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New Governor and New Words; SNCC Style and Old Religion

While SNCC made plans for the Freedom Summer a surprising voice of moderation was heard from the white leadership down in Jackson. This was in January at the inauguration of the new governor, Paul B. Johnson, from Hattiesburg, and his running mate, Carrol Garten, from Laurel. Johnson had won the election on the basis of being the strongest segregationist in a campaign where all candidates proclaimed loyalty to segregation and hostility to the Kennedeys as the only issues. His father had once been governor and the present Johnson had once seemed in the family tradition of being on the "moderate" side of state politics. The new governor may even have lost an earlier campaign by being too moderate on race.

Paul Johnson had been lieutenant governor in the popular Ross Barnett administration and claimed the racist mantle in his political campaign. His surprising inaugural address contained a new tone for a Mississippi governor. Johnson said his administration would look to the future and announced that "hate, prejudice or ignorance will not lead Mississippi" 3a while he was governor. The American press and even the National Council of Churches praised this. In the Movement we thought of it as nothing more than words to improve the image of Mississippi and wondered if the governor had a speech writer who worked in the Chamber of Commerce. But, whatever our cynicism, we were genuinely surprised and wished this might be real moderation.

However, the speech by the Lt. Governor, Carroll Garten, carried more meaning for us. The Governor spoke words that he knew the nation would mark; the Lt. Governor, with his eyes on the future and his desire to run for governor, spoke words that white Mississippi would mark. This was the message that mattered. Garten, also, had not always been an

extremist on the race issue and even once ran against Jim Eastland for the U.S.Senate. But Garten knew the mood of Mississippi; and it had nothing to do with moderation. In his inaugural speech the Lt. Governor sounded all the old battle cries and called on everyone to "wage a brave, determined and continuing battle against any invasion (underlining mine), from any source, from any group, of our heritage, sovereignty, constitutional rights and Southern way of life." 3b

The liberals and moderates of the national press ignored this speech; they did not want to hear such things. They did want to hear the moderate words of the Governor and to convince themselves that, finally, Mississippi would behave, the moderates would take over, and the rest of the country could forget about Mississippi -- again.

In the Movement the essential message that came with the inauguration of a new team to replace the Barnett administration was that "the fight is on." COFO continued plans to bring about that very "invasion" the Lt. Governor feared. Once COFO decided to go ahead with the summer project, this did not mean regular Movement activities in the state would let up. Continuing the political emphasis of the Freedom Vote, the main emphasis planned for the winter of 1964 was on voter registration campaigns.

In January a new plan was initiated in COFO. This was to focus most of the staff and resources on one single county for the moment. The pattern was developed in the "Freedom Day" in Hattiesburg. The goal was to get a large group of local people, over a hundred if possible, to gather in a church, then walk together to the Courthouse to take the registration test. Such action was both a demonstration to America that these people were being denied the right to vote, and, more importantly, a demonstration to the other black citizens of the community that large numbers of their friends were trying to register. This produced response from other people and also offered some degree of protection to the people who often faced economic harassment or worse when they had been easily singled out in earlier registration attempts.

Lawrence Guyot, recent Tougaloo graduate, was the SNCC and COFO leader working with the Forest County Movement. On the first "Freedom Day" no one knew what to expect; mass arrests were certainly a possibility. Guyot wanted to have several hundred people take the registration test; jailing would not accomplish that. But the risk had to be taken. To lessen the chance of arrest or violence COFO invited a group of northern ministers, mostly white, to come to Hattiesburg to accompany the black citizens to the Courthouse.

There were Freedom Rallies the night before and the morning of the Freedom Day. All the SNCC leaders from Atlanta came. COFO leaders such as Aaron Henry and Fannie Lou Hamer came down from the Delta. I brought some Tougaloo students and some visiting northern white ministers. Almost one hundred people marched in single file to the Courthouse. The white police marched up the cold, rainy downtown street in military ranks,

bearing rifles and shotguns. The demonstrators were not instantly arrested; we were allowed to stand on the courthouse steps. We were denied entry but we remained; we then expected a charge of blocking the entrance. After four years of unconstitutional arrests SNCC and COFO were holding a public protest demonstration. This was an important break through for the state.

