

In the Service of God and Humanity: Conscience, Reason, and the Mind of Martin R. Delany

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Review

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Adeleke, Tunde. *In the Service of God and Humanity: Conscience, Reason, and the Mind of Martin R. Delany.* University of South Carolina Press, 2021. E-BOOK. Open Access ISBN 9781643361857 pp. 191.

When asked “Who is Martin Delany?”, scholars today often answer that he is “*known* as a founding figure of Black nationalism.” Delany is known as such because of his advocacy for emigration in the 1850s. In the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Delany judged that freedom and equality were impossible for Black Americans to attain in the United States. He urged Black Americans instead to forge or join a polity elsewhere— at times, his envisioned destination was Africa, at times South America. But while Delany is popularly known for his calls for emigration, he held this stance for less than half of his career as an antislavery activist. Throughout the 1830s and ‘40s, Delany was strongly committed to projects of Black self-elevation within the US. At the outset of the Civil War, he threw himself into the military struggle, becoming the first Black combat major in the Union Army. After the Civil War, Delany embedded himself in the Reconstruction politics of South Carolina as a commissioner in the Freedmen’s Bureau, candidate for Lieutenant Governor, and eventually a supporter of a Democratic Party controlled by former slaveholders (!). For Delany, integration and separation were both models of emancipation for Black Americans worthy of pursuit. Thus, while Delany is popularly known as a theorist of Black nationalism, this is not a commitment that unifies his political thought. Tunde Adeleke’s first book on Delany, *Without Regard to Race: The Other Martin Robinson Delany* (2004), demonstrates this point compellingly.

Adeleke’s recent monograph on Delany, *In the Service of God and Humanity: Conscience, Reason, and the Mind of Martin Delany*, picks up with the natural next question: If Black nationalism is not the consistent animating force driving Delany’s antislavery politics, is there a principle around which his ante-and-postbellum politics are organized? In other words, could Delany have argued plausibly that there was a fundamental consistency to his dynamic

political career? (We need not assume— and I do not think that Adeleke does— that such consistency is necessary, or even desirable. But it would be significant if there were *in fact* such consistency in Delany's political thought.)

In the Service of Humanity's main contention is that moral suasion is the organizing principle of Delany's political thought across his activist career. Moral suasion, as Adeleke characterizes it, was a strategy widely employed by Black abolitionists in the 1830s and '40s that challenged racist beliefs and practices through projects that aimed to 'elevate the race.' In the 1840s, influenced especially by fellow Pittsburgh abolitionists Reverend Lewis Woodson and William Whipper, Delany urged nominally free Black Americans to elevate themselves through practical education and material gains. He, like other moral suasionists in the period, believed that these efforts at self-elevation "would disprove the proslavery contention that Blacks were inherently inferior, lazy, unintelligent, and morally decadent" (21). With these racist beliefs disproven, moral suasionists thought, white Americans would come over time to disavow the oppression of nominally free and enslaved Blacks, and confer upon them equal rights of citizenship. Through moral suasion, conscience would reveal the moral imperative of integration, and reason would demonstrate the mutual interest of whites and Blacks in achieving it.

Moral suasion, Adeleke argues, delimited the boundaries of an integrationist antislavery politics for Delany. When, by the early 1850s, it had become clear that the project of moral suasion had failed, prompting violent backlash rather than respect from whites, Delany turned to a separatist approach, advocating emigration. When, in the wake of the Civil War, Delany came to believe again that the conscience and reason of whites could be seized upon, he turned back to advocating integration— even at the cost, politically, of accommodating the demands of the former slaveholders and, personally, of being ostracized by his abolitionist fellows. In essence, Adeleke argues that Delany's integrationist and separatist phases were driven by his evolving judgment about the viability of moral suasion as an emancipatory strategy for Black people in the US. Adeleke demonstrates this by showing how moral suasion informed Delany's views on the role of religion, violence, education, and electoral politics in Black Americans' pursuit of liberation.

