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Analysis: Part 4 – Taking Part in Rothschild Francis's Legacy

This is the final installment in a four-part series on the legacy of Rothschild Francis in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The three earlier installments can be seen by following the links below.

The Silence of Social Consciousness

The historical records indicate an ominous silence of the people when Rothschild Francis was being persecuted and prosecuted. There is a sense that his supporters dispersed and fled into hiding, much like the disciples did when Jesus was arrested.

Today, despite the designation of Oct. 5 as Rothschild Francis Day, there is still no public recognition of his vision of democracy for the Virgin Islands.

In lieu of educational activities to develop knowledge of government operations, there is a new brand of ominous silence regarding his work for democracy; liberation, justice, equality and political representation. This time the silence may suggest that the people are afraid to arouse his political ideals.

Francis, perhaps prophetically, publicly addressed the issue of the silent acquiescence of the people in his statement when he said, “How much longer, I ask you, will they keep their heels on the necks of the people? Are we going to lay down and play dead?”

His analogy about acquiescent silence in this statement has biblical significance. The symbolism of the heel on the neck is in chapter 10 of the book of Joshua. In chapter 1 Joshua, the new leader of Israel, was told to cross the Jordan into the land they will be given, and that the Lord will be with him.

Joshua was told “just be determined, be confident ... obey the whole law ... do not be afraid or discouraged ...”

In their second battle after crossing the Jordan, they fought a combined force of five kings who, facing defeat, hid in a cave. When Joshua retrieved the kings, he called all the men of Israel to him and ordered the officers present to put their feet on the kings' necks. After they did so, Joshua said to them: “Don't be afraid or discouraged. Be determined and confident because this is what the Lord is going to do to all your enemies.”

In the ancient Near East, placing the foot on the neck was symbolic of the victor's dominance of his captives. According to Scriptures, other kingdoms were allowed to defeat and enslave Israel because the Israelites lost their relationship with God by adopting foreign, vain lifestyles.

The feet on the necks of those powerful kings were also symbolic of the victory through

redemption with a superior power, their God. The five kings were terminated along with their kingdoms, and Joshua's Israelites continued to fight and acquired their homeland.

The People's Choice

Both Rothschild Francis and Moses had to contend with reports that caused their people to be afraid and discouraged. Consequently their people did not fight and did not acquire their homeland. After assessing the promised land for Moses, 10 of the 12 explorers spread a false report that the land doesn't even produce enough to feed the people who live there, and that "the people there are more powerful than we are."

Contrarily, two explorers, Caleb and Joshua, reported that "the land we explored is an excellent land. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will take us there and give us that rich and fertile land. Do not rebel against the Lord and don't be afraid of the people who live there. We will conquer them easily; the Lord is with us and has defeated the gods who protected them; so don't be afraid."

Like the Israelites, the Virgin Islanders were faced with choosing whose report to believe. They heard Rothschild's report for acquiring democracy as opposed to the governor's report for accepting colonial subjugation as a way of life.

The governor's report criticized Francis and other community leaders. Francis raised the Governor's report above his head and said:

"Who are the real malcontents, who are the race mongers, who are the ones that are trampling the rights of the people?"

Both Moses and Francis were called to be leaders as an answer to the complaints of the people. Similarly, the Israelites and Virgin Islanders complained about their circumstances but were afraid and undetermined when help became available.

The Israelites complained that: "It would have been better to die in Egypt or even here in the wilderness! Why is the Lord taking us into that land? We will be killed in battle and our wives and children will be captured ..." Numbers 14.

As a result of that complaining, the whole community threatened to stone Moses' leadership team to death, but saw the dazzling light of the Lord's presence above the tent. Then the Lord spoke to Moses: "How much longer are these wicked people going to complain against me? I have heard enough of these complaints! Now give them this answer ... I promised to let you live there, but not one of you will, except Caleb and Joshua. You said that your children would be captured, but I will bring them into the land that you rejected, and it will be their home. Your children will wander in the wilderness for 40 years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last one of you dies. You will suffer the consequences of your sin for 40 years, one year for each of the 40 days you spent exploring the land..."

"How much longer will these people reject me? How much longer will they refuse to trust in me, even though I have performed so many miracles among them?..." Numbers 14:11

Rothschild Francis made a similar statement in response to lack of faith displayed by the people:

"How much longer, I ask you, will they keep their heels on the necks of the people? Are we going to lay down and play dead?"