All day long a picket line of local citizens, COFO workers, and visiting ministers was maintained in front of the building. The black citizens who had known so many years of failure in their efforts to register could see the friendly pickets and found it easier to decide to try again, or, even, take the test for the first time.

There were arrests, almost hourly, throughout the day, but only one or two people at a time. These were usually not local black citizens but were the Movement leaders like Bob Moses and Lawrence Guyot. The campaign continued every day; over 500 people took the test during the first month. The presence of the outside ministers was very important. By the end of the sixth week of the drive over 100 ministers had come to the City to help. Many marched with the blacks to the Courthouse in the morning and then spent the afternoon visiting white ministers and church leaders of their particular denomination.

The local white religious leaders either did not believe blacks were discriminated against or did not believe most blacks were qualified or deserved the right to vote. The hostility of these whites was manifest to the northern ministers. The police were also hostile. About a dozen ministers were arrested for "disorderly conduct." The ministers were recruited from many denominations but chiefly by the National Council of Churches, the United Presbyterian Commission on Religion and Race, the Episcopal Society for Cultural

and Racial Unity, and the Rabbinical Association of America. This ministerial presence in Hattiesburg was maintained all winter and spring and became part of the Freedom Summer work in that county. By early spring a special minister's "Freedom House" had been set up where their work was coordinated and where some ate and slept; a few were housed with local blacks. A United Presbyterian minister, Bob Beech, was in charge.

The northern ministers who came to SNCC projects like Hattiesburg also played another role which greatly surprised those of them who realized it. They helped make the Movement respectable to many black ministers and church members. In almost every community most of the local ministers and church leaders were initially opposed to the Movement. The typical church of the poor people had developed a religion which could offer little in the way of changes in the problems of the present world and so concentrated on teaching its members to accept the present state of things and look to heaven for their reward. If there was any concept that this life might be drastically improved, these churches still taught the people that they should be patient and wait for that day when God would intervene in the affairs of this world and straighten out things. Either way the people understood that there was no relation between religion and social change. In this the vast majority of black churches in Mississippi had a theology very similar to that of most of the white churches.

Most black ministers in the churches that served the poor had almost no theological study or special preparation for the ministry. Some who had attempted to do such work had attended part time courses in fundamentalist local schools, which often granted all sorts of degrees. The most wide spread training program for black ministers was under the guidance

of the white Southern Baptist Church in Mississippi, the most conservative, most pro-segregation, and most numerous denomination in white Mississippi. This seminary type program stressed church administration, preaching skills, and Biblical studies. The leadership of this program was genuinely concerned about needs in the black community and church, but not the denomination that supported the program.

Most black ministers in the poor community served several churches, often in different towns; the preacher gave a sermon about twice a month, sometimes only one Sunday a month in this kind of situation. Most of these ministers were also poor, although almost always better off financially than the members of their churches; these men usually had other full time jobs during the week. The minister who worked for a white employer who could fire him instantly if his church, much less he, himself, became involved in Civil Rights activities, was not a likely candidate to offer leadership to the Movement, or even welcome the Movement to his town. Their normal response was to tell the church members to have nothing to do with the Civil Rights business and to insist that no Movement meetings be held in their church building.

The black churches which served the middle classes were not so numerous as those that served the poor, but were almost as conservative. The ministers of those churches were usually college trained men who worked at their churches on a full time basis; many had little traditional seminary work. Many of these ministers were not well paid by their churches, although certainly earning more than most black men in the state. Many church members here earned higher salaries than the minister. Many such ministers had additional sources of income such as a part time teaching job and their wives often worked in

professional jobs such as teaching. Many ministers of middle class churches were a legitimate part of the circle of businessmen in the black world. They often owned property, rental housing, or participated in other financial ventures. Most ministers of middle class churches were against the Civil Rights Movement when it first came to their community, although once the Movement was underway, these men and their churches were quicker to open their doors than most of the poor churches.

The congregations in the middle class churches had their basic needs served by their religion, just as did the poor people in their churches. The religion taught in the middle class church placed a heavy emphasis on morality and middle class virtues, almost as if to set themselves apart from the great mass of the black population, or to use the Church as an added reinforcement to the teachings about a proper life style set by the family and the middle class school. There was also great stress on dignity in the worship service and order in everything; rules and patterns covered every possible thing from the conduct of a church school committee meeting to the posture of the ushers. Lower class churches also stressed rules and order, but never to the same degree.

