

MISSISSIPPI: THE WHITE CHURCH AND SOCIAL CRISIS

1EKT 16.20

"God is on our side!." This ~~is~~ almost arrogant verse is part of ~~the~~ the battle hymn of the Movement. Each familiar verse contained a slogan that was an article of faith; combined the song became the Credo that both explained and sustained. But for the Movement the message could never be so simple and direct as, "I believe," but because any faith is a matter of grace rather than assent, and because sometimes we did believe and sometimes we just wanted to believe, we had to sing "I do believe." It was as if we could convince ourselves by the power of the song, of the power of our combined voices, as if we could preach faith until we had it.

The ~~Black~~ church was the obvious center of the Black Movement. In most cases the first ^{person} ~~leader~~ the people looked to for leadership was a Black minister. It was natural that the most influential leader, Dr. ^{Malcolm X} King, was a minister. Even within SNCC and the youth in the Movement, Bob Moses, the Mississippi Project Field Director, functioned more as priest and prophet than the roles he perhaps preferred, teacher and philosopher. The local church congregation and its usually one room building was the center for mass meetings and the first small ~~strategy~~ groups where change and protest and struggle were first discussed. The individuals active in the Movement related to each other as an almost ideal church congregation, a "beloved fellowship" without an actual church building.

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The most violent elements within the White South seemed to understand the power that the Church provided for the Movement. It was natural that Black churches which were Movement centers should be bombed. And it was also natural that churches which had never become involved should also be bombed. It was as if the Church itself was the target. In Mississippi, as in the rest of the South, most Black churches never held any kind of Civil Rights meeting. Most Black ministers preached the most traditional kind of religion-- personal salvation, good manners, middle class virtues, accept life as it is and improve yourself, hold on to what God has given you and take no risks, and, if things do not work out right, look over Jordan. Martin Luther King was not welcome in any major white pulpit in Mississippi; and he probably was not welcome in a majority of the Black churches as late as the summer of 1964 when he toured the state, preaching and politicking for the MFDP. In almost every small town in the state the SNCC workers had to wait and plead for many weeks before the first church was opened to them; often most of the local Black ministers tried to discourage their people from joining a voter registration campaign or some other Movement effort (often sincerely to protect their flock from the sure and fierce wrath of the white wolves.)

But even as the Movement had to fight some of the traditional-ist ministers, the place and power of the Church in the Black community was still respected. Young men with SNCC ~~used~~ preached to the people that they must become involved in the struggle, and used Biblical stories and proof-texts to support their argument. The songs at the first Movement meetings were always the old gospel songs and hymns, and these continued to be sung even after the new Freedom Songs were learned. (To me, personally, the old hymns gained new power when sung along with the Movement songs.)

In earlier periods of terror against the Black community in the South there were many cases where violence was directed against the entire Black community, where any Black man might serve as the victim of a lynch mob, because the particular thing that had aroused the mob had been more than a specific act by one Black man, but was understood as an intolerable violation of the whole system of segregation and taboos. Thus if the "guilty" man was not caught immediately, a substitute victim was quickly found. So in the sixties the Black church was recognized by all as the source and the symbol ~~of~~ of the power of the Movement. Thus any particular church, whether involved directly in the Movement or not, was an apt target for white violence.

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The white men who would bomb a Black church did so in the name of the same God proclaimed in those Black churches. The white men who carried bombs rode under the same sign of the Cross, sang the same hymns and gospel songs, heard the same scriptures, ~~and~~ referred to the same Constitution, and waved the same flag. Of course, there were very few white Christians who would bomb a Black church. And, there were very few of these others who would do anything to stop the bombers. To the white community, bombers and moderates, Mississippi was the center of the Southern Way of Life and the best of the American Way of Life. Atheistic Communism was trying to destroy both the American Constitution and the Christian Church. Foreign Communist forces were believed to be behind the civil rights Movement. The white South was being attacked first because the South was the most loyal and most Christian section of America. Once the Christian South was defeated (and once the purity of white blood was contaminated producing a degenerate species of Americans) it would be easy for the Communists to defeat all America and rule the world. The Christian religion would be destroyed by the Communists as well as Freedom and the American Way of Life. The white Southerner thus was able to combine patriotism, religion, and his way of life. ~~In its own way the white church~~

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In its own way the white church was ~~as~~ as much a symbol of the white community as the Black church was for the Black community.

