

**The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of the New South**, Charles Marsh, Basic Books 2001, (ISBN: 0-465-04419-0), \$14.00

*Editors note:* After the warm reception of his book *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton University Press, 1997), which explored the theological worlds of five Christians deeply involved in the civil rights struggle in Mississippi in the summer of 1964, Charles Marsh, who teaches theology at the University of Virginia, turned his hand to a biography of his own father, a Baptist pastor in Laurel, Mississippi in the 1960's. The history Marsh had examined in his earlier book had some deeply personal connections, and raised some nettlesome questions. This resulted in the book, *The Last Days*, published four years later. The editors of *Conversations* sought two reviewers with similar backgrounds – both babyboomers whose fathers were Protestant ministers in the South in the 1960's – to review the book and expand on their reviews by reflecting on memories of their own fathers and how they responded to the pressures of this unique historical moment from their parishes. Rev. Beverly Prestwood-Taylor followed in her father's footsteps, went to seminary and was ordained to serve as pastor in Methodist and United Church of Christ churches in the Midwest and New England. Today she has a special ministry in community conflict transformation. Dr. Keith Miller, an English professor at Arizona State University, has established himself as a scholar of the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, and has written one of the best books on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons and speeches, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (Free Press, 1992). In his own way, like Prestwood-Taylor and Marsh, he followed in his father's footsteps, sustaining a fascination for the historically liberative power of biblical proclamation.

*Reviewed by Beverly Prestwood-Taylor*  
*Roots of Shalom Institute, Massachusetts, USA*

Like an archeological dig, this book painstakingly unearths multiple layers of the long-buried past. Author Charles Marsh recreates the story of his family's experience in Laurel, Mississippi, home of the Ku Klux Klan Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers during the turbulent years of 1967–1973. In a rare account, he digs through and dusts off intimate artifacts that reveal this history in all its complexity. We are privy to the embarrassing inner thoughts of a teenage boy growing into manhood, juxtaposed with the headlines of newspapers of the day. These are combined with a father's concise journal entries and tied together with a

historical overview and analysis. The cumulative effect is a feeling of utter immersion in the 'Last Days' of the reign of terror of the KKK and a deep insight into the ethical dilemma faced by Bob Marsh, a pastor of the First Baptist Church in town.

The appeal of the book is its stark honesty, not blinking or shielding our eyes from the glaring, painful truth. We read the personal revelations of failure and compromise that characterized the church's response to the civil rights movement. In telling the story, Marsh invites us to think about our own stories and the choices and compromises we have made in the ethical decisions in our lives.

As the narrative unfolds, we observe that the great sweeping movements of history are comprised of millions of dots representing individual people, who are scripted for certain choices by their past conditioning, early trauma, and relationships with parents and grandparents, caught up in the confluence of events in their lives. Yet, the outcome is not pre-determined, but always a culmination of each individual's personal struggle in the soul.

Bob Marsh's early trauma was the isolation he felt as a youth resulting from both a pronounced stutter and a family that ignored him. He found his solace and his ultimate purpose in a teenage conversion experience that sparked a fervent desire to serve Christ. In spite of his family's disinterest and even aversion to things religious, Bob Marsh felt called to become a Baptist minister.

His convictions gave him the strength to overcome his stutter, and to move from a life of seclusion to become a respected community leader. As his son describes him, 'My father, Bob Marsh, was a man of God, revered by everyone who knew him for his preaching and teaching and spiritual insights. On top of that, he was built like a linebacker and sported killer good looks' (p. 2).

We are privileged to have access to the intimate admixture of forces that shape the decisions Rev. Marsh made. He was influenced by his love and commitment to his own family, his passionate desire to serve God and to do what is right in God's eyes, his fear of losing status in society, and his never ending fruitless attempt to earn his parents' approval.

The climax of the book comes when Marsh decides he cannot sidestep the issue of racial justice anymore. He feels compelled to publicly condemn the actions of the KKK and speak out on behalf of civil rights for the Negro. He knows the price of his candor will be the loss of his parish. In order to provide security for himself and his family, he seeks out and receives several offers of university teaching positions. With this assurance, he visits the black pastor in town to make his proclamation. He tells the Rev. Marcus Cooley, 'I'm free to do what's right, because I no longer have anything to lose. This means I can finally get up in the pulpit and speak about the race issue, about all those things

that you and your people are concerned with, and I don't have to worry about what happens. If I lose my pulpit, I'll still have these offers in my hand' (p. 166).

Instead of affirmation, he receives scathing judgment. Marcus Cooley's church had been bombed and shot at so many times it stood in ruins. Friends of his had been murdered. His family had been threatened. He had lost patience. Cooley fires at Marsh, 'A man isn't free when he takes a stand because he has nothing to lose . . . Until you are willing to lose everything, you will never know what it means to be free' (p. 166). He continues by reading to him from Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. 'I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is . . . the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice . . .'

Marsh feels as if 'the wind had been knocked out of him'. After a few attempts to clarify himself, he is rendered speechless. He leaves the office as a man defeated with his hypocrisy laid bare. He says 'I felt like a balloon when you stick a needle in it, a lot of noise coming to nothing' (p. 169). Bob Marsh didn't make any courageous pronouncements that day or any other day. He didn't accept the university positions. He was paralyzed, knowing he should act boldly, but too fearful of the consequences. In the ensuing days, he recognized himself as a 'coward' and a 'hypocrite' (p. 172). He 'lost his nerve'; he 'despaired'; he 'broke down' (p. 179).

Not only did Bob Marsh have to find a way to make peace with his failure, but his son, Charles Marsh also struggled with a sense of shame over his father's lack of courage. When he was a student at Harvard, he recounted the myth the way he wished it had happened: 'cross burnings in the front yard, hoodlums trampling through the azalea beds, the knotted frames of dynamite, and my father, standing tall, armed with a baseball bat, a hammer, the souvenir tomahawk from Cherokee, North Carolina – with the Word of God' (p. 176).