The members of the middle class church found their religion very satisfactory. This was not the place where they wanted the Movement to talk about the reality of the world. Any serious relation of church and society did not fit in this situation. These people had found some economic security and comfort even within the segregated world of Mississippi. They were proud of their achievements and wanted to celebrate this in church; not talk about the problems of the world. And, most significantly, their economic security was, for most people, a tenuous thing. Most middle class people were professionals of some sort who were

still subject to the will of the white man, but just enough removed so that people could try to deny or forget it. Most professional people were public school teachers. School principals were usually officials of their local churches as well. No public school teacher could belong to a civil rights organization nor even talk about such things in the classroom.

Other professionals, like doctors, were a little more free of such direct pressure. Black businessmen also had more freedom than the teacher. But any black person could be hurt by state and municipal licensing boards or by white merchants and bankers. In general the economic security of the middle class was so insecure that they were less willing to take risks than the poor. Even if the minister of the middle class church had been ready to support the Movement, the school teachers and others in his congregation would have let him know that this was no business or concern of the church. In their most important attitudes and teachings the black middle class churches of Mississippi were very similar to the white middle class churches, although, of course, the black churches never did anything so absurd as refuse to admit white people into their worship services. The middle class church for both races in general had the purpose of blessing the status quo.

In some sections of Mississippi there were also small groups of black people, usually middle class, who belonged to the Episcopal or even the Roman Catholic churches. Some areas of the state, such as the Gulf Coast and, to a lesser degree, Natchez, had a large white Roman Catholic population and had also always had a large black Roman Catholic population in segregated churches and segregated parochial schools. In other parts of the state most black Roman Catholics were recent converts. For many people such conversion was part of a wider conversion to a higher social status and the new church was a way of showing the

break with the religion of the black masses. The Civil Rights Movement held little appeal for such converts and the churches, schools, and priests were under the authority of the white bishops.

In every black community there were some men and women, especially the young, in every social class and in almost every church who were ready for the Movement. They expressed their support as soon as there was opportunity, and worked to persuade their minister to support the Movement and their fellow church members to allow their facilities to be used for Movement meetings. They often met hostility and suffered; in Canton Mrs. Annie Divine, leader of CORE and MFDP, was rejected as a teacher in the public schools and in her church Sunday School.

The Mississippi black people who became active in the Movement usually gave religious motivations for everything they did and found vital strength and comfort for their work and suffering from their Christian faith. Most local Movement people were bitter about the attitudes of so many ministers and church people, although never condemned so much as the public school teachers and administrators.

At any public Movement meetings it was assumed that religion was part of the rhetoric. Most people were quite sincere in this. Aaron Henry was active in Methodist church affairs as well as being the chairman of COFO. In his campaign for Governor his political talks always included Biblical stories and reminded that it was the will of God for black people to vote.

The SNCC staff understood the religion of the people of Mississippi very well. They despised the piety and hypocrisy of the white churches; they were angry and bitter about the

conservatism of the black churches. They wanted the poor people to stand up and fight for a better life; SNCC saw religion as a terrible crutch for most people. SNCC laughed at the familiar scene in almost every town of at least one leading black minister who drove a Cadillac and dressed in expensive suits, whose highly polished shoes would never get dusty from walking one of the back alleys where the poor had to live.

The Southern SNCC workers were very familiar with the local religious patterns. They had all grown up in these churches and, at one time, had been able to accept and express their religious feelings as easily and naturally as older people in the Movement such as Mrs. Hamer or Dr. Henry. The northern blacks in SNCC were just a little further removed from this religious tradition, but soon found they could use it when necessary and sound almost as natural as any preacher who had never left Mississippi. The Southern SNCC workers also learned to preach in the accepted style and were always more convincing than their northern comrades. A few SNCC staff may have been a little cynical about religion; other SNCC people were trying to come to their own understanding of religion while they were still disgusted at the normal religion in their communities. For most in SNCC the ideals of the Movement were best expressed in the traditional religious language with a new emphasis. For some SNCC staff the use of religious language was both a necessary device for communication and an expression of something that was sincere if not a literal belief in all the traditional forms and words they were forced to use.

