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GOD'S LONG SUMMER

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INTRODUCTION

With God on Our Side: Faiths in Conflict

THE THEOLOGIAN Karl Barth once said that when God enters history, something wholly different and new begins, "a history with its own distinct grounds, possibilities and hypotheses." The paramount question, if this proposition be granted, is whether we have the good will to meditate and enter upon this new world inwardly.[1] How would the world look if we let ourselves be led far beyond what is elsewhere called history—into a new way of seeing, into the world of God?

This book invites the reader to revisit the tumultuous landscape of the American civil rights movement in Mississippi: to look again at some familiar stories (and to look for the first time at many unfamiliar ones) in light of the hypothesis that God was—in some perplexing and hitherto undelineated way—present there. Of course, both the civil rights and the anti-civil rights movements were saturated with religion; in every mass meeting, church service, and Klan rally, God's name was invoked and his power claimed. White conservatives and civil rights activists, black militants and white liberals, black moderates and klansmen, all staked their particular claims for racial justice and social order on the premise that God was on their side. Undoubtedly, religion played an instrumental role in giving these claims authorization. Yet I ask the reader to consider how the movement may appear anew if its complex and often cacophonous religious convictions are taken seriously—if the content of such language is not dismissed as smooth justifications of cruelty or dissent, pragmatic tools in the service of political ends, or opiates of the status quo. How do ordinary southern towns become theaters of complex theological drama?[2]

I tell the story of what happened when differing images of God intersected, and then clashed, in one violent period of the black struggle for freedom and equality under the law. Yet I do not provide a systematic analysis of how religion shaped the civil rights movement, which would encompass not only Protestant and Catholic influences but Jewish and Hindu—and to a lesser extent Islamic and Buddhist—as well. Nor do I provide an institutional history such as James F. Findlay, Jr.'s splendid *Church People in the*

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Struggle.[3] Rather, I tell the story, or the interwoven stories, of certain individuals whose lives converged in Mississippi, sometimes with devastating consequences, during the long, hot summer of 1964, when civil rights activists in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), working under the auspices of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), turned their energies not only toward defeating Jim Crow on his own turf but toward transforming the country as well.[4] In the "Christ-haunted" south, and even more in Mississippi, "the most race-haunted of all American states," one finds an intensification of a religious conflict that existed throughout the civil rights movement (and exists, though perhaps with less intensity, in the American Protestant church as a whole).[5] The commitment to a brutal pigmentocracy was matched only by a fervent belief in Jesus Christ; and the fear of change (rendered "impurity") strained this fragile dialectic toward an inescapable apotheosis of violence.

I follow the lives of five religious persons from the experience of their "calling" through their spiritual and social formation to the turbulent season of their convergence in Mississippi—and in one case, to life beyond Mississippi. I try to reckon with the complexity of the story (or stories), and with the varied theological sources that configure these individuals' responses to black suffering and disenfranchisement. Although the lives of these five persons may be construed as types of responses, I wish to grant maximum appreciation to the particularity of their stories. Obviously, an accurate picture of how religion shaped the civil rights movement cannot be drawn from a crude juxtaposition of good social gospel guys on the one hand and bible-thumping racists on the other. Over the course of the movement, some bible-thumpers appeared as social progressives, and some who were weaned on liberal theology championed segregation.[6] There are no easy patterns for predicting the way religious ideas govern particular courses of action. Yet there is in each case a theological sense or inner logic in these embodied theologies, and thus there exist patterns specific to the complex interaction of faith and lived experience. I invite the reader to contemplate the inner sense of these religious worlds, to seek an understanding of how the social order looks from the various perspectives of faith, both to broaden our knowledge of the civil rights movement and better to discern how images of God continue to inform differing visions of civic life and responsibility. It is thus my hope that the book will appeal not only to scholars of religion but to the larger number of people interested in the public debate about race, character, and the common good.[7]

The book opens with Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville, Mississippi, leaving the cotton fields of the Delta in 1962 to "work for Jesus" in civil rights activism. In 1964 Mrs. Hamer burst onto the national scene as the com-

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manding voice of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party (MFDP) in its bold attempt to unseat the all-white state delegation at the National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. As a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a courageous leader in voter registration and grass-roots political organizing, Mrs. Hamer gave eloquent witness to a liberating, reconciling faith, shaped by a skillful blending of African American hymnody and spirituality, prophetic religion, and an indefatigable belief in Jesus as friend and deliverer of the poor.[8] Strangely, much historical literature has obscured her deep religious convictions, presenting instead the picture of a freedom fighter and political organizer whose faith seems, if not incidental to her movement life, at best peripheral.[9] I am heartened by James M. Washington's comment that the spirituality of the civil rights movement "begs for our attention."[10] Following Professor Washington's lead, I wish to describe Fannie Lou Hamer not only as the prophetic voice of Mississippi's "local people" but as one of America's most innovative religious imaginations.[11]