In fact, it appears that he wrote this book because he had to come to terms with his own disappointment in his father, fallen from almost mythical Greek god status, to just another man who went along with the crowd. The poignancy of this story comes in Marsh's willingness to tell the whole tale with all its humiliating detail, in pursuit of a deeper truth. There is something that is ultimately healing in the truth revealed. Bob Marsh's courage is evident, finally, in allowing his shame to be exposed. His son chronicles his steps, as he picks up the pieces of his shattered pride and finds a way back to a renewed calling and passion for God. The story is a story of grace, because in the end, there was grace even for his father.

Many of us who lived through those days have to find ways to make peace with our disappointment in the church and in ourselves. Somehow we have to find a way to come to grips with the inadequacy of the white church's response to the civil rights movement. We have to begin to fathom the unconscionable silence of the church when people who espoused hate and urged violence clothed their rhetoric in Christian language. We have to wonder about the authenticity of the church that promoted inaction in the face of flagrant injustice. Can the church follow Christ with integrity? Is our institution too compromised by enculturation to serve the purposes of Christ? Marsh doesn't offer answers but offers insight. He lets us stand in the shadows, looking at our shadow selves, while shining the safe light of academia into the hidden corners of our disgrace. Maybe if we understood, if we recounted the story honestly, if we confessed and repented, then we could act differently. Maybe, then, we could find our way to that positive peace.

My memories are so similar and so different than Charles Marsh's. We, too, lived in Alabama and Mississippi in the 1960s. The intricate details of his writing are so sharp they penetrate the tough, outer layers of my disillusionment and stab right into my heart. He has re-created the warm, slow, luxurious days of my southern childhood. His descriptions awaken the senses: scuppernong and honeysuckle; Sting ray bicycles; souvenir tomahawks from Cherokee, North Carolina; sitting in a teenage cluster in the first row of the balcony in church; fish camps and fried hushpuppies served in big metal pails. These are the hooks that catch me up and reel me into the drama.

This is where the similarity ends. My father made different choices with respect to civil rights. His choices were just as conditioned by his past as Bob Marsh's. He was shaped by his 'poor-white trash' upbringing, an alcoholic mother, and an absent father. Food was sometimes as scarce as snow. He managed to scrape out a certain respect for himself and his brother using his fists. As a teenager, he was converted and found what he had been longing for: a true home in the church. Following his call to seminary, he was transformed by his relationship with fellow student Martin Luther King. King became a hero in our household. Having known King, he had no choice but to live out the call to racial justice and inclusiveness, regardless of the price that would be paid.

I wish I could ask my father now how he lived so boldly, balancing on the razor's edge during the conflicts in Alabama. Where did the courage come from? How could he stand so unswervingly when the stakes were so high, when the cost would be so great? According to his colleagues, he didn't back down, but kept pushing. In one month's time, several things happened that brought his ministry in Alabama to a crisis point. Bishop Kenneth Goodson, of the Alabama-West Florida

Conference of the Methodist Church, called a meeting of the pastors who were activists. He wanted to put a stop to the 'kneel-ins' planned for churches in Alabama. 'It is embarrassing the church', Goodson complained. 'See if you can get them to back off'. My father challenged the pastors. He dreamed that the church would be a place where all could worship together. He insisted that the church *should* be embarrassed if it turned any of God's children away. After hours of heated debate, they came to a compromise agreement. My father would contact the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and invite them to his church, where they would be received and welcomed.

Shortly after that, he flew to Washington, D.C. to meet with Martin Luther King and other pastors to plan the Selma March. David Brinkley happened to interview my father and broadcast the report on national news that Friday evening. He ended the newscast with my father's words, 'justice may not be flowing like waters in Alabama, but it has started to trickle'.

The hate phone calls and threatening letters began pouring in before my father had even returned from Washington. My mother, alone with four young children, called the lay leader of the church to come and sit with her at home until my father's arrival. During the following week, my father sat up all night in a rocking chair with a shotgun over his lap to protect us from the intimidated danger. The scrappy teenager, who wasn't about to be licked in a fight, was still alive in him.

However, I don't remember the terror of that time. I remember the sweetness. The memory has that thick, sweet smell of Easter lilies. It has that sweet sticky feel of jelly beans stuck to my teeth, melted in my hands and hidden in the pockets of my frilly pink dress.

It was Easter Sunday morning and I was seven years old. Caught in a reverie about the candy from the Easter bunny, I sat in one of the back pews at Whitfield Memorial Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. My confectious reflection was interrupted by a rustling at the entryway in the rear of the sanctuary. A group of Negro men and women had arrived for worship. (I am sure I pronounced the word Negro carefully in my mind because my father had tutored me in the correct pronunciation of the word. The way he articulated that word differentiated our politics: not *nigra*, indicative of wishy-washy moderates nor the unspeakable n- word, reserved for outright racists, but NE-gro.)

Methodist churches in Alabama were always starchy quiet and oppressively dignified. The most momentous occasions were muffled by the thick carpet, the sound panels, the hushed tones, and the white gloves, and the dignity. So, there was no fanfare, applause, or boogie. The shock and exhilaration were registered mutely on faces and in quiet murmuring as the visitors were ushered to the front pew. It felt like something huge was happening, but the only way I confirmed the

feeling was when I saw tears streaming down my mother's face in the choir loft and my father's face in the pulpit. I caught my breath. Gradually, as the service moved from hymn to announcement to sermon, a feeling started to swell in me, like a flower unfolding inside my soul. My seven year-old frame was too small to house something so big. I thought I might pop before the service was over. What was it: God or grace or hope or vision? I didn't know.

My mother especially remembers one tall, very dark man. He was singing, 'Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done?', booming out the words in a rich baritone voice with full expression, not even glancing at the hymnal, but singing all the verses from memory. Later when accusations were made that these 'kneel-ins' were just politics, not expressions of faith, my mother contradicted the critics. 'You didn't see them singing. I did. One man was lifting his whole heart to God. That was worship'.

