

64 Summer August

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"White Church - Beauty for Ashes"

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The response of the white moderates over acceptance of school desegregation (tokenism) and the public accommodations law was led by people with very practical interests, chiefly the businessmen. Most of the white women working to keep the schools open did actually favor some degree of desegregation - but they also had the practical concern of preserving all public schools in a state that was considering abolishing all public education. The deeper concerns about the civil rights crisis of morality or democracy still had few advocates. The white church which should have been the major source of moral concern continued in the Freedom Summer its long time failure to do more than assuage the tiny tinge of guilt and comfort the afflictions of its members in the face of invasion, criticism and change.

The white Christian church had tried to avoid the civil rights problems for years. This eventually led to the desperate attempts of white Mississippi to prevent any communication or even confrontation at the closed doors of white only churches by arresting Blacks. After this there was little reason to expect any meaningful response from the white churches - or the white moderates to the racial crisis.

By the end of the Freedom Summer there had been a slight shift in the position of most white middle class churchmen. The original response was one of disbelief and denial: this was replaced by disidentification. At no point was there any assumption of guilt, much less responsibility - or guidance to the white population facing change.

The first reports (from people like myself, not the press) about the rise of the klan, murder, and, especially, church burnings was met by denial. This could not be true about their state. Such violence was beyond their belief. This attitude was necessary to continue the attitude of no responsibility. If there was no crisis, then nothing was demanded of the church or the moderates. The moderates could remain moderate. After it was no longer possible to deny the violence a shift was made, almost instantly, to admit that terrible violence (but not as bad as the northern press and the agitators said) was, indeed, happening in Mississippi. BUT, no one could say, could prove, that white Mississippians were guilty of this violence. It might be Communists. It might be the civil rights workers. Finally there was an admission that some white Mississippians just might be guilty of some small degree of violence. This the religious people condemned as damaging to the cause of preserving the traditional good race relations (i.e. white supremacy and docile happy Blacks) in Mississippi. Then there was the process of disidentification with those who were violent, pushing them so far outside the circle (and class) of the religious moderates that there was still no need to accept any responsibility for their (the klan, the red necks, the poor whites, the hill billies, the white trash, etc.) violent acts. (Interestingly enough, at the same time there was still one form of identification with the violent men - the constant stress that violence is wrong but this particular violence is understandable. This led to placing the blame for violence on the victim, the Black people, the civil rights workers who so wrongly provoked the violent white man into

his wrong deeds.) The major theme of white moderates, especially churchmen, was that Mississippi (white) was being wrongly accused; that the great majority of responsible white people were "innocent" of all the terrible things said about the State.

I first discovered this process of disbelief and denial at work at the start of the summer when white moderates refused to believe the reports of murder and church burning in Neshoba County. I said to myself then that I had far more important things to do that summer and could spend no more time trying to move the white moderates and church leaders. But, a few weeks later, I tried again. The bombings had become more frequent. The federal government was acting with less responsibility than the white moderates of Mississippi - the people in Washington could not deny the reality of the violence in Mississippi. Many people in the Movement were discussing the reasonable response they could make - guns. The Black community had to defend itself. To prevent some church bombings Blacks in some places (such as Holmes, Leake, and Pike Counties - all different parts of the State) organized armed teams to guard their churches that were used as freedom schools and major Movement centers. Some places were so well prepared that a white attack would probably mean the death of some Klansmen. I feared that the whole white community, including the moderates, would use this as an excuse to join - or tolerate - any degree of future violence.