- Rothschild Francis

There will be many possible interpretations of Rothschild Francis' quoted statements. What is certain is that this statement refers to an act of domination of one group by another. "They" refers to the ruling class, "the people," the people of the Virgin Islands, and "we" is inclusive of the residents responsible for responding to the pillaging assaults on the people of the Virgin Islands.

"Are we going to ... play dead" is a rhetorical question that points out what the response to the domination has been. The entire quote asks, how much longer will we play dead? This contends that playing dead has not stopped the attacks. To the contrary, playing dead enabled the assailant to attack, and encouraged the attacks to continue. Further, this quotation, which uses battle terminology such as heels on the necks, and playing dead, made it clear that there was a battle for control, power and authority over the Virgin Islands. The sense of urgency in the prose conveys that choosing not to fight would have dire consequences for the people. This speech was meant to depict the circumstances, and motivate people to take a stand to defend themselves, their families and future generations of Virgin Islanders.

Regarding the show of force, the phrase "how much longer will they keep ..." implies that "they," the ruling class, used their power to keep their heels on the necks of the people. Directing this question "how much longer?" to the people suggests that the people possessed enough power to remove the heels of domination from their necks.

Despite having the power to acquire their freedom, the people's choice was to play dead. This response left the power and control in the hands of the ruling class, and the people under their feet at their mercy.

According to the biblical perspective from which Francis likely drew his inspiration, his rhetoric could have been contemplating: 1) How long will the Virgin Islands people be subjugated? 2) Would this subjugation be until death or until redemption to the sovereignty of God? These were issues Francis would have contemplated from the case of the Israelites. The Israelites transformation from condemnation and fear to victory and freedom took 40 years.

Moreover, his statement gives notice that the people were responsible for acting to defend their own freedom and dignity. This Rothschild Francis quote confirms that the people were informed about the circumstances regarding the fight for control and domination of the islands and its people. The people's lack of determination was more powerful than Francis' inspiration for self-determination.

One of his most compelling quotes is taken from what he said on the floor of the Colonial Council. "I have done my part." Considering the political challenges that remained, this means that others needed to do theirs.

In the execution of his initiatives, Francis, a consummate reader, displayed a command of the philosophy in the books of Numbers and Joshua. Considering his interaction with the community, it is likely that he knew the people did not have the requisite faith to fight for their political inheritance of the land they purchased with their blood, sweat, and tears. So, after doing all that he could, he left inconspicuously. His exodus to the U.S. amounted to a death in leadership for the Virgin Islands. In comparison to Moses' Israelites, both groups believed the wrong report, became fearful, and through their complaining and faithlessness were condemned to live without a homeland.

After wandering 40 years, the redeemed Joshua Israelites claimed their land. Perhaps Virgin Islanders need redemption. Francis died in New York in 1963 at the beginning of the civil rights movement there.

Approximately 40 years after Rothschild Francis left the Virgin Islands, 1968, activists in the U.S. overcame their civil rights challenges. The civil rights movement was a faith-based fight for equal rights. Through a fervent fight with demonstrations, sit-ins, and other protest activities, the faithful secured equality and justice for African Americans who had endured the vestiges of slavery there.

The people of the Virgin Islands looked on, disconnected, without leadership, singing "We Shall Overcome" on special occasions, in church or for Black History Month, giving moral support to the cause. There was no follower of Francis to lead the people in the fight for equal rights and justice.

The Virgin Islands civil rights movement had passed. Then another 40-year period passed. In light of the scriptures, 2008 would mark four generations of Virgin Islanders wandering for the unfaithfulness of their parents, and their lack of redemption.

Knowledge is power

The references to Bible events in Rothschild Francis speeches indicate he 1) read and believed the Bible, 2) valued the wisdom it shared, and 3) used its principles to execute his initiatives. His broad scope of principles supported by faith, knowledge of human nature, and knowledge of government operations were factors in his success. As he responded to the needs of the community, he was mindful that the internal dynamics would cloud the judgment of those affected.

So from a sociological perspective, his assessment that support from outside the territory would be necessary to implement his initiatives is a testament to the thoughtfulness and power of reason he acquired through self-education.