After the service, people stepped forward to welcome the delegation and invite them back another Sunday.

Later, at home, during Sunday dinner, my father was expansive and buoyant. He had the gleeful hope that they would return. He imagined an integrated church, unheard of in Alabama in the 1960's. He believed that our glimpse of the kingdom of God on earth was coming. We would participate in the Beloved Community in our lifetime.

The welcoming of the Negro delegation didn't happen by chance. He'd been preparing the congregation for a year. In almost every sermon, he'd made some reference to the notion that 'all men are brothers'. The previous January the 'Official Board' of the church had voted to 'welcome every man regardless of race'. After the vote, my father was accused of 'stacking the Board' in order to get the decision he wanted. This was probably true. He likely did shift and shuffle to find the right group to vote yes. But, when the day of reckoning came, they were prepared to act justly. History was made.

The Beloved Community of my father's dreams never did materialize in the church in Montgomery. Two or three more 'kneel-ins' occurred. The death threats, poison pen letters and threatening phone calls continued to pour in. Pledges to the church were reduced. My father wrote a memorable pastor's letter to the congregation. 'I notice you've been withholding pledges. I do hope you are saving them in an account that provides a high rate of return. You will certainly need the money when you attempt to buy a cold glass of water in hell'.

My father was determined to stand his ground in Montgomery and not be driven out. We managed to persevere for another year with the support of numerous dedicated lay people in the congregation. The new pastorate in Pensacola only lasted for two years. During those two short years, our church burned to the ground on Christmas Day and Martin Luther King was assassinated. My father, disillusioned with the

church as an institution, left the ministry for a teaching position with a college, later moving up north. He was still full of passion for Jesus and justice, but his hopes for the church as an instrument of Jesus' teaching were dashed. He never seemed to adjust to life as a professor. Safe, suburban life was an ill-fitting suit. He shifted uncomfortably in it. Charles Prestwood died a few years later of cardiomyopathy. We all wondered if the cause was a broken heart. After all that fighting, the victory never seemed to come decisively as we had hoped it would.

Charles Marsh's tale ends with reconciliation, love, and appreciation for the strengths his father did have, the commitments he kept to tithing and faithfulness, and his loyalty to his family and friends. Marsh muses, 'that love had always been there, love as heavy as rain, the kind that can wash the air clean or leave you panting like a dog, but love it was still, nothing else but love, everywhere love' (p. 238). And 'Through it all, love prevails, be not afraid' (p. 272).

In Laurel, the changes didn't come sweeping in like the morning tide, but they came, regardless. Charles Marsh saw the hope for Laurel's future in the friendships of the high-schoolers forged on football fields, in the locker rooms after the game and in 'Tim Harvey's clear lateral pass to Joe Porter in the warm sun' (p. 271).

Everyone's ending wasn't quite so serendipitous. Most of the pastors who were my father's colleagues left the ordained ministry for other professions. The courageous little band that shored each other up in the worst of times scattered to the four winds. Most of them are loosely connected to the church, but distant enough so that they won't be crushed by their disappointment in it again.

There is another voice in this story's ending that hasn't been fully heard. I wonder what the black pastor's son would say today. What conclusion would he draw? How has he made peace with those times and with the price he had to pay? The scene between Rev. Marcus Cooley and his son is also seared into my memory. Marsh describes it, quoting Cooley. 'The last time our church was bombed, my son asked me where God had been when the Klansmen showed up. You know what I told him? I said, 'Child, don't be afraid. God will never leave you or forsake you. God will always calm the stormy waters. He did it two thousand years ago when the disciples were fearful and the master stretched out his hand, and he will do it today'. You know what my boy did? He put his head on my shoulder and started crying'. I wonder if Marcus Cooley's son is still mourning inside.

Once again on Easter Sunday, but thirty-eight years after that tumultuous time, my mother was in a Methodist church in Decatur, Georgia, sitting in the choir loft and again smelling the fragrance of the Easter lilies. She looked out into the congregation as all the voices were raised in one song, 'Christ the Lord is Risen Today'. The faces were white, tan, yellow and black, all worshipping God together in one place at one

time, but now in harmony. She began to weep, thinking back on the dreams of so many years ago. The battle had been so hard, and it had taken so long, but she could taste a sweet morsel of the victory right here and right now. I suppose that love can seep in through the cracks, in spite of ourselves.

What can we say about the church? Marsh gives us all the disparate images of the church and leaves us to draw our own conclusions. It can bring new life to two boys who had lived on the fringes of acceptance. It can turn its back on the good and right, more concerned with propriety than with theology. It can 'prefer a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice'. It can surprise us and allow the yeast of change to be mixed into the stone bread of institutionalism. Most of all, the church can be like us.

### *Oh Church*<sup>1</sup>

*How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you!  
I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence.  
You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand  
sanctity.  
I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity,  
more compromised, more false, and  
I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful.  
How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and  
how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.  
No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, although not completely.  
And where should I go?*

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*Reviewed by Keith D. Miller*  
*Arizona State University*

In November 2000 Charles Eagles correctly noted that historians of the civil rights movement 'have tended to emphasize one side of the struggle, the movement side, and to neglect their professional obligation to understand the other side, the segregationist opposition'. He remarked, 'They have written about the movement essentially from the perspective of the movement' and need to adopt a 'broader' view.<sup>2</sup> One

<sup>1</sup> From *The God Who Comes* by Carlo Carretto (Orbis Books, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Eagles, 'Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era', *Journal of Southern History*, 66 (November 2000), pp. 815-848. p. 816.

problem in sketching the dimensions of segregation is that, within 10 or 15 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, relatively few white Southerners would ever admit on record that they had ever favored – or even tolerated – a system of racial inequality.