In chapter one, Adeleke observes that Delany advanced arguments grounded in Christian theology to legitimize both his efforts at integration and his calls for emigration. These contrasting religious justifications were not, Adeleke contends, merely opportunistic. Delany

continually rejected a providential determinism that predicated Black liberation on direct divine intervention and demeaned material well-being, putting him in opposition to a number of Black church leaders. In both his integrationist and separatist phases, Delany advanced an idea of Christianity that linked liberation to material security in this world and put the power to achieve it in the hands of Black Americans themselves— both of which were key commitments of moral suasion.

In spite of his militant rhetoric, Adeleke argues in chapter two that Delany was committed to nonviolence throughout his career, with the exception of the Civil War. One of the most provocative and persuasive elements of Adeleke's argument in this chapter is that Delany's novel *Blake; Or the Huts of America*, was not a call for hemispheric revolution, but rather an illustration of the limits of collective violent resistance. Delany's objection to violent resistance was not based in a commitment to pacifism, but in the moral suasionist emphasis on self-preservation as the basis of liberation; he believed that violence tended to harm, rather than help, the oppressed. (Notably, Delany understood the success of collective violent resistance by Black people to depend on "providential deterministic agency" (62). It is worth asking why collective violent resistance is the only mode of political agency whose efficacy Delany renders dependent on God's intervention.)

Chapter three argues that Delany's emphasis on practical education— especially English, arithmetic, geography, and political economy— as the basis for Black self-elevation derives from his commitment to moral suasion. Education was valuable, Delany claimed, insofar as it improved the material conditions that were integral to the moral suasionist project— whether the target of this persuasion was white Americans or the 'ruling element' of where Delany sought for Black Americans to immigrate.

Finally, in chapter four, Adeleke turns to the formal political sphere. One concrete aim of Delany's moral suasion project in the 1840s was to secure full citizenship rights for nominally free Black Americans. Material efforts at self-elevation were at the same time, Delany contended, contributions to the nation, which whites would reciprocate by extending citizenship rights. By the early 1850s, Delany recognized that no amount of contributions by Black Americans would persuade white Americans to extend these rights— a point which Delany illustrates at length in his 1852 emigrationist pamphlet, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*. Delany's postbellum turn back to

integration was driven largely by his renewed belief that these rights can be extracted from the polity, as reflected in the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Delany's renewed faith transformed him from one of the staunchest opponents of political abolitionism into a dedicated proponent of accommodation, who sought compromise with white conservatives in South Carolina in the hopes of cementing Black Americans' political gains. The results of the state's violent 1876 gubernatorial election, which saw the eventual victory of the revanchist Wade Hampton III, prompted Delany to foreswear state politics and return to his emigrationist project until his death in 1885. Three times in his political life (early 1850s, post-Civil War, 1877), Delany's pivots between integrationist and separatist strategies for Black liberation were prompted by his evolving judgments on the efficacy of moral suasion.

The crucial question that remains in the wake of Adeleke's systematic analysis is *why* the shape of Delany's emancipatory politics turned on the efficacy of moral suasion. Adeleke provides a plausible genealogical explanation: Delany's early political mentors, Woodson and Whipper, were thoroughly committed to moral suasion as the strategy for the antislavery movement. But this by itself does not explain why moral suasion gripped his political imagination, even when confronted with its manifest failure by the early 1850s. Relinquishing moral suasion did not necessarily require conceding the aim of integration, as illustrated by Frederick Douglass's pursuit of alternative strategies for integration throughout the 1850s. There is an irony that Adeleke's thoroughly pragmatic Delany is so dogmatically committed to a picture of political life in which the options are accommodation and compromise on the one hand, or withdrawal on the other. It is a success of Adeleke's project that this puzzle is so clearly crystalized for the reader; the puzzle, I believe, is one that philosophically-oriented scholars of Delany's political thought ought to take up.

Philip Yaure is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Virginia Tech. His work on Delany, "Deliberation and Emancipation: Some Critical Remarks," appears in Ethics; he is currently at work on a book project on republican citizenship in the political thought of Frederick Douglass.