Several of us strongly committed to nonviolence talked about this situation. I decided on one more effort with white churchmen. I asked several men to join me (or go alone) to certain Black

churches which were likely targets. The white men were to spend the night in or at the threatened Black church. There would be no civil rights activity there on such a night. The white ministers were to notify the sheriff or local police that they opposed settling problems with violence (one of their favorite arguments) and so were interposing themselves between the guns of the Black men and the bombs of the Klan. In one community the Black men agreed to put away their guns - if I could get this help from the Mississippi white ministers. I was convinced that if "responsible" white church leaders did such a thing in just a few cases they might still have rallied enough white moderates to curb the church burnings and terrorism. Of course the idea sounded absurd. I am sure that word of the presence of such white men would have reached the Klan and no bombing would have taken place. Publicity would have spread and some significant reaction taken place in the white community. But such action was not moderate - and the men I spoke to refused. But they did not refuse before they had expressed their shock at the idea that Black men were now guarding churches with shotguns. One white man suggested that the role of the National Council of Churches in the Freedom Summer Project should be to convince the Negroes to put away their guns! These white ministers insisted that self-defense by Blacks would only cause more trouble. When I asked what the Blacks should do to defend their homes and churches the answer of two white moderate church leaders in Jackson was, in essence, that Black churches should disassociate themselves from the Civil Rights Movement, that

churches should stick to religion. (Most of the Black churches bombed in Mississippi were not involved with the Movement; they were just easy Black targets.) I pressed the point that even if the white ministers did not approve of a Black church holding voter registration classes on week nights, surely they did not approve of bombing the church. And they, of course, replied that all violence was wrong. What then, I pressed, could be done for churches that had received threats - or attempted bombings already? The answer of the "responsible" white churchmen on this point was simple - ask for help from the local white sheriff. How moderate!

I did not return to white moderate churchmen for help the rest of the summer. Those last visits had revealed far more hostility to the concept of Black men using guns in self defense than to all the blatant violence of the Ku Klux Klan.

In Mississippi - and in America - it is often easy and quite comforting to equate moderation with responsibility. Sometimes they are moderates.

The sign of recognition of the wave of terrorism in the State came the first week of August. The newspaper with the largest circulation in the State was the publication of the white Southern Baptist churches of Mississippi. This church also had the largest membership of any religious organization in the State and was the most typical Mississippi denomination. Here was the mass of the white middle class and lower middle class. This church paper finally commented on the church burnings in an editorial called, "Smoke Over Mississippi."⁶⁵

The editorial said that arson must be involved in some of the now admitted church burnings in the State. The writer was never specific enough on this point to disturb the sentiments of readers that the arsonists were civil rights workers. But the overall implication stated that any and all violence was wrong - and thus gently hinted that the source of violence might, indeed, be anyone. Many readers did understand that this meant white Klansmen; many readers were ashamed. But the main thrust of the article was to comfort these people.

The strongest statement about violence read:

Christians of both races in Mississippi want these problems of racial conflict solved peaceably and justly. They know that lawless acts of any nature - murder, rioting, bombing, arson, threats, mob action, or any other - will not solve Mississippi's problems.⁶⁶

Nothing at all was said about the nature of these problems, of how these problems might be solved, or that any questioning of segregation itself was in order. (The Klansmen who read such editorials as this or heard similar plus statements from a few ministers must have known that on the key issue of segregation they and the religious leaders agreed; they just differed on how segregation was to be preserved. The Klansmen must have felt some disgust at the moderation of the churchmen. The churchmen were also offering no better way than violence to the Klansmen who would have welcomed guidance from their religious leaders.)

Most of this important editorial centered on upholding the myths of the white Christians about themselves and about Mississippi.

The only specific group condemned in any way was the Civil Rights Movement. Christians of both races ...

see the futility of the efforts of outside groups
.... in securing solutions in the conflict....⁶⁷

The general theme was that outsiders had caused the present conflict and disrupted the happy race relations of the State:

There is a vast reservoir of good will, understanding and mutual respect among the Christians of both races in Mississippi. Both groups have labored together (n.b., that is "separately but equally." EK) in Christian witness in the State. White conventions, churches and individual Christians have, throughout the years, given encouragement and assistance to the Negro churches and conventions, and continue to do so. It is our feeling that this Christian relationship has been the main cause for continued general peace and harmony in the relationships of the two racial groups in Mississippi, despite the violent and divisive action of a few.... White christian people of the State are revealing their attitude by starting funds in some areas to help rebuild these (burned) church buildings. This should be a general practice and we think it will be. White Christians always have assisted Negroes in building their church buildings in this State.⁶⁸

