Seminary and one of a handful of African-American students in Yale University and Boston University.

Similarly, the local Norfolk community had high expectations for him and his five siblings due to his family's social status. In the segregated South, African-American community status was as much a consequence of what an individual accomplished in terms of education and financial assets as how an individual lived their daily life in terms of "the simplest virtues of honesty, sobriety, thrift, kindness, charity, and mutual respect."<sup>8</sup> The Proctor Family held steadfast to the simple virtues. These virtues became a staple of Proctor's life throughout his career.

### **Things Hoped For—Government Service**

After serving as the president of two historically African-American universities, Virginia Union University and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College (North Carolina A&T), he worked in the presidential administrations of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson. As he worked with the Peace Corps in Nigeria during the Kennedy years, he thought about Black identity issues. These thoughts helped him to develop an understanding about his African and American identity. Similarly, his work with Sargent Shriver's Office of Economic Opportunity provided exposure to leading civil rights activists, including, Fannie Lou Hamer of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. During the "Black Power" era, Proctor's integrationist vision of hope was subjected to attack from the NABE and many others with militant black nationalist views.

In government service he worked in positions which focused on issues of racial justice and an integrated society. Despite his strong religious values and educational training which influenced his governmental service, his main ideological focus was the political hope articulated by the Boule members. Proctor's civic work was based on a desire to include more African-Americans into the "mainstream" of American life, "things hoped for." While his memoir provides the reader with a career filled with interesting details, some important issues were

not addressed by the author.

The book's greatest strengths were the continuous expression of the author's indomitable spirit and faith in God as well as his belief in Gunnar Myrdal's concept of the American Creed. His belief in the possibility of the American Creed coming to pass was supported by his African-American religious upbringing. It was at the core of his work with many government programs. In addition, it was the basis for his recent National Youth Academy proposal (a sophisticated version of AmeriCorps), Rutgers University non-traditional students' master's program, and Institute for Service to Education. His beliefs were reinforced by the kindness of many individuals, including white southern liberals who provided unexpected gifts on his return to college and a church for worship after his family's church was destroyed by fire.

His faith enlivened the pages of a memoir which often made this reader feel as though he was riding a five to six year changing career roller coaster. The roller coaster ride led Proctor around the world from one job to another. While he suggested his wife and family moved happily from place to place, the constant upheaval of his familial arrangement tested credibility regarding the explanation of why he continued to be motivated personally to frequently change his occupation. As a highly motivated scholar, one wonders where opportunity to serve ended and sheer opportunism began.

The book's greatest weakness is the author's failure to explain the influence of Christian fundamentalism in contemporary society and the relationship of his "liberal" theological views to the liberation theologians of the 1960's and 1970's. While the author mentioned an encounter with the apolitical former "segregationist," Billy Graham, he did not explain why Graham and his fellow contemporary "Christian Conservatives" wield the type of political clout which results in Graham's offering Clinton's inaugural invocation as well as political advice.

Although the memoir was not designed as a theological exegesis on the role of religion in modern society, he failed to connect the influence of his theological readings with contemporary scholarship on the African-American church, such as, Joseph Washington, James Cone, Albert Cleage, and John Henrik Clarke. His personal reflections were fascinating but they would have been enhanced by a critical discussion of others' ideas.

Despite the book's weaknesses, it provided a strong counter response to the negative popular descriptions of the African-American family and church. His book offered testimony to the resourcefulness and clarity of purpose which have sustained many African-Americans. Although many critical themes were highlighted in the book, it left readers of different generations with two essential points: (1) the young reader received an excellent historical overview of the sweet struggles of a successful African-American male; and (2) older readers were provided many thoughtful observations about the validity of integration in the 21st century. With these generational contributions, Proctor's memoir adds to the rich tradition of African-American autobiography by

providing trenchant commentary on the socio-political dynamics of the African-American community.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Samuel DeWitt Proctor, *The Substance of Things Hoped For: A Memoir of African-American Faith* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), 120.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 119-20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 16.

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