Recently, however, several historians have portrayed in detail at least some of the white Southerners who favored racial ‘moderation’ and others who actively resisted the struggle for racial integration. In *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, for example, S. Jonathan Bass carefully researched the lives of the eight ‘moderate clergy’ whom King addressed in what is probably the most famous American essay of the twentieth century, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.<sup>3</sup> King’s refutation of their position, Bass argues, is not as thoroughly and indisputably devastating as thousands of college students, prompted by their professors, have thought. Bass maintains that some of the clergy (for example, Rabbi Milton Grafman, who stayed in the Birmingham area despite anti-Semitism) were not as protective of the racial status quo as King indicated. Bass explores and differentiates the contours of racial conservatism, ‘moderation’, and liberalism among these eight pastors. He also traces the post-1963 evolution of one of them, Joseph Durick, into the kind of social gospel activist that King urged clergy to become.

‘Moderates’ don’t fare as well in Diane McWhorter’s *Carry Me Home*, which portrays Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, an indefatigable local agitator, as the linchpin of the entire Birmingham crusade, which he almost singlehandedly inaugurated about seven years before King arrived in 1963.<sup>4</sup> (This view is reasonably consistent with that of Andrew Manis, who wrote a recent, laudable biography of Shuttlesworth.<sup>5</sup>) McWhorter describes a frightening alliance between the Ku Klux Klan, who systematically bombed African American homes, and allegedly law-abiding officials in the state government of Alabama and in the police department and city government of Birmingham, a city that African Americans sardonically dubbed ‘Bombingham’. McWhorter argues that, over a period of several years, the sometimes tacit, sometimes active encouragement of public officials helped Robert ‘Dynamite Bob’ Chambliss and other Klan figures, in 1963, to explode the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on a Sunday morning, killing four African

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<sup>3</sup> S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

American girls and outraging the world. McWhorter weaves autobiography into her historical account, describing her experience growing up in Birmingham at the time and eventually wrestling with her father's sympathy for the Klan.

In his previous book, the scintillating and award-winning *God's Long Summer*, Charles Marsh offers an extremely cogent, scholarly examination of five very different religious perspectives that helped shape the racial convulsions in Mississippi during the 1960s, when almost every Southerner was soaked in the Bible.<sup>6</sup> His analysis of Fannie Lou Hamer's Christianity is more astute than that of her biographers, and he ably limns other important figures (such as Ed King) who might otherwise be largely and undeservedly neglected. Marsh painstakingly examines the fairly elaborate and extremely bizarre 'Christian theology' of Sam Bowers, a paranoid Klan wizard who, in 1964, organized, among other frightful crimes, the notorious triple murder of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman – all of whom were nonviolent civil rights activists.

In Marsh's autobiographical *The Last Days* – a work whose tone alternates between wry and serious – one learns that when Marsh interviewed Bowers in the 1990s for *God's Long Summer*, he was not meeting the homicidal racist for the first time. In 1967 – three years after the highly publicized murders of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman – Marsh's father moved his wife Myra and their young son Charles from Alabama to Laurel, Mississippi. There Rev. Robert Marsh assumed the pastorate of the all-white First Baptist Church, which, as it happened, was located only two miles from Bowers's Klan headquarters. Charles and his parents sometimes ate at Admiral Benbow Coffee Shop, where they were obliged to walk past Bowers and his Klan buddies. These 'jittery fellows with fast-blinking eyes' would tease Charles, whose parents had enveloped him in fundamentalist Baptist theology but had failed to inform him about the Klan (p. 52).

Like many other Protestant ministers, the handsome and athletic Robert Marsh 'craved preaching as a drowning man craved air' (p. 92). He repeatedly propounded the familiar evangelical theme of individuals' all-or-nothing choice between hell and heaven, sin and salvation. Responding to his impassioned entreaties, his listeners often accepted Christ as Lord and learned to eschew various worldly pleasures, including dancing. Ignoring peaceful, civil rights activism and Klan bombings of black churches, Rev. Marsh strategically avoided the subject of race as much as possible, except when he once excoriated Northern white liberals allied with Martin Luther King.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

One night Rev. Marsh addressed other white Southerners at a banquet staged in an august, mahogany-walled room gracefully lit by crystal chandeliers. In an ebullient speech, he celebrated the many civic contributions that Clifford Wilson had made to the city and explained why Wilson richly deserved the Jaycee Man of the Year Award. One hour after the smiles and handshakes ended, the FBI arrested Wilson and Sam Bowers for the murder, by firebomb, of Vernon Dahmer, a well-regarded black man who, despite obstacles posed by racism, had become a highly successful landowner and businessman in small-town Mississippi.

Following this incident, Charles Marsh's embarrassed, but still confident father consulted a local African American minister. Instead of providing the comfort that Rev. Marsh sought, his fellow pastor politely exposed him as a coward and hypocrite. His motions whiplashed, his confidence cracked, and his identity jolted, Rev. Marsh drove his family to California, where he preached to hippie drop-outs known as 'Jesus freaks'. There he and his wife broadened their worldview and danced together for the first time.

Upon returning to Mississippi, Rev. Marsh's enthusiastic witnessing attracted a following of Baptist young people, black and white. Segregation was collapsing, and some white people were finally abandoning their entrenched, but utterly irrational fears of African Americans. Unlike the stalwarts among his congregation, who resisted the appearance of rock-and-roll musicians and African Americans in their sanctuary, the Marsh family, in certain ways, personified this shift.



Like Rev. Marsh, my father pastored a white church in the Deep South during the tumultuous 1960s. Born in the Texas Panhandle shortly before the Great Depression, Ernest Miller spent his hardscrabble childhood in the Dust Bowl, living in a small house that his father had built from the scraps of a construction site. Dust storms sometimes hid the sun and chased him and his brothers on their way home from school.