There was frequent reference to solving the problems of the State. The vast majority of this white readership would

understand that phrase to mean a return to segregation, a return to traditional general peace and harmony. Most white Christians would say segregation was the thing that made possible peace and harmony. Mississippi needed no outside help or advice in creating or restoring a solution to the racial problem. White Mississippians had nothing to feel much guilt or shame about:

There are enough Christians in Mississippi to bring solutions to the state's crisis. The vast majority of them are acting calmly and with restraint in the midst of all present tension. They are law-abiding people, as is clearly shown by the fact that the State has the lowest per capita crime rate in the nation, according to the FBI* and they are determined that lawlessness and violence shall not destroy the State, nor the good relationships which exist among the majority of its people.⁶⁹

This editorial must have been very carefully written. It must reflect the best thinking of the editor and, probably, many other leaders of the most powerful white church in the State. The same issue of this paper carried a letter from a white woman in North Mississippi which shows the thinking of concerned local church people. The letter reflects the traditional good will of the white moderates towards their Negroes as well as another form of denial - thinking that local Mississippi Negroes do not support the Civil Rights Movement. She mentions the news that nine** Negro

* Underlining mine, for emphasis, EK, a point to brag about often cited by whites.

**Obviously she had not heard of all the bombings - just nine.

churches have been burned (with no mention of why or who did the burning) and suggests that white Christians raise money to help rebuild them. She gives these reasons for such action:

I think our Lord would be pleased and honored by this act.

The fact that so many Negroes in Mississippi have remained calm and loyal to their communities and white friends deserves recognition and some evidence of appreciation.

Our helping to rebuild their churches would be an inspiration, and encouragement, and insure a brighter future for Negroes of the entire State. I feel proud of the large majority of Mississippi Negroes who have stood their ground against the evil elements seeking to enflame them." We should show our admiration and appreciation. Let's rebuild every burned church.⁷⁰

The weakness and worse in the response of some religious people as those quoted is seen when contrasted with the strong statements made by two state newspapers - even earlier. (These papers stand in isolation from the normal Mississippi press. Their editorials thus show courage as well as good journalism - and morality.)

In Greenville the "Delta Democrat Times" wrote on "Arson In the House of God;"

*Underlining mine, for emphasis, EK.

... Aren't any of the "good" white people of Mississippi disturbed? Don't the ministers of God who pastor to white flocks see the disturbing possibility that if the barbarians attack one group of churches today, they may attack all churches tomorrow? The comfortable Christians of the Germany of the 1930's could remain silent as the Jews were brutalized, murdered and incarcerated, only suddenly to find to their shocked surprise that no religious opposition would be tolerated, Christian or Jewish.

.... there have been 13 Negro churches leveled... with no apparent moral nerve being touched in the white community.

Apparently most of our ministers have not felt compelled to speak as these houses of God were burned down, although their silence is perhaps only consistent with their usual approach to the trampling Christ's doctrines by Mississippi's haters. Let a church pledge be dropped or whiskey touched, and then hear the thunder roll from the pulpits. But let a place of God be desecrated by modern Huns, and we hear not even a mild admonition....⁷¹

Editor Haze Brannon Smith, of Lexington and Jackson, spoke, as usual, with more moral fervor and Biblical language than the vacillating Baptist preachers. She suggested there "must be a special place in hell for anyone who would bomb a church...

(including) those horrible heathens who are now burning Mississippi Negro churches."⁷² Then she called (again) on the white moderates:

White churches and ministers throughout the State

should literally be up in arms,* especially in the areas where these awful crimes have occurred. Yet we have not heard of one white person, minister or layman, denouncing them,

Where is the white Christian conscience in this so-called Bible belt?

