Free But Not Free Essay, Research Paper

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After United States’ President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and even after the American Civil War was fought and won by the abolitionist North, the black people of this country continued to be dealt with as if they were sub-human. Instead of disappearing with emancipation, the problems the black people of this country faced merely changed as they gained freedom.

Studying two excerpts from the writings of W.E.B. Dubois and Frederick Douglass, gives us historical evidence this occurrence. Douglass is writing before slavery was abolished in the United States, while Dubois is writing quite a bit later, around the turn of the century.

Douglass points out that there is no freedom for the black man, and thus the 4th of July is a slap in the face more than a holiday for him. Douglass understandably speaks very harshly of the American people, both as religious Christians (as the majority were), and as boasters of liberty and equality. Your denunciation of tyrants your sermons and thanksgivings, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy (Douglass, The Meaning of the 4th of July for the Negro, in 80 Readings, ed. Munger, 240)

The truth of the matter is that the American people, and slave-owners in particular had a problem. Their Puritanical religious beliefs, in conjunction with the idea that all men are created equal, caused a difficulty with the ownership of human beings as chattel property. The pagan people of the earth never saw any difficulty in buying and selling people as slaves, and to a certain extent, neither did the Jews, despite their strict laws governing the treatment of slaves. Islam, as well, had no qualms. It was because of this particular outlook that in almost every earlier society once a slave had gone free he would become a normal citizen. He was human like the rest of the populace, free to live his life as he pleased, despite his former status. This was as true under both Greek and Roman rule, for example, as it had been under Egyptian. Even the instances of Spanish slavery in the New World were in this vein, that despite having enslaved the native populations, the Spaniards didn t dehumanize them, rapidly leading to a merging of cultures. It was the Protestant English, and the successive American colonists, inheritors of the Puritan values, who, in order to assuage their collective guilt, had to invent this type of racism, placing the Africans in a sub-human race. They no longer owned other human beings that would be immoral! They merely owned a member of a slave race.

This would be the problem confronted by Dubois in his essay, The Souls of White People. Even after slavery was abolished, partially due to the unselfish work of people like Douglass, the problem of racial prejudice remained. After hundreds of years, an ingrained prejudice is very difficult to erase.

While Dubois seems a little off in his recollection of modern history in his statement that, The discovery of personal whiteness is a very modern thing – a nineteenth and twentieth-century matter , as it was a 17th-century matter as well, he still seems to agree with the idea that this invented prejudice is relatively recent. Dubois also speaks of the hypocrisy of the American Christian, even after the turn of the century. We profess a religion of high ethical advancement and not simply justice to our fellows, but personal sacrifice of our good for theirs. It is a high aim so long as we strive bravely toward it. Do we, as a people? On the contrary, we have injected into our creed a gospel of human hate and prejudice (Dubois, The Souls of White People, in 80 Readings, ed. Munger, 193) Dubois claims that what has happened instead is that good Christians have merely pretended that their religion and its cherished values are only referring to the treatment of white people.

To this day, the bigotry that was started hundreds of years ago is still a characteristic part of American society. Though the reason for the bigotry has long disappeared, via the abolition of slavery, its traces are still easily found wherever one looks. Bigotry is not only restricted to the South, but is an issue for the entire country. In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. went to Chicago and was physically threatened for his stance on the equality of the races. Even today, there is great tension between whites and blacks over racial issues. As recently as October 23, 1999, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) marched through Manhattan in a show of white supremacy. Only by individual conscious recognition of the equality of all people, will we be able to place racial prejudice collectively behind us.