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*Review of God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and  
Civil Rights*

Steven R. Goldzwig

Marquette University, [steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu](mailto:steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu)

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*God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights.* By Charles Marsh. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997; pp. xi +276. \$24.95.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Charles Marsh, an associate professor of theology at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland, takes theology and its attendant modes of religious commitment seriously as a force in social relations. The result is both formidable and informative. Whether one is engaged in active reform or the machinations of active or passive resistance to change, the inspiration is often drawn from doctrinal and denominational traditions and insights. This is a fact that has too often been overlooked in many scholarly treatments of social movements, and even within studies of the civil rights movement in particular—where religious traditions are paid lip service, but often not studied in-depth because of conventional disciplinary boundaries and concerns.

How one enacts one's religious beliefs often mirrors preferred social, political, and institutional arrangements. In pitting the gospel of individual salvation against the social gospel, for example, those who work for and against change display differing religious epistemologies and work from different premises toward radically divergent goals. By taking these theological commitments as seriously as their proponents, Marsh provides added scope and depth to a subject in dire need of this kind of attention.

Marsh's method may be a bit too eclectic for some. He bases his observations on narratives drawn from five participants whose lives converged in 1964 during the Freedom Summer: Fannie Lou Hamer, the legendary civil rights activist and spiritual leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; Sam Holloway Bowers Jr., Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi; Reverend William Douglas Hudgins of the First Baptist Church of Jackson, whose larger-than-life presence cast its shadow across the entire state of Mississippi; Reverend Edwin King, a liberal white Methodist chaplain at Tougaloo College, a black institution of higher learning in Jackson, Mississippi, who also served as the National Committeeman and later as candidate for Lieutenant Governor for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; and Cleveland Sellers, a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staff member during the summer of 1964 and a subsequent proponent of black power. Each, in his or her own way, appropriated religious roots to foster or resist social change. While these mini-biographies may not give the definitive account of the unique lives led during this tumultuous period, the stories evoke much insight about ourselves and the legacy of the civil rights movement in the United States. Each of these rich, powerful narratives should be read and savored. It is impossible to do them justice here.

In truth, Marsh's recounting of these particular stories helps us to understand our present a bit more clearly—even as we are simultaneously reminded of the roots of the divisions that remain. The future is ensconced in the memories evoked

in this collection. Marsh's metaphor for these accountings is that they represent a kind of "clearburning," one aspect of which envisages "preparation for a time when whites and blacks together will reckon with their common humanity" (9). Marsh is very much interested in the process of creating a useable past to chart a common future. In the process, he makes us rethink the "beloved community" and what it might take now to transform such a beatific vision into social and political reality.

What is particularly striking about these accounts is that the interlocutors in this great human struggle come alive. The daily activities, outrageous antics, and stark brutality outlined in these narratives give pause and, at times, evoke compassion. Whether the reader is inspired or angered (and sometimes, for this reader, this occurred simultaneously) he or she will be somehow different for having been subjected to and having had to grapple with these important, often mesmerizing stories.

Marsh's efforts will disappoint those looking for grand theory and clear, systematic explanation for how religion informed and shaped the larger civil rights movement. Marsh clearly avoids such a goal. But for those with less grandiose and more grounded aspirations, I can think of no better contemporary book delineating the power of religion in shaping our notions of morality and justice to the contours and constraints of an engaged and engaging political life. As a practicing public theologian, Marsh reveals religion's crucial role in inspiring human action for good and for evil in a complex world—a world made more complex by the intriguing avenues and conflicting strands of human spiritual imagination. This is a welcome addition to a body of literature that I hope continues to grow and thrive. Marsh has crafted an engaging, learned, and important work.

Marsh's book is a fitting companion to sociologist Doug McAdam's classic *Freedom Summer*. It also usefully supplements Taylor Branch's recent treatment of the Freedom Summer in *Pillar of Fire*. The book would be a helpful classroom supplement to a course on social movements or the civil rights movement. This book should also play an important role outside the classroom, where the discussion of the relation between religion and politics continues to attract attention and motivate concern.

To the narratives he re-presents, Marsh has added a necessary narrative to a large literature, which in itself is no mean accomplishment. The faith journeys recounted in these narratives are compelling and Marsh tells them in a compelling manner. Indeed, the attempt to theorize social change itself is now put into question without careful incorporation of the religious dimensions found in the narratives Marsh has so captivantly recapitulated. Anyone interested in understanding change in public policy or the intricacies of social movements directed toward or opposing such change cannot now help but give at least part of their attention to this very public theologian who has given us a new compass for directing our interpretation of the ongoing debates on race relations in the United States.