In 1957, several years after graduating from Texas Christian University, Ernest and Doris Miller, my mother, moved their three sons to a small town in South Texas. I was eight years old. Dad pastored a Disciples of Christ church and Mom taught in the elementary school that my brothers and I attended. We often walked or rode bikes to school and church. In our front yard we sold watermelons, supplied by a generous church member, at our makeshift stand; we often swam in another churchgoer's pool. Businesses closed on Sunday. Dad got a

10% pastor's discount at the drugstore and was active in the Ministerial Alliance. The church, school, family, and community functioned as a single institution, but it did not exclude the rest of the world. We performed a skit that Dad wrote, about how the price of corn in Russia affects the entire human race.

We played with the few Mexican American children who lived in our neighborhood. Only a small number of African Americans lived in our town. When one of them – a strikeout artist – pitched my error-prone, lousy-hitting Little League team to one of its rare victories, he and I elatedly hugged each other.

In 1963 Dad uprooted us so that he could become an associate minister at the King's Highway Christian Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. In many respects, Shreveport seemed alien to me, an eighth grader. My Texas accent endeared me to no one. As the associate to a pastor his own age with comparable training, Dad rarely got to preach, even though he loved preaching.

Blooming azaleas filled the town, so did racism. 'Whites Only' signs hung everywhere. Some teachers told blatantly racist anecdotes in class; on the playground some students invented jokes about killing African Americans for sport. I watched the movie 'To Kill a Mockingbird' in a theater that confined blacks to its balcony. Every week, it seemed, the city newspaper shrieked at Martin Luther King; the editors threw an apoplectic fit when he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. On the day that President John Kennedy was assassinated, one of my classmates glumly remarked, 'Now they will make him a martyr'. Like that student and most other whites in Shreveport, my ninth grade civics teacher adored Barry Goldwater. Her final exam required us to explain why the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, which would outlaw segregation in all public accommodations, was unconstitutional. Always a compliant student, I earned an *A* on the test by writing what I knew she wanted to read, even though I didn't believe a word of what I said. My parents had taught me better.

When Dad went to register to vote, city officials made him wait in line for four or five hours: in an attempt to slow African American registration, they allowed only a trickle of previously unregistered people to sign up. As a teacher, Mom could not take time off work and was never able to register or vote. Unlike his segregationist congregation, Dad read and liked Walter Rauschenbusch and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Although Martin Luther King and Dad attended different seminaries, their curricula were remarkably similar.

Dad occasioned some consternation simply by calling the hard-working church janitor 'Mr. Williams' instead of referring to him by his first name. Dad raised more hackles when he gently suggested to an adult Sunday school class that segregation might not be ideal. Mom recently told me that the Shreveport police once called the church,

offering to turn away African Americans who might have the audacity to try to worship with us. She said the head minister and Dad told the police not to worry. Some church loyalists, though, told me they would rebuff any such uninvited guests. None came.

In early 1965 we moved to the Amarillo, a city in the Texas Panhandle, and Dad became an associate minister at First Christian Church, which Mom had attended regularly throughout her childhood and adolescence. One year later we drove to a Disciples of Christ convention in Dallas and heard King speak in a large auditorium. In 1967 I matriculated at Texas Christian University, my parents' alma mater, about three years after it began to integrate its student body. By 1969, I had read broadly about the Vietnam War, and my friends and I were busily organizing protests against it. Although some professors supported us, TCU administrators, most of whom were ordained Disciples ministers, unanimously championed the Vietnam War and expressed their disgust at our mild, nonviolent dissent. Wagging his finger, one flummoxed vice chancellor angrily scolded me, saying that I should stop 'this protest nonsense' and study John Milton's poetry instead.

One of my brothers and I appeared before the draft board in Amarillo to be interrogated about our candidacy for the status of conscientious objector to war. The secretary of the draft board was a church member and a close friend of Mom since childhood. Her sons were our buddies. One man on the draft board also belonged to our church. Even though board members expressed their displeasure with our applications, they allowed Dad to join the conversation and heard him explain that the Disciples had passed anti-war resolutions at national gatherings, resolutions that I had not heard of before. He had earlier solicited supportive letters for us from two other Disciples clergy who attested that I was a sincere pacifist, even though one of them had never spoken to me.

Later Dad preached a sermon against the Vietnam War. He also directed the first Planned Parenthood in Amarillo. Although Dad never learned Spanish and held a (normally well-hidden) suspicion of Catholicism – especially for what he regarded as many Catholics' blasphemous reverence for the Virgin Mary – he and Mom moved to South Texas, to a town alongside the Rio Grande, where the population was 90 per cent Mexican American and heavily Catholic. He retired from his pastorate early so that he could serve as the local, unpaid director of Habitat for Humanity and do other humanitarian work on both sides of the border. His social gospel seemed more feisty than ever. Disillusioned by Vietnam and Watergate, his conception of America had grown somewhat jaded. He was no longer the innocent kid who had returned from the Navy at age nineteen, after serving in the Pacific Theater during the triumph of World War II. 'Mexico is a Third World country', he would grumble, 'but most Americans don't care'. And:

'Newt Gingrich knows nothing about poverty; he never talked to a poor person in his life'. He dismissed the possibility of visiting Aspen, Colorado, insisting, 'It's too affluent'. Disliking most Republican leaders, he once criticized President Reagan, but misspoke and called him 'President Nixon'. When I politely corrected him, he deadpanned, 'They're the same'.

He brightened at a local nature sanctuary that abutted the Rio Grande, consulting his Audubon guidebook to identify an occasional, odd bird in the almost empty trees. He cheerfully informed me that this small marsh was the largest airport of every Canada-departing flock on the entire North American flyway and the only US truckstop for wayward tropical birds from Central America, birds that flashed azure, crimson, and amethyst. On our countless fishing trips, he had never noticed or discussed waterfowl; and the unprepossessing swamp seemed anything but a Carnegie Hall for birdsong. He had to be fantasizing. Maybe he was nuts. After he died, though, I learned that Roger Tory Peterson, author of the Audubon guide and the most famous birder in the US, sometimes flew from the Northeast to the Rio Grande, hypnotized by Dad's wetland.

