CHAPTER 2

Race, Religion, and the Pursuit of Happiness

James H. Evans Jr.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The Declaration of Independence guarantees that all persons under its purview are entitled to the pursuit of happiness. It does not promise that this happiness will necessarily be achieved, but that to pursue it is an inalienable right. This promise is funded by the “social contract” that exists among free and equal persons. This contract does not define happiness per se, but its application to collective life in the United States suggests that there are three major trajectories to happiness. Ironically, these same trajectories had to be framed in a manner that excluded people of African and Native American descent as participants in the national conversation, while demanding that they submit to the authority of that contract. Life and liberty are construed as foundational to the pursuit of happiness for free and equal persons.

For those who are thought to be neither free nor equal, the meaning of life and liberty has been shaped by the notions of race and religion. For African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans the meaning of life is contextually framed by the dynamics of race. Whether one
seeks to embrace race and racialized ethnicity as a symbol of pride or to reject them as categories that limit the expression of one’s humanity, race and racialized ethnicities are continually a force to be reckoned with. Specifically for African Americans, to speak about life on an individual or collective level means to engage, at some level, racial discourse. Likewise, the notion of liberty for African Americans is framed with the context of religious discourse. Part of the reason for this is that the idea of a separation between the religious and the sociopolitical dimensions of life are foreign to the African mindset. Another and perhaps more important reason for this connection is that liberty is seen as not only as the political privilege of the powerful, but also as a divine gift and inheritance. African American thinkers from Frederick Douglass to Henry Highland Garnet have understood liberty in theological and political terms. Frederick Douglass, a great abolitionist orator in the nineteenth century, spoke of this American notion of liberty as a divine right granted to all people by their creator. Henry Highland Garnet was a nineteenth-century African American writer who spoke of this American notion of liberty in connection with an understanding of freedom as the essence of what it means to be human. The issue here is not the separation of church and state, but the spiritual basis for apprehending material reality. Even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s brilliant oratory did not only argue for the liberty of Black folk on the basis of the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence, but framed the argument in terms of a deeper spiritual reality, namely, the equality of all people in the eyes of God. One way to get at the connection between one’s understanding of life and its meaning and one’s understanding of liberty and its meaning, is to see them against the backdrop of race and religion. Through these lenses, the notion of the pursuit of happiness should also be refracted. The central question is “How is happiness pursued (and defined) in the context of exclusion and denigration of one’s personhood?” There are three arguments for the exclusion of Black people from the social contract that protects the pursuit of happiness (Allen and Pope 2006). The first suggests that the social contract was an arrangement that had no place for African Americans. The second suggests that the social contract was for the benefit and protection of the powerful. Since African Americans had no political power, they were excluded from the benefits of such a contract. The third argument suggests that the social contract reflected a divine mandate of sorts. This meant that the exclusion of African Americans from this contract was a matter of divine providence. I want to suggest that an examination of these arguments can shed some light on the problems and possibilities