Sam Holloway Bowers, Jr., the high priest of white Christian militancy, considered Mrs. Hamer and her fellow travelers betrayers of "Jesus the Galilean." Elected in 1964 as Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, Bowers ruled over a four-year campaign of white terrorism, and is alleged to have orchestrated at least nine murders, seventy-five bombings of black churches, and three hundred assaults, bombings, and beatings. Until my interviews with Bowers (the only interviews he has ever granted), it was the conventional wisdom among scholars and journalists that his convoluted theological promulgations were either shrewd covers for his criminal rage, used to rally angry, uneducated white men around the cause of white supremacy, or something akin to psychotic rambling. Yet the picture of Bowers that develops upon closer scrutiny of his life and vocation, and in light of new information regarding his biography and religious self-understanding, is that of a man with exceedingly clear ideas about his divine priestly calling—a man convinced of his own world-historical consequence.[12] Bowers once described his calling by distinguishing between a preacher and a priest. A preacher, he said, points people toward the truth, pleading with the sinner to seek forgiveness. But the priest searches out the heretic with deadly intent—"this is what makes him powerful like a warrior." And the heretic—who for Bowers takes the form of civil rights activists, "liberal media whores," and "pagan academics"—cannot be forgiven. He can only be "eliminated."[13] Bowers's sinister vocation, his central role in the murders of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, paints a harrowing portrait of the violent extremities of Christian nationalist zeal, authorized by the empowering convictions of faith.

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Of the images of God coming into conflict in the civil rights movement, none seems more replete with contradiction than that of white mainline Protestantism. In most cases, the Southern white Protestant adheres to an evangelical belief, the heart of which is the confession of "a personal Lord and Savior" who has atoned for the sins of humanity. Yet in most cases, the confession remains disconnected from race relations—and often from social existence altogether. A white conservative minister could stand at the pulpit of any Baptist church in any hamlet of the deep South and preach from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that Jesus Christ reconciles all people to God and each other, and he would undoubtedly receive an enthusiastic chorus of "Amen" from the congregation; yet if the minister proceeded to explain that the Gospel message requires brotherhood with black people, and justice and mercy toward them, he would be run out of town by sundown.[14] My narrative of the state's preeminent Southern Baptist minister, William Douglas Hudgins of the First Baptist Church of Jackson, illustrates this religious sensibility—the bifurcation between proclamation and practice—and its evolution from a serene, deracinated piety. Hudgins's preaching, with its unmistakable blend of traditional Southern Baptist theology, anti-modernist fundamentalism, and civil religion, was put in the service of his singular emphasis on personal and spiritual purity. The important matters of faith were found in the interior dimensions of the soul's journey to God, or in the soul's "competency" before God. In a sermon at the beginning of the civil rights years, Hudgins proclaimed, "Now is the time to move the emphasis from the material to the spiritual."[15] Social existence becomes secondary, inconsequential to the real intent of faith. In the final analysis, concern for black suffering has nothing to do with following Jesus.

How then can we understand the theological shifts that inspired a handful of Southern white Christians to condemn Jim Crow for the sake of a desegregated South—indeed for sake of the "beloved community"—and ultimately for the sake of the Gospel? I address the question by looking at the civil rights life of the Reverend Edwin King, who as the white chaplain of black Tougaloo College in Jackson and the National Committeeman of the Mississipppi Freedom Democratic party and its candidate for lieutenant governor, performed the roles of church reformer, theological prankster, and pastor of his "movement congregation." My narrative of this renegade Methodist minister highlights the sometimes comic, sometimes tragic story of the church visits campaign, which attempted to desegregate and agitate white conservative and moderate churches. Under Ed King's direction, these confrontations between integrated groups of church visitors and white church leaders created a space (usually on the front steps of the church) where previously unspoken ideas on religion and race dra-

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matically came to the light of day. The church visits campaign enacted time and again spectacular scenarios, teasing out of the various antagonists darkly comic and ironic assertions about faith and social existence. King's driving conviction was simple at its heart, though costly in its demands. If people took seriously their identities as Christians, they had no choice but to give up the practices of white supremacy—and not only white supremacy, but also class privilege, resentment, the concession to violence, anything that kept one from sacrificing all for the beloved community, for that interracial fellowship witnessing to the redemptive possibilities of reconciling love. However, from King's perspective, the failure of the church visits campaign, or rather the failure of the white church to open its doors and to preach racial justice, signaled the need for broader, more aggressive civil rights activism. In 1964, Ed King became one of the leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party and an active player in the massive initiative in voter registration and political empowerment that was the Summer Project.