Considering the status of African Americans in the 1920s, approximately 40 years before the civil rights movement in the United States, his national fight to establish democracy for the natives was monumental. The planning, organizing and lobbying congressional support as well as acquiring the opportunity to testify before Congress was groundbreaking in regards to promoting civil rights of African Americans. But his goal was altruistic. It was to help make life better for working class people who had been struggling for equality and recognition since the abolition of slavery in the Virgin Islands. According to the social, economic and political advantages, the ruling class had still not relinquished its power over the working class in the 1920s. The knowledge Francis acquired through reading was a great equalizer in his contests with the ruling class.

Evidently, his power came from faith and knowledge as opposed to wealth or the political connection that controlled the government.

Some of the powers employed by the ruling class to maintain autocratic control have been wealth, political connection, education, knowledge, unity, planning, and will. In the absence of a democracy, the working class was subjugated through a deficiency in those components of power.

In a democracy, the power is dispersed among the people, districts, and interest groups. The needs of the people and their interests are represented in the system of constituency. The goal Rothschild Francis pursued was to empower the people through democracy.

The Rothschild Francis initiatives provided the first steps to democracy, and a model of government that would empower the people by providing representative government. In sum, his work laid a path out of colonialism and totalitarianism. Francis employed some of the ruling-class elements of power to achieve success in that colonial environment. He acquired pertinent knowledge, planned, and had the will to succeed. He went as far as to become a member of the colonial council. However, he did not adopt the prevalent colonial ideology.

With his morality, he overcame the colonial powers of his day. His faith overcame the fear that caused others to just complain, and his excellent communication skills were likely a primary factor that enabled him to acquire assistance and cooperation from abroad.

Rothschild Francis introduced a compelling ideology that was later suppressed. The suppression of his ideology is a factor in the current colonial status that negatively impacts the people and government operations in the territory.

According to the ideals Francis promoted, the Virgin Islands is still in need of a democracy. Rothschild Francis, a cobbler and musician, became a journalist, labor and civil rights leader who fought for citizenship, freedom of the press, and government reform.

What Happens Next?

Today, the fight is in the hands of the people to acquire political reform that would establish a democracy. Rothschild Francis laid out a model for acquiring reform that should work just as well today.

First, the proponents should become informed, second, they must organize and plan a course of action, third, take action without fear, and last, have faith throughout the process. These steps can be identified in the Joshua movement and the Rothschild Francis movement, as well as in the civil rights movements in the United States. Following these guidelines, the Virgin Islanders could achieve participation in a democracy before 2017.

For the 50th anniversary of the passing of Rothschild Francis it is fitting to recognize Leon A. Mawson, the author of "Persecuted and Prosecuted," for his documentation of the Rothschild Francis story. As a contemporary, his document provides various aspects of the events in the life of Rothschild Francis. Gratitude is also extended to Geraldo Girty, also a researcher and writer who carried a torch for the recognition of the Rothschild Francis legacy.

For the people, the only meaningful recognition of Rothschild Francis would be to fulfill their part in the work started in his era of activity. Today every individual in the Virgin Islands can participate in the movement out of colonialism and into democracy. The first step could be to communicate for outside assistance by sending an email to the Department of Interior about acquiring government reform for democracy in the Virgin Islands. Second, team up with others to organize, support, and implement strategies for reform.

Throughout the process, be fervent and faithful; be determined and confident, not afraid.

It is not known if Rothschild was ordained by a denomination as were other civil rights leaders, but his actions, speeches, fearlessness and victory suggests that he was at least highly favored. He acted boldly with the premise that "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." In this analysis, it is recognized that God provides empowered leaders, servants, and authors according to His will. God also provided these significant findings of Rothschild Francis' relationship with his holy word.

So, all honor, glory and praise go to God for His hand in this product, and for the redemption

of the Virgin Islands.

This anniversary may be a Pentecostal year for the exodus of Virgin Islanders. It could be the appointed time for the people to unite for the cause of freedom, to tear down the strongholds of the colonial systems in the local government, and finally acquire democracy; equality, justice, and representation. In honor of Rothschild Francis, 2017 should not be 100 years of political peonage for indigenous Virgin Islanders. In this new millennium, Virgin Islanders have access to sufficient information about the issues to act responsibly and responsively to complete the unselfish work started by Francis in the early 1920s.

So, in honor of Oct. 5, 2013, Virgin Islanders can exercise their power of reason freely to make the 50th anniversary of a passed hero a new era marked by the acquisition of democracy in a newfound homeland.

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