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Charles Marsh: God's Long Summer

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PREFACE TO THE 2008 EDITION

IN THE SUMMER of 1994, while teaching at a Jesuit college in Baltimore, I packed a few bags into my Honda station wagon and headed south. I had a notion that I would write a book about the civil rights movement. I had no knowledge of field research or oral history, and couldn't really tell you what I was hoping to accomplish; yet for a variety of unavoidable reasons, some of which I later wrote about in the memoir *The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South*, I had begun thinking a lot about my Southern childhood, after having spent a decade trying hard to forget it. Despite a lengthy training in philosophical theology, and my current efforts as an assistant professor to write the monographs and scholarly articles needed for tenure, I had come to the conclusion that my journals and notebooks, filled now with images, words, and fragments evoking those anxious years, offered a more reliable guide to my future plans than the expectations of the guild. So I plowed ahead into the unfamiliar territory of narrative nonfiction and historical research.

An interview with Victoria Gray Adams in Petersburg, Virginia, led to a visit with Will D. Campbell in Mount Juliet, Tennessee, which led to a conversation with Bishop Duncan Gray, in the Jackson office of the Mississippi Episcopal Diocese, which led in turn to the first of many lunches and day trips with Ed King, in Jackson and in the small towns where the civil rights movement had once taken hold. My trip followed only an itinerary of the willing and ricocheted back to Georgia, to South Carolina, to congressional offices in Washington, and to my neighborhood in Baltimore, which had raised a community of Jewish social progressives, a fair share of whom had traveled to Mississippi in 1964.

I spoke with anyone willing to tell their story. The cast included not only movement heroes like Cleveland Sellers, Jane Stembridge, John Lewis, Bob Zellner, Andrew Young, and Joan Trumpauer, but also people who sat on the fence—white ministers, school teachers, attorneys, business leaders, black moderates, and members of my own family. Eventually I talked with the men who so greatly despised the prospects of black freedom that they organized terrorist cells and plotted murder and mayhem. In a private dining room in the back of a gas station on a two-lane highway outside of Laurel, Mississippi, the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, Sam Bowers, broke his

decades-long vow of silence and recounted to me in harrowing detail why he had killed “infidels” and “heretics” in the name of God. He also expressed his hope that were he summoned by higher powers in 1994 (the year we spoke) to take up the cause of Christian terrorism, he would show the same courage as when he regularly orchestrated killings, beatings, fire bombings, and church burnings in the 1960s. He told me all this while I sat across the table and tried to calmly transcribe his comments into a spiral-bound notebook.

The only person I recall who ever refused an interview was an unlikely sort. At least his refusal took me by surprise. The heir of a racist Mississippi media conglomerate, who had renounced his cultural (though not his monetary) inheritance, left the South, and bought a liberal magazine in New York. “I’m not telling my story anymore,” he said in our final phone exchange. I was not aware that he had ever told his story, but such is the pretense of white privilege that in pitching timidity as a class virtue it becomes an accomplice of wounded memory. By contrast, the generosity of black Southerners in sharing their stories, photographs, and scrapbooks, and often in sitting down for meals and leisurely chats, felt to me then, as it still does today, like a precious gift—merciful, uplifting, and wholly undeserved.

In time, a book took shape. It was not a comprehensive study of religion and civil rights, but the intricate story, or stories, of five people believing wholeheartedly in the Christian religion, who stuck themselves into the chaos of history according to differing images of God, often with devastating results. The beliefs and actions of ordinary men and women caught in the whirlwind of the movement, and, in particular, in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964 and its aftermath, illuminated in my mind a fresh perspective on the story and the promise of new insights on faith and justice.

Historians and scholars before me have acknowledged the religious motivations of the civil rights movement; but in paying attention to the personal testimonies and all the documentary materials—sermons, church bulletins and minutes, hymnbooks and Sunday school curricula, denominational newspapers and occasional publications, biblical expositions on segregation and white supremacy, unpublished (and published) memoirs, and my own interviews with participants and those gathered by other scholars—a more interesting field of religious investigation appeared. I came to see the civil rights movement as theological drama. I came to see that particular ways of thinking about God, Jesus Christ, and the Church framed the original purposes and goals of the movement. No doubt, these purposes and goals shifted in emphasis or meaning, and they were quite often supplemented and nurtured by other philosophical and religious traditions. But the movement burst into life

amidst the singing, testifying, prophesying, and organizing of people in the pews and pulpits, and it seemed as though honesty compelled one to pay closer attention to the voices of the Church.

Revisiting the civil rights movement as theological drama meant more than nodding in the direction of some monolithic religiosity that psyched up the soul and rallied the weary troops into action. The task of interpreting the religious and theological sources of the civil rights movement meant capturing the dynamic particularity of its stories and the events; trying hard to make them vivid, honest, and inspiring; and asking questions about God with appropriate suspicion. Who would deny that my heartfelt attempt to clarify the interconnections of belief and action and to make sense of Christianity's complicity in racism and violence is not an even more urgent matter today than a decade ago?