Nuns, a rabbi, and the mayor attended Dad's funeral in 1996, as did his congregation and people living in houses built by Habitat for Humanity. One woman told a local reporter, 'Thanks to God and Rev. Miller, I got my house'. Perhaps I should follow Marsh's example and write more about my father. Both my dad and Marsh's viewed regular Bible study and weekly church attendance (even during vacations) as the *sine qua non* of human existence. Both felt bewildered and squeezed by racial troubles in the Deep South. Both pastored segregationist churches. Neither marched with Martin Luther King. I'm not sure that I could create a sympathetic, yet critical portrait of Dad that would be as full-bodied and as illuminating as Marsh's portrait of his father. Because Sam Bowers didn't live in Shreveport and King didn't lead big demonstrations there, my book would lack the national drama evoked by Marsh, Bass, and McWhorter. I hope, however, that my hypothetical book would explicitly raise certain theological questions that, I think, are implicit in *The Last Days*.

These questions begin with Christianity and American race relations. In his classic, autobiographical *Narrative* from 1845, former slave Frederick Douglass insists that the cruelest slaveholders he encountered were devoted ministers and deacons.<sup>7</sup> The least malevolent slaveowner in the *Narrative* was indifferent to Christianity. Douglass distinguishes between true abolitionist Christianity and the false, slavery-endorsing

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, ed. David Blight (Boston: Bedford, 1993).

Christianity practiced in neighborhoods where, he explains, babies were sold to buy Bibles and the sounds of human auctions mingled with the chimes of church bells. I wonder: do any true and false religions exist and does a religion need to be as heinous as that of Sam Bowers in order to qualify as false? Should Christians pointedly reject ethnocentric, culturally uninformed, war-like and/or anti-Islamic 'Christianity' and utterly separate themselves from such 'Christianity', just as Douglass urged Christians in the British Isles to separate themselves entirely from their denominational brethren who held slaves in the US? Or can a moral institution contain both racist and anti-racist, culturally insensitive and culturally sensitive, pro-war and anti-war elements and attitudes, as many American churches seem to do?

My questions extend to one of the many paradoxes that Reinhold Niebuhr discusses in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Propounding a favorite theme – the difficulties occasioned by excessive pride – he contends that Christians face a great temptation upon their baptism or confirmation, a temptation to which they frequently succumb. In their religious joy, they often imagine themselves freed and exempted from the selfishness and egotism that underlies so much human behavior. Instead of divesting themselves of overarching pride, newly minted Christians can, Niebuhr claims, become even more susceptible to such pride. I would observe that they can mistake their own culturally specific attitudes for God's view of the cosmos. Instead of prompting them to shed their prejudices, their faith can push them to identify their cultural biases with universal truth. (Mohandas Gandhi, who strongly disliked missionaries, sadly observed that, when Christian evangelists from England successfully proselytized their colonial Indian subjects to Christianity, those Indians quickly discarded their own culture, adopting British mores and sipping British brandy.<sup>9</sup> According to E. Stanley Jones, a leading Christian missionary to India, most British and US missionaries there supported British colonial rule and opposed Gandhi's non-violent struggle for an independent India.)<sup>10</sup> Given (in my view) how utterly frequently conversion seems to authorize converts to behave badly toward those they fear, whom they deem Other (whether African, Indian, Native American, Vietnamese, or Iraqi), is such conversion itself utterly problematic? Or, to rephrase the question, what (if any-

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<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Vols. 1 and 2* (New York: Scribner's, 1943).

<sup>9</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, *The Mahatma and the Missionary*, ed. Clifford Manshardt (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949).

<sup>10</sup> E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1948), p. 66.

thing) could happen so that Christian awakening will actually prod people to question and curtail their egotism and ethnocentrism rather than to wallow in self-absorption and regard their biases as holy?

More questions: is it practical to expect large numbers of white Americans to view their own conversion experience as a reason to wrestle with dilemmas presented by Niebuhr and Langdon Gilkey? Or to consider the challenges offered by James Cone and Gloria Anzaldua? Or, for that matter, to weigh the admonitions of Amos and Isaiah about injustice toward the poor? Or to dose themselves against pride instead of merrily worshipping their own nation even as it wreaks havoc in Vietnam or the Middle East? Can Christianity function, in the main, as a warrant against cultural self-righteousness instead of as a 'divine' validation for white (or some other form of) oppression? Or is the Christianity of most white Americans (largely) inseparable from white supremacy, as Malcolm X argued, or from the patriarchy, as some feminists maintain?<sup>11</sup>

My last questions. While *The Last Days* contains analysis, it is mainly a story. Does Marsh consider *The Last Days* theological? If so, does it enact a narrative theology that subverts or complements the 'normal' theology of reasoned, abstract propositions? Does it exemplify narrative theology of the kind outlined by Paul Ricoeur, Stanley Hauerwas, or someone else? If so, are many diaries, letters, memoirs, and other autobiographies – I am thinking especially of works by women – also theological? What if the authors have never read Schleiermacher, Barth, Moltmann, or Cone? If so, should such texts be studied in theology classes? Also: could narrative theology be useful in addressing the temptation toward excessive pride and cultural chauvinism faced by converts? Does it offer any other advantages over propositional or polemical theology? In its focus on individual and social change, can it serve as a species of process theology? Of liberation theology? Can it provide a useful biblical hermeneutic? Finally, if narrative theology is valuable, who should do it in the future and why?