Yet by summer's end in 1964 a growing number of African Americans in the civil rights movement, in particular younger members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had become disenchanted with the pursuit and vision of a reconciled brotherhood and sisterhood. A contingent of more militant activists appeared eager to put reconciliation (or its all-too-rough legal equivalent of integration) on the back burner. Cleveland Sellers, who in 1964 had worked as a SNCC staff member in Mississippi, emerged in 1965 and 1966, along with his close friend and SNCC comrade, Stokely Carmichael, as an earlier champion of the new racial spirituality and nationalistic consciousness called Black Power.[16] As Sellers explained, "Black babies are not dying of malnutrition because their parents do not own homes in white communities. Black men and women are not being forced to pick cotton for three dollars a day because of segregation."[17] The real issue was power, these activists claimed. "Integration has little or no effect on such problems," Sellers said. In terms now resonant in our cultural repertoire, Black Power sought black liberation from white oppression "by any means necessary." Yet the construction of a rigid racial orthodoxy led, in turn, to narrowing standards of toleration. Despite its celebration of the ethnic, cultural, religious, and biological particularities of Americans of sub-Saharan African descent, Black Power did more tearing down than building up—though such iconoclasm no doubt accounted for much of its rhetorical appeal. In 1966, after interracialists like John Lewis had been made unwelcome and Fannie Lou Hamer was rendered "no longer relevant," the new SNCC vanguard began purging the organization of its white members.[18] Sellers's courageous, frenetic, and ultimately cataclysmic life in the movement offers a complex narrative of an African

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American student activist whose Christian faith was profoundly changed by the spirituality of black nationalism.

The story does not have a happy ending. Despite the impressive slate of civil rights legislation enacted in the wake of the Summer Project—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—the movement began to fragment in ways that continue even now to polarize blacks and whites. What began with Fannie Lou Hamer's spirited devotion to the God who was liberating blacks and whites from bondage ended with the collapse of the beloved community. Many whites in the movement, like Jeannette and Ed King or SNCC activists Bob and Dorothy Zellner, were ostracized by black nationalists, their hopes for racial healing and reconciliation deemed quaint and even annoying. White Christian conservatives, in turn, remained largely indifferent to black suffering, preoccupied instead with evangelism and church growth, and with personal vices like drinking, dancing, and "heavy petting." Of course, the White Knights of Ku Klux Klan were the screaming exception to such moralism, preferring concealment, calculated harassment, and acts of sabotage to deal with those "atheists and mongrels" who promoted "BI-RACISM, CHAOS AND DEATH."[19] However, by the late 1960s, the white militant organization had begun to disintegrate; the Klan's extremist views, its demonization of the outsider, its paranoid theories about Jewish world domination, and its dreams of a Christian nation were left for the fundamentalist mainstream to assimilate in more polite forms.[20]

Yet I do not entirely despair. In the conclusion to the book I suggest that it may be possible, if only with the most modest of results, to sift among these narratives and find ways to discriminate among the differing, often conflicting images of God. Whether such work helps us overcome the racial misreadings of the past or lays the groundwork for a new thinking about reconciliation and beloved community remains uncertain. There is no obvious reason to think that a wider knowledge of past failures will inspire Christian communities to act more responsibly in the future. However, quite apart from concrete proposals for reconciliation, these narratives do give us clarity for the difficult work ahead. In Mississippi, there is a farming term that may illuminate the point. In late winter when the land is cleared for plowing, many farmers burn their fields so they can see the ground for what it is—to see what's there, the bottles, cans, dried roots, the detritus of winter. This is "clearburning," burning clear the fields to prepare for a new planting and harvest.

This book is a kind of clearburning, a preparation for a time when white Christians will not have to be reminded by the accusing evidence of history that their proclamation has too often served cruel purposes; and when African American Christians will not have to be chided by Fannie Lou

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Hamer with the sober judgment that problems will not be solved by hating whites; preparation for a time when whites and blacks together will reckon with their common humanity, keeping in mind the difficult wisdom of James Baldwin's remark that "to accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it."[21]

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