The typical Movement speech of a SNCC worker in Mississippi combined lessons in politics, economics, American history, and traditional religion. The religious portions of the message served several purposes: this made the audience feel at ease and accept the Civil

Rights worker; it reassured the people that God was on their side; it served to accent the Civil Rights message, this was what God wanted the Church, the people to be doing.

A master of this style of political preaching was Lawrence Guyot, the SNCC director of the Hattiesburg Movement for COFO. Guyot was a native of Mississippi whose home was on the Gulf Coast. He was a big man, weighing over 225 pounds with light skin, not unusual for a black man from that section of the state. He was a member of the Roman Catholic Church, also not unusual on the Coast. Guyot had recently graduated from Tougaloo College where his studies had been in the sciences. Instead of going on to medical school when he left college Guyot joined SNCC to work full time for the Movement in his home state. In his SNCC preaching Guyot never developed quite the emotional shouting style of some SNCC men in the Delta. But Guyot still used the traditional symbols and told the audience what they needed to hear.

The black community of Hattiesburg had as many ministers and churchmen and other conservatives who were afraid of the Movement as any other place in the state. By January of 1964 and the time of the first COFO "Freedom Day" voter registration campaign there were several black ministers who were helping the Movement and whose churches were open for Freedom Rallies or even as assembly points for demonstrations. But this had taken slow and careful work. Guyot and the other Movement workers had to convince the local people that civil rights workers were Christians; any criticism on that point and there would have been no communication. But, still, there were many churches which would not allow Movement meetings and many ministers who were not helping, if not openly hostile. Many black neighborhoods had never seen a Movement meeting because there were no facilities

and their churches were closed.

Thus in the first few days of the Hattiesburg campaign Lawrence Guyot found it necessary to lead a very strange kind of demonstration. Instead of marching to the Courthouse he led a small group of people to a local black church which had refused to open its doors to the Movement. The minister here had criticized the Movement and condemned a young girl in the congregation for her Movement activity. Guyot, the girl, several friends and several SNCC workers in dungaree overall uniforms, came back to the church. Several adults who supported the Movement also came. This group knelt down on the front porch of the Greater Mt. Bethel Church. For a time there was silence as the Deacon stood at the door, beckoning to church members to enter the building by a side door or to ignore the demonstrators and step over them. Inside the church there was singing and then preaching. On the outside Guyot began to preach--to his demonstrators, to the angry Deacon, and to any church members who could hear.

"We are here," Guyot intoned, in an appropriately solemn tone, "because we are Christians. The problems of any member of any church are the problems of all Christians. We believe the church is made up of people not stones. We act, not against the minister as an individual, but against his action, which was directed against humanity." 4 The description of the church being more than just a building of wood or stone was one of Guyot's standard sermon devices. He carried a large Bible and thumbed through it as he talked. Then he closed his service by asking the people to practice their Christianity in their daily lives -- and work in the Movement.

SNCC faced the problem of the closed church in almost every community in the state

and sometimes handled it just the way Guyot did in Hattiesburg. SNCC workers with COFO and the MFDP, later that year, spent many months working to bring the Movement to life in Natchez (where the klan was strong and the black community afraid of church bombings as well as all the natural conservative factors). Dorie Ladner, another Tougaloo student who had dropped out of school to work full time with the Movement, staged a Freedom Rally on the lawn of a black church whose doors were locked one evening and I had accepted her request to be the preacher that night. We sang familiar hymns as well as Freedom Songs.

Dorie told the several hundred people gathered in front of us that Jesus was crucified because he mixed religion and the problems of the world, the same problems that Natchez had, and that Jesus expected His people to do something about Natchez. She was a much better preacher than I, but I followed her line, as piously as I could. I did mention how sad it was to see black churches that closed their doors and claimed there was no relation between Christianity and the race problem in Mississippi; I talked about the number of black students from Tougaloo who had been arrested at churches with closed doors in Jackson white only churches.

Once the black churches of a community were open they became the actual and symbolic centers of the Movement. The SNCC workers would stand in the pulpit and preach their message of freedom to the congregation. In the context of the sermon any point could be made. During the Hattiesburg campaign Lawrence Guyot preached almost every night of the week for almost three months. The same points were usually made, changing only the details of the next day's demonstration and location of the class for those who wanted to take the voter registration test. The speakers and the congregation came to enjoy the repetition

and familiarity of these freedom sermons as much as they did the regular Sunday sermons.