These lawless and God-defying acts could not take place in a really moral society where people show respect and love not only to the God who made us, but to all of our fellow creatures whom He also made and loves.⁷³

The following week the bodies were found in Neshoba. This produced a stronger response from the editor of "The Baptist Record," condemning murder and calling for the protection of the criminals whoever they were, and the preservation of law and order by supporting local law enforcement officials in the crisis.* (That was meant as a strong statement; it was still inconceivable to a moderate editor that the claims Black people made about the nature of law enforcement might be true.) However, this strong stand was diluted by the traditional effort to deny personal responsibility for Neshoba:

Mississippi, however, is not guilty of these murders, any more than Dallas was guilty of the murder of President Kennedy, or all Chicagoans are guilty of the gang murders there.... These dastardly acts are the responsibility of the evil persons who perpetrate them. The State, or the cities involved,

*Underlining mine, for emphasis, EK.

become guilty only as they condone the acts, or do nothing about them.⁷⁴

Hazle Smith praised her fellow Baptist editor for this statement, quoted him, then added her own much stronger message to her readers, and, hopefully, to the white moderates. She tried to speak about the failure of the white churches but through a typo or a Freudian slip, in print it was the "failure of the hate churches."⁷⁵ In a long editorial she named names of segregationist groups in the State. She would not let her readers have any doubts about the source of the violence in the State. But her focus was still the moderates.

Failure of the churches and ministers to face up to this issue has resulted in a monumental silence on the part of leading Mississippi citizens, including the highest officials of our cities and state.

The resulting vacuum has made it possible for all kinds of extremists and hate groups to ply their dirty trade in Mississippi....

What we must realize is that our failure to speak out against these organizations and the evil they personify is what creates the climate of public opinion in which certain types of individuals feel perfectly free to commit whatever crime comes to mind, including murder, safe in

*Underlining mine, for emphasis, EK. The use of the word "dastardly" to describe assassinations and atrocities was so commonplace it became a kind of sick joke in the Mississippi Movement.

the assumption they won't be found and arrested by the law, or if arrested won't be punished by a white Mississippi jury.

....

We (church people) must stop our sinning through silence.... God help us to move before it is everlastingly too late.⁷⁶

One week later the office of this newspaper was bombed.

The one place at which the white churches might have given strong leadership to the white moderates was in the desegregation of their own worship services and institutions. It did not happen. When the public school desegregation finally occurred there was still almost total segregation in all church institutions in the state that might have set some example for the community. The Protestant churches maintained several private colleges in the State. Even after the desegregation of Ole Miss these schools remained closed. The Methodist college, Millsaps, did desegregate some events on campus such as plays and concerts (after great pressure from the Movement) peacefully. This was an important sign in Jackson that some desegregation could be achieved peacefully and would be accepted - despite the fear of moderates that any change always meant violence and possible chaos. Millsaps College announced that the school would desegregate - but only after the public schools of the State had already taken the step. The public reason given by Millsaps for desegregation was not that this was right in any moral, civic, or educational sense, but that the federal money was

needed. (Of course this was a moral act a majority of the faculty had long favored.) The major colleges of the Baptist and Presbyterian denominations announced they would not desegregate - not because integration was wrong, but, so they said, because they did not want the dirty federal money. All pointed to the compliance pledge of desegregation to forestall the withholding of federal funds as the major reason for their action. (One small Baptist school, William Carey College in Hattiesburg, did quietly sign the pledge - and begin accepting Black applications.)

The Roman Catholic Church had an even greater opportunity for witness. This denomination had the only significant private school system in the State - totally segregated. There were separate schools for Black Catholics just as there were separate Black churches. (To the credit of the Catholics, Blacks could attend worship services in white churches - but few dared. They could not attend white only Catholic schools.) The Bishops announced that in the fall of 1964, following the public schools, the first grade only (just as the tokenism in the public schools) of Catholic schools would be open to students of all races. The church took no positive steps to integrate; there was no pairing of Black and white schools, there certainly was no busing. The church accepted the same kind of "freedom of choice" as used to keep change to a minimum in the public schools. (In this action the Roman Catholics of Mississippi were only following the pattern set by the powerful Church in New Orleans where there was no desegregation of the parochial schools until after the public schools had been forced by the federal government to make the step.