I fully realize that Charles Marsh lacks the space to respond to my queries. An eight-hundred page book might not be long enough. So I apologize for my excess! But I find that Marsh's *The Last Days* prompts such questions, especially when he depicts his father – a sensitive and intelligent man – as someone callous to issues of racial justice (and to the Ku Klux Klan) for a long time. Even as Marsh helps satisfy Charles Eagles's request for accounts drawn in chiaroscuro of those Southern figures in the 1960s who were not in the vanguard for racial quality,

<sup>11</sup> See Keith D. Miller, "'Plymouth Rock Landed on Us': Malcolm X's Whiteness Theory as a Basis for Alternative Literacy', *College Composition and Communication* (Forthcoming).

Marsh leaves me with the feeling that 'moderate' and evangelical Protestantism was a big part of the problem.<sup>12</sup>

*Response to Beverly Prestwood-Taylor and Keith Miller*

*By Charles Marsh*

*University of Virginia, USA*

I appreciate Kelton Cobb's gracious invitation to take part in this conversation on my memoir, *The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South*. I love the beautiful and moving review essays by Keith Miller and Beverly Prestwood-Taylor, which we might better call lyrical essays, and I hope my response helps to illuminate some of the points made eloquently in their pieces. It is good to have as fellow travelers such distinguished scholars and writers as Professors Miller and Prestwood-Taylor.

About ten years ago, while teaching at a Jesuit college in Baltimore and writing monographs and articles in philosophical theology, I began to notice the recurrence of words and images in my notebooks that evoked my childhood in Mississippi. The decision to plow ahead into the unfamiliar territory of narrative non-fiction felt abrupt and slightly dangerous; but born of personal desperation, the decision could not be avoided. One could say that *The Last Days* had its origins in therapeutic needs as much as in theological ones; although the therapeutic, that is, self-respect and proper attention to the emotional life, ought never be denied for the sake of someone else's measure of piety.

At the heart of the book lay questions about my father's decisions and indecisions during his pastorate in the late 1960's in a Southern Baptist church in the town of Laurel, Mississippi, and about my need to make his burdens my own, or at least to dwell inside them for a while. Still, I wanted the memoir to be more than a reconstruction of an interior journey. I wanted to show the way in which the world within and without interpenetrate and collide into history, or more precisely the way that concern for the landscape of the soul eventually leads outward to the clashing and clanging social world. I wanted to use the frame of reference of an evangelical boy coming of age during the most violent period of the civil rights movement, in a county drenched in terror, as a means of capturing the sensibility and moods of a cast of characters unfamiliar in the literature of the civil rights movement, and thus to say something

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<sup>12</sup> For their help with this review-essay, I thank Doris Miller, Elizabeth Vander Lei, and Ralph Luker.

about historical complexity, the thickness of our life-situations and the comedy of our pretensions to holiness. In short, I wanted to tell an honest story.

One takes a risk when writing outside one's discipline and a few theologians have dismissed my foray into narrative non-fiction as journalistic and non-theological. But in fact telling an honest story was an exceedingly difficult task, which placed great pressure on my tendency to fudge autobiographical matters in conversation or render them banal in homiletical blather, and required important resources from my theological training. The most difficult part of the task however was not so much finding the honest story amidst the shards of memory (one is simply never confident of having gotten the story), but of mustering up the courage to accept the summons to a journey that would undoubtedly carry me a long way from home. What if I never got back? What if I embarrassed myself in that strange land of memory and imagination and failed in the craft? What if I got so caught up in the truth-telling that I trampled mercilessly over secrets, wounds and confidences? The memoirist Patricia Hampl has spoken of the 'dead body of privacy lying smashed on the track' as the 'casualty' wrought by the colliding paths of memory and imagination; the collision that is memoir. I often felt like Graham Greene in his own journey without maps, hacking through dense brush in a malaria-drenched trek through the Liberian bush. At some point – in fact just around the time these questions took shape – I began entertaining delusional thoughts about bestsellers and movie rights, thoughts which seem now like fairly transparent defenses against the more plausible scenario of my academic career lying in ruins.

In the company I kept at the time, referring to a book written by a theologian as 'non-theological' amounted to a stinging rebuke. The 'theological' was not only a more pure and elemental way of thinking Christianly than the philosophical, literary, historical and psychological modes; it was also the proper grammar for framing language suitable for the debates and conversations of the church – and, to many orthodox proponents, for language suitable for grasping most all reality. If a theologian appealed to a non-theological category in thinking about some aspect of the created order (the self or sexuality, for example), he was betraying the sufficiency of Christian revelation and its superior inner resources. (When a well-known post-liberal theologian referred to my book *God's Long Summer* as 'sociology and history', he meant that the book lacked more serious attention to God.) But as I began to think about the complicated and insuppressible material appearing in my journals, everywhere demanding narrative order, self-analysis, and precision, I soon encountered the discursive gap between theology and memory, a gap which I further discovered must be appreciated before it can be bridged.

There are times when a theologian must have the good sense to recognize that speaking theologically is inappropriate to speaking the truth about life with God and the fellowship of the Church. For example, it is inappropriate, I think, except in the most general way, to confuse theological formation with emotional and psychological well-being; and I do not think a classic text such as St. Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, based on a model of divine correction, offers much insight for the treatment of illness, even though Gregory's meditation is part of the tradition that forms us as Christians and theological claims brim in its pages. Furthermore, just as I think there is a part of sanctification rarely discussed among theologians and pastors, but which most Christians experience in their faith and practice, namely, that in significant ways God releases the individual in discipleship to autonomous life; so there are regions of experience over which God whispers in our ears, 'Figure it out, friend. You're on your own'. And so there are times when faithfulness to Jesus Christ requires one to leave the motherland of theology; times too when theology is diminished by its self-obsessions, and we must work out the meaning of our salvation by sifting through the detritus of mortality – through newspapers, journals, photographs, and letters – looking for a clue.<sup>13</sup>

Keith Miller asks the excellent question whether memoir subverts or complements 'normal' theology? In the process of attending to its own business, memoir probably does a little of both, but since memoir is finally more about craft than truth (though only slightly more) and theology is more about truth than craft (and in most cases dramatically more), theology needs memoir a little more than memoir needs theology (leaving aside the question of God for a moment); and so to answer Professor Miller's question, memoir both subverts and complements theology though, I think, memoir subverts theology a little more than it complements.

