

Ed King
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The Ministry
+ the church
+ the struggle
to come

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I, myself, never recognized Byron de la Beckwith at any of our meetings. I had never actually met him. But I had read some of his letters in the Jackson papers back in the 1950s, about the time I first met Medgar Evers. In the months following the Emmett Till lynching I first read of Medgar Evers, then the new field secretary of the NAACP, investigating the murder of the 14 year old Chicago black boy who wolf whistled at a white woman on a dare from the Mississippi cousins he was visiting. Such violence in the defense of white racism shocked me and most of my friends. At an interracial student meeting in where we had gathered to discuss race relations, Dr. Ernst Borinski, sociology teacher at Tougaloo College, introduced Medgar Evers to me. Medgar invited me to come to his office for more talk, which I did. Medgar never overwhelmed me with things too strong for my naive thoughts. We could start with our Christian faith and common interest in academic matters like sociology then talk about segregation.

Ernst Borinski did not have the contacts to introduce me to someone like Beckwith. "Delay" Beckwith was from my old world, the South I was struggling to understand. As well as writing about segregation Beckwith also wrote about the Christian faith. He worried about ministers being too liberal on the race question, a path I realized might include me as well as my close friends, Sam Tomlinson and Bert Ward, who planned to enter the priesthood of the Episcopal Church, his church. Fascinated with Beckwith's words I saved the newsclippings, almost as if someday I was bound to find Byron de la Beckwith again. And I was sure that Medgar Evers would have read the same letters and had some memory of them and the author with the romantic sounding name. (Myrlie Evers said that Medgar had filed the Beckwith newsclips.)

In the letter I most vividly remembered (and soon dug up from my old files) Beckwith wrote to the editor, addressing the people of Mississippi:

I have sworn to practice and maintain segregation in the Episcopal Church in Mississippi, and I am not alone. In a moment of weakness, we have lowered our guard and another mis-guided and ill-informed race mixer has reared his head in our midst. Somebody told him that he could improve on God's laws of segregation by substituting the doctrine of a classless society. His name is Rev. Duncan M. Gray, Jr.* and He (sic) is not alone!

In our Confirmation Services we vow "to renounce the devil and all his works." Let's

*Footnote: The Rev. Duncan Gray, Jr., the priest criticized by Beckwith, was the Episcopal minister in Oxford in 1962 at the time of the riots over the entrance of James Meredith, the first black student, at the University of Mississippi. Gray met the crowd in the Courthouse Square, underneath the Confederate Statue, and urged the students to cease resistance and not to join the violent mob or would be troops under General Walker. He later became the Bishop of the Diocese of Mississippi, the position held by his father at the time of this 1956 Beckwith letter. In 1962 I visited Gray in Oxford; he encouraged me to come to Tougaloo.

get the race mixers out of the Episcopal Church, for it is rapidly becoming the "Devil's Workshop" ... if the race mixers don't resign and leave.

I say, Throw them out bodily, if necessary.

These men, disguised in the robes of the clergy, deliberately and maliciously defy the laws of God and drag the sacred name of Jesus Christ through the mud in the attempt to crucify the white race on the black cross of the NAACP.

Parish by parish, we must demand that the Vestry of each church force the immediate resignation of each and every clergyman in Mississippi, who even mildly hints at the integration of our Church...

Each Priest found guilty of advocating integration must be immediately stripped of all robes and vestments of the priesthood and divested of all rights and privileges normally accorded to a minister in our State...

Good men and women of the white and Negro races, arise and cast out the evil ones in our

midst, and, thereby, preserve the white and Negro races, as such, in America.

Most sincerely yours,

BYRON DE LA BECKWITH 15

I certainly did recognize that name when heard in the awful context of being part of the conspiracy to kill my friend Medgar Evers. I told Jeannette there in the hospital why I remembered the name. I reminded her of something we had often talked about, that the truth in Mississippi is always so bizarre, so Gothic, that no fiction writer would ever be able to approach it. "Can you imagine," I asked, "any novelist daring to name a Southern murderer of a black leader, Byron de la Beckwith, and, on top of that, a good Bubba type nickname of Deelay? No writer would dare."

But it was not a medieval romance nor a Gothic horror story. Medgar Evers was dead. John Salter and I were almost dead, were removed from action and in the emergency room, while Federal agents took control of the Jackson Movement which had been led by Medgar Evers, excluding the militant young people and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, keeping Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference out of Mississippi, forcing a settlement ending the protest campaign, a settlement whose provisions Medgar had firmly denounced and resisted while he was alive. But Medgar Evers was silenced, dead. John Salter and Ed King, advisors and assistants working with Medgar Evers, were silenced, and left for dead. We survived; it hardly mattered. Medgar Evers, the leader, did not survive. That did matter. Even in the strained conversations in our hospital room John and I had two constant themes. Medgar Evers is dead but the Freedom

Movement would still overcome, or in John's words, "We're going to win." And the second theme: "Medgar Evers is dead. What now?"