The book was originally entitled *Theologies in Crisis*, after Robert Coles's book *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*, which recounted in five mini-biographies the psychic lives of children living through the desegregation of public schools in New Orleans. My wife, always my best editor, suggested a better title, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. Early drafts of the manuscript were written with more theological discussion in the body of the work, with breaks for second-order reflection on the unfolding story; but a narrative interrupted with scholarly analysis usually adds up to uninviting narrative, despite all the other potential benefits. I tried placing the analytical material in the footnotes, but in most cases this didn't work either (and still a few reviewers worried that there was too much theology). After a while, most of the academic discourse disappeared altogether, and then, and only then, did the characters and stories come to the foreground and sparkle into life. I discovered what most writers of fiction and poetry know by second nature: that narrative untethered from theory runs over everything. I was delighted when the theologian and Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge referred to *God's Long Summer* in the *Princeton Theological Review* as a "theological thriller." If I were Truman Capote I might seize on that compliment and claim to have invented a new genre; too bad that the Gospel narratives, the Acts of the Apostles, the Revelation of St. John, and most of the Hebrew bible beat me to it.

In any case, the veering off of the straight and narrow road of my training changed my life and re-educated me as a scholar and teacher. My mentors now were sharecroppers and domestics, black church people and misfit Southern liberals, humanists and dreamers, righteous militants and beatnik priests. "The cause of the Movement was to live the kind of life we wanted for the world in the midst of the struggle to change the world," the dissident pastor Ed King wrote in one of his many luminous movement papers and letters. Theological explorations

of eschatological longing, divine presence, and beloved community have rarely been packed so tightly in a single exclamation of hope. In this way, I learned that theology needs a place, a real history wedded to time and memory, a Yoknapatawpha, or Jones, County, if you will.

Still—and no doubt precisely because—I set off so blithely down an unfamiliar path, I began to see many of the old questions in a new light. The glare of recent history and my own complicity in racism cast a worrisome light on the theological and religious questions that the academy had taught me to regard as foundational. Anglo-American theologians have never accepted race as a theological category, even when they have occasionally spoken of racial matters. That harsh light made it hard to see at times what my work actually had to do with theology, but harder still to determine whether the old questions were really worth saving. This fact is undeniable: in a nation that enslaved millions of Africans, devastated families and communities, and condemned them to lifetimes of misery and deprivation, the theological evasion of race is flat-out reprehensible. It is worth pointing out that the only theologians who avoid the subject are white.

The writing of *God's Long Summer* confronted me with tough questions: Why am I scholar? Who am I serving? Is my work part of a larger human struggle toward more just and compassionate societies? Can research and writing make any difference at all? Once in an interview, a kindly minister who had been recalling his years as a staff member of the National Council of Churches and his role in the 1965 March on Selma, paused and said, "You know, your generation is a bunch of wimps." The least I could do was to ask a few hard questions about my own vocation as a scholar and teacher and somehow try to make the connection back to life. "I'm not serving Mr. Marlowe anymore," Fannie Lou Hamer said when she left the cotton plantations of Sunflower County to devote her time fully to voter registration and civil rights organizing. The civil rights movement taught me that faith is only authentic when it stays close to its essential affirmations: showing hospitality to strangers and outcasts; affirming the dignity of created life; reclaiming the ideals of love, honesty, and truth; embracing the preferential option of nonviolence; and practicing justice and mercy. Still, *God's Long Summer* remains, above all else, a love poem to the soul of the freedom movement.

Less than a year after the publication of *God's Long Summer*, in the first week of August 1998, Sam Bowers once again stood trial for the murder of Vernon Dahmer. Fifty-eight years old at the time, Mr. Dahmer had run a country store on his 200-acre farm in the Kelly Settlement of Forrest County, Mississippi, and was widely revered in the black community as a successful businessman, church leader, and president of the local NAACP. After 1965, Mr. Dahmer had courageously established a voter

registration center at his store, which spared rural African Americans the certain harassment of attempting to register at the county courthouse. In the late 1960s, Bowers had been brought to trial four times for the murder of Mr. Dahmer but had not been convicted. His only conviction had been on conspiracy charges in the slayings of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, for which he had served seven years of a ten-year sentence in a federal prison on McNeal Island in Washington State. Bowers had never been convicted for any of the murders or other crimes widely associated with his reign of terror. But now, in a new Mississippi (not at all a perfect one, but a lot more grown-up), following a week-long trial and less than three hours of jury deliberation, a seventy-three-year-old Bowers was found guilty of murder and taken in handcuffs from the courtroom to serve a life sentence. On November 5, 2006, Bowers died in a hospital in Parchman Prison. His body lay unclaimed for several days until an out-of-state relative, wishing to remain anonymous, came for his remains.

“Sam Bowers lived a life consumed with hate for African Americans,” said Vernon Dahmer, Jr., who had been stationed as a master sergeant at March Air Force Base in Riverside, California, the night of the 1966 fire-bombing. “He caused a lot of pain, suffering, and death for many individuals and families in my race. Now that he has passed from this life, God will be the judge.”

I am grateful for the call of an uneasy conscience that many summers ago spirited me out of my office and on the road in search of answers. It gives me great satisfaction to know that my journey might inspire others on their own.