Let me explore this matter by making five provisional conclusions.

1. Memoir is attentive to the idiosyncratic details of experience and runs toward eccentric presentations of life – to the particular ways in which we are on our own. The claim that God alone knows our stories is a beautiful, reassuring and eschatological claim, and altogether unhelpful in coming to terms with the intricacies of being the I that I am. The exquisitely particular dramas that shape us as individual selves cannot be understood by singing, 'Faith of Our Fathers', no matter how loudly we raise our voices.

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<sup>13</sup> See William James's 'Introduction', Volume I, *The Stories and Novels of Ivan Turgenieff*, (New York: Scribners, 1922).

2. Memoir helps to ensure that those aspects of human experience which resist theories of human experience not be forgotten and to preserve the 'sheer phenomenality' of human experience, as John Webster has written more generally of narrative, which can only be appreciated in the particular as such.<sup>14</sup> Memoir has the capacity – and often the courage – to cast light on regions of experience that formal theological discourse often ignores, evades, or even distrusts. However, to say that memoir reaches a level of experience that theological writing evades, ignores, distrusts or simply does not attend to, is not to say that the memoir is theologically irrelevant. Writing and reading memoirs, as Miller and Prestwood-Taylor show us in their own autobiographical narratives, reminds us in important ways that life with God must inspire attunement to a deeper mundane, to the varieties of ordinary life – of 'fate and folly and pity and wonder and beauty' – and to the otherwise lost world of the past.<sup>15</sup>
3. Memoir foregrounds the incommensurable details of lived experience in narrative, as it labors under 'the secret heaviness of experience', where stories live their complete lives.<sup>16</sup> In this manner, memoir casts light on the intersection of the experience of God and the experience of the world and shows us in a more vivid form than theology what it means to say that God's purposes are directed always toward the concrete, historical person in community.
4. Memoir reminds theologians that we need a sense of place in our thinking and writing, a social world alive in time and historical memory, where memory and imaginations are grounded in concrete life. Without a place, we tend to roam freely in a no man's land of concepts without footprints. Thus, memoir calls us back to a language more direct and communicative of the *effects* of the divine-human encounter, reminding us that it is not doctrine, catechism and confession alone that shape us as Christians but doctrine, catechism and confession in the flow of everyday life in particular places.
5. Memoir helps to clean language of its lies, self-deceptions or willful naiveté, to make it capable of connecting us to the world.<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that theology would do better to become something like a refined testimonial; still it is unseemly of theologians to stand guard over their compounds like watchdogs. At the same time it is also best for memoir to accept its theological reticence and risk irreverence for

<sup>14</sup> John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 116.

<sup>15</sup> James, 'Introduction'.

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Hampl, *If I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Landscape of Memory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Jorie Graham, 'Introduction', *Best American Poetry 1990*, xv–xvi.

the sake of honesty and precision. Memoir contributes to theology not by implicitly claiming that theology become story-telling and testimonial – it ought never make such an implicit claim – but by reminding theology that the wisdom, depth and detail of lived experience informs, confirm, measures and often chastens theological claims. (Memoir may of course perpetuate lies, but this speaks to the reason precision and honesty are indispensable in its task; imprecision and dishonesty give memoir an unmistakable odor of inauthenticity, though they may boost sales numbers.)

How then should we understand the relationship between memoir and theology? To *do theology*, means 'to take the whole situation upon us in the fear of God, and in the fear of God to enter into the movement of the era', Karl Barth once wrote.<sup>18</sup> Its audacity is its rhetorical venture into the unknown, into a world of pure gift. To do memoir means to accept one's finite and contingent life-situation. Its audacity comes from the willingness to sojourn in a world bereft of the transporting effects of miracle and doctrine, where all that matters is craft and candor. While theology's business must in some final sense involve the protection of mystery from the encroachments of language; narrative spreads over mystery until it has become all plot, character and feeling seeking to bring the unsaid to language.<sup>19</sup> (Thus, the theologian Rowan Williams speaks of theology as more poetry than narrative.) Yet unlike memoir, theology works under the inescapable burden of making something happen outside the text. Thus, theology sometimes works too hard to make language accommodate its practical and congregational mandates; while memoir tends to quicken speech, thought and understanding in its run toward narrative resolution.

Still, if one believes in the Resurrection, passionate worldliness always opens onto wider vistas, and memoirists and theologians alike should work with a more skillful hand and observant eye. For on precision, discernment and honesty depends – in a most important and yet I think under appreciated way – the trustworthiness of the narrated encounter of God in worldly experience; on them depends whether the theologian or memoirist is a success or a failure, whether he or she is honest with the reader or fudging truth in a polite deferral on worldly and historical complexity. In the end, how sincere we truly are, how desperate and committed we are, is revealed by how hard we are on discipline, how courageous we are to break with academic fashion,

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<sup>18</sup> Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, MA, 1978), p. 294.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, 'Introduction', xv–xvi.

when fashion suffocates life, how willing are we to be honest and accept difficulty.<sup>20</sup> Difficulty is not to be confused with abstraction, vagueness, tripartite distinctions heaped on bipartite distinctions, or the sophomoric construction of idiolectic (when idiolectic is not required). Accepting difficulty must be part of our task, but difficulty must sometimes be pursued in places far from home. Memoir, better than theology, has the courage to live amidst the conflict and chaos of memory and thus to capture the dramas and comedies of fallen creation in vivid form. But theology lives its life in view of the greatest difficulty, the mending of language by revelation and an obedient yielding to its deep and cosmic meanings, apart from which the telling of our life's stories lacks context and purpose.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful for John Utz for allowing me to present some of these thoughts in a forum on theology and the memoir at Duke Divinity School in October 2003.