Typical of the SNCC style is the preaching of Guyot at Truelight Baptist Church:

> Are we ready to push? Are you ready to join the Movement ...? These people have to be voted out of office. Sen. Eastland must be voted out of office ...
>
> If Jesus Christ came to Mississippi tonight, he'd be arrested tomorrow. 5a

The Congregation shouts: Amen, That's the Truth. Preach on, brother. Tell it like it is. Oh Lord, Oh Lord ... And Guyot tells it:

> We have to change everything --the Negroes, the white man, the ministers, everyone! 5b

Lawrence Guyot, like most SNCC people, talks about many things in such sermons, including the problems of employment and education, of poverty and hunger, in America for all poor people, black and white. The broad concerns of SNCC and the Movement in the first month of 1964 are brought before the people. They applaud talk of brotherhood and the unity of mankind. SNCC "preachers" do not hesitate to criticize the American government's military spending and war policies:

> The government is spending billions to kill people, but I am ready to start living with the rest of the human race! 6

This is sentiment with which the audience can agree and no one thinks it is out of

place at a meeting called to urge voter registration in Forest County, Mississippi, sometimes almost hinting that to stand up to the notorious white registrar, Therron Lynd, was to stand up to Satan.

Guyot had developed another device in some of his sermons to shock the people into realizing that the praying and shouting they were doing at this Movement meeting had to be carried into their daily lives, into the streets, into the Courthouse, into the prisons. This separated the Movement spirit from the deadening normal religious spirit. At the close of his message Guyot would slap his hand on the Bible and say:

> Damn! I'm saying damn in church on purpose.
> A church isn't stones, it's people -- you and me.
> And we don't have to be in a church to be
> Christians. 7

Then Brother Guyot would again outline the plans for the next day's demonstrations, making it quite clear that the Movement was the Church and the Christians would obey God and try to register to vote.

Lawrence Guyot and Dorie Ladner were joined in this Movement preaching style by other former Tougaloo students like Hollis Watkins and MacArthur Cotton. This SNCC preaching used the same language and traditional style that the students still at Tougaloo College used. The SNCC staff off campus were more apt to talk about politics and economics than the campus students, who were also part of SNCC. The religious expression of the college students was a very natural thing, giving voice to the faith they had learned in Sunday School and Church and used naturally to express their sincere feelings when facing

jail or talking about brotherhood or knocking on the closed doors of a white church. The words and symbols were the same for the fulltime SNCC field workers but these people had known more suffering, more frustration, more corruption and failure in all churches, black or white. The black students on campus and the black students in the field once had the same religion; now they used the same words, the words all black Mississippians used,but it was not so easy for the men and women going through the hell of a constant struggle with Mississippi to be so sure what these words really did mean or to be so sure what they themselves meant by those words.

Certainly SNCC had little use for the Church as they saw it except the use they could get out of the Church for the Movement. But most of the SNCC workers were deeply spiritual, even mystical, but in no traditional religious way. This faith, this religion, was expressed in the dream of the beloved community and in the singing. "We Shall Overcome" was the battle song of the adults in the Mississippi Movement; but the song of SNCC staff in Mississippi was a slow, sad, beautiful song written after the murder of Herbert Lee in Amite County, in the town of Liberty, in the fall of 1961 during SNCC's first voter registration campaign:

> We've been 'buked and we've been scorned,
> We've been talked about sure's you're born.
> But we'll never turn back. No, we'll never turn back
> Until we've all been freed and we have equality.
>
> We have walked thru the shadows of death.
> We've had to walk all by ourselves.

We have served our time in jail

With no money for to go our bail.

We have hung our head and cried,

Cried for those like Lee who died,

Died for you and died for me,

Died for the cause of equality.

Every verse of this song grows slower and slower, more haunting and more powerful as the chorus is repeated after each verse until the final time when it is almost a benediction given by each person in the circle to all the brothers and sisters as each pledges their faith:

But we'll never turn back. No, we'll never turn back

Until we've all been freed

and we have equality.