Traditional-religion gave strength to the white resistance to social ~~racial~~ change. Segregation persisted in the white churches long

after even Missississippi had accepted token desegregation of schools, public accomodations, and politics. The White Church was the symbol of the same religions tradition that somehow produced the ~~few~~ ^{occasional} rebels, the many moderates, and the ~~few~~ klansmen. The Christian teachings of brotherhood and good will that might have been the major resource for a confused people in accepting the social changes, more often functioned as the foundation and source of strength to resist all change.

The Civil Rights Movement responded to the Southern White Church in a very ambiguous way. The first response was one of hope, to appeal to the common Christian tradition and God, almost pleading that Black and White Christians come together, pray together, admit the problems of the society, and begin to change them. This approach tried to reach the white man at his best-- or at least the place where he (could) offer the least resistance, the poorest defense of racism. The second approach of the Movement was a low key understanding that the hypocrisy of the white church had to be made manifest and that segregation had to be challenged everywhere. Thus the White Christian Church was seen by some as potential ally and potential enemy, neither wise nor safe to ig

Two Black leaders made statements showing the extremes of the ideas of the White Church as possible ally or enemy. The idealistic theme is seen in the beautiful "Letter From a Birmingham Jail", written by Martin Luther King during ~~April~~ Holy Week of 1963 to the leaders of the white churches of Alabama. In contrast to the high hopes, dreams, and appeals of Dr. King is the "eye for an eye" cry of Charles Evers of Mississippi in the spring of 1964 that Negroes should burn a white church in retaliation for every Negro church burned. In his struggle for leadership in Mississippi against SNCC and SCLC Charles Evers made many attacks on ~~the~~ "nonviolence" but in his suggestion of a sort of church burning deterrent he really went beyond the "eye for an eye" appeal and was touching on the idea that if white klansmen could strike at the Black church, at the symbolic and actual center of strength for the Black Movement, then Blacks should consider striking at the white church, the symbolic and actual center of the Southern Way of Life.

Most Tougaloo students and most SNCC students in Mississippi regarded the words of both Dr. King and Mr. Evers as just "preacher talk." They thought that King was too idealistic and optimistic about what response was possible from the white church. And they thought that Charles Evers did not

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have the courage or the intention to carry out this proposal any more than most of his other platform statements. In 1963 and 1964 the Movement workers preferred the ^{positive} direction of the words of Dr. King. In most of the Deep South states one short phase of the direct action campaigns involved an appeal and challenge of the segregated white churches. Negro students and some adults made attempts to worship in white-only churches in campaigns called "kneel-ins" or "pray-ins." Sometimes they were admitted; more often the church doors were barred and white "ushers" turned the Negroes away. In almost every case such an action provoked dissension and debate within the white congregation whether segregation could be carried this far. An unquestioned tradition was now challenged; and some whites began to have their first doubts about the compatibility of their faith and their way of life. Approaches to the closed doors of white churches usually came after the failure of attempts to get the white church leadership involved in significant biracial committees or to approve steps towards moderate change. The momentum of the Movement in a particular community was usually such that the "kneel-in" effort brought too little response and was too slow. For most Blacks, and for most Movement workers, interest in the white church and the moderates who worshipped there was secondary to goals of voter registration, education, and poverty. As white

violence increased it~~x~~ was obvious that appeals to the morality and religion of the white moderates was irrelevant. Appeals to the commercial interests of the white businessmen was the only kind of approach to moderates that was helpful in times of crisis. No one took much interest in Charles Evers' white church burning message or any direct antagonistic attack on the white churches. But mixed in with the Christian idealism and spirituality of the "kneel-ins" was a ^{small} portion of "non-violent" attack on the white church, a sort of idea that "well, if we can't worship the same God together inside the same church building, then we will still knock on your door and so irritate you that you cannot worship your white God in peace, that you cannot escape thinking about the problems of segregation even on Sunday morning, that we are just letting you know that every single aspect of your Southern Way of Life is under attack."

The white churches embodied the best that was possible in the tradition of the white South. The failure, the irrelevance of the white church in the face of the crisis in racial matters, is the clearest example of the collapse of the moderates. The power of racism and the fear that accompanied the rise of the klan and/or the development of fascist tactics to resist the Movement meant the "Christian" moderates were no longer free to do good, even to be decent. The law, the press, the schools, all