The white Christians of Mississippi, Protestant or Roman Catholic, gave no significant leadership, no example, no help to the people of Mississippi - of whatever race. Following the 1964 Freedom Summer church leaders did begin to speak out - against violence and extremists on both sides, condemning Klansmen (but not the society) and the growing militancy of young Blacks in the Movement (but not the society).

The major effort of the white churchmen of Mississippi that came from the Freedom Summer was a campaign to rebuilt the bombed Negro churches - and (more importantly in result, in my opinion) to rebuild the image of white Mississippi and their own self respect. There was no need of white money from Mississippi to rebuild these churches. The funds could easily have been raised in the rest of America and the world - a fact well understood and resented in white Mississippi. The white Baptist minister, Dr. W.P. Davis, who led this campaign was a good man who meant well. He established an interfaith group called the Committee of Concern. The top leaders of the white denominations were represented - led by Father Bernard Law, Editor of the Roman Catholic Diocesan newspaper. They focused on the most obvious thing to them - rebuilding the churches. But this was hardly the most obvious need, especially for the white moderate and church leadership. While they were building a few churches the Klan was still riding. Many more churches were burned in the year or so of their activity. More Black homes were bombed. More Black people were killed. I am convinced that the work of these white churchmen in the Committee of Concern

did more harm than good. For this was not the legitimate place for their concern. White Mississippians had a very proper and traditional role in building - or rebuilding Negro churches. It was still paternalism. Worse, far worse, was the fact that this effort gave these white moderates a great sense of pride and pious relief that their critics could not say they were doing nothing about the racial crisis. This effort allowed them to avoid their real responsibility - stopping the bombing, facing the violence. This they had always refused to do - and still continued the pattern. Their help was not needed in rebuilding the bombed churches. Their help was needed in stopping the bombing.

In the literature put out for fundraising in Mississippi (and for favorable national publicity) this group said it was raising funds for Black churches - but pointedly was vague about the unknown causes for the church burnings. The motto of those moderates was "Beauty for Ashes," a fantastic Biblical bit taken from the famous passage of Isaiah 61:1-4, a different portion of which was used by Jesus to inaugurate his own ministry (which many would find hard to label as moderate), and a passage often quoted by the Black movement leader, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. The Committee of Concern quoted the following passage in their literature and at numerous dedication services for rebuilt churches over the next few years. They used the King James Version of the Old Testament:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; Because
the Lord has annointed me to preach good tidings unto
the meed; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of

the prison to them that are bound. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes,* the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations.⁷⁷

How anyone, in the context of the Mississippi of the Freedom Summer of 1964, could manage to seize on a phrase like "beauty for ashes," even as the bombs still exploded and the Black community was taking up arms and SNCC exploring the road that would lead to Black Power is amazing - perhaps. Overlooked were bits of the Biblical message that seemed (to me) to speak to the condition of Mississippi and the Movement. The opening message about good tidings unto the meek is also translated other places of "good news to the poor."⁷⁸ Of even more significance are passages such as: binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and opening the prison to the bound. The Movement shouted "Freedom Now," in an almost Biblical meaning that this was the acceptable year of the Lord. Should that fail the next cry would be for the day of vengeance.

*Underlining mine, for emphasis - E.K.

Far more than beauty for ashes the veterans of the Movement in groups like SNCC and CORE needed the garment of praise for the overpowering spirit of heaviness. The desolation of many generations might be seen by many as the racism of white America. The Freedom schools, the community centers, and so many other products of COFO were efforts by SNCC and others to build, to raise up, to repair. The Committee of Concern ended their Biblical quotation at this point - but the passage in Isaiah continues and a few verses later moves beyond beauty to justice:

For I the Lord love Justice,
I hate robbery and wrong.⁷⁹

But most American churchmen are not concerned with terrible things like this when they can do something helpful, comforting, and praiseworthy, something positive, something optimistic, like giving beauty for ashes. If the world is really like this one can have confidence; who then needs faith - or dreams? Beauty for ashes is the religion of Mississippi, the creed of America, the faith of the Western world - and perhaps, most of humankind.