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Robert Colby Nelson

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THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, THURSDAY, APRIL 2, 1964

## Historian's View

# Mississippi Branded Closed Society

By Robert Colby Nelson  
Chief of the Midwest Bureau of  
The Christian Science Monitor

University, Miss.

One of the most controversial figures in this state today is a historian who charges that Mississippi is a "closed," "totalitarian" society.

He is Prof. James W. Silver of the University of Mississippi. One hardly expects to find such a critic on this campus, so steeped is it in the traditions of the South in general, Mississippi in particular.

Frequently during the more than 25 years that Dr. Silver has been at "Ole Miss," he has spoken out against prejudice and bigotry in the affairs of Mississippi.

His charges have brought countless angry rebuttals.

"I believe that I am doing a great service by telling the truth," he recently remarked to a student reporter at "Ole Miss." "I am concerned with reality, not a public image."

### Views Categorized

"I have given all my adult life to this school," he went on in the interview published last December in *The Mississippian*, the school newspaper. "This is more my school than anyone else's on campus."

He has been called a radical and an Uncle Tom. He categorizes his politics as conservative middle of the road.

"I think the Negro should have equality of opportunity and equality before the law," he says. "All citizens should be treated alike—they are not in Mississippi. It's immoral and indecent that someone should be required to serve in the Army without being allowed to participate in the workings of his society."

Asked why he remains at "Ole Miss," in the light of his deep distress over conditions in the state he replied:

"Some days I'm loyal to the school and some days I'm mad enough at someone to stay just to irritate him."

### Conflict Seen

In the past five months such irritations appear to have reached a peak. Last Nov. 7, Dr. Silver addressed the Southern Historical Association (of which he was then president) in Asheville, N.C. His subject—"Mississippi: The Closed Society."

[His book under the same title is to be published in May.]

The talk was a 43-page searching, documented, hard-hitting warning of worsening conflict ahead in Mississippi.

Mississippi ever to be elected president of the Southern Historical Association. He wrote "Mississippi in the Confederacy" as a memorial to the confederacy in addition to three other books. And he was one of those who started the Mississippi Historical Society.

Mississippi leaders, however, were furious with his "closed society" speech.

One newspaper columnist labeled the professor's attitudes "heavy propaganda for compulsory race-mixing."

A Mississippi congressman, while not mentioning the professor by name, left little doubt whom he had in mind when he called for "Mississippi to fumigate its college staffs" and replace the casualties "with professors who will teach Americanism and not foreign ideologies."

A former governor derided the speech.

Students and others, skipping over the full import and breadth of the long statement, chided the professor about his freedom to speak out in such a "closed society."

### Address Criticized

Many Mississippi newspapers either ignored the address or criticized it without thoroughly reporting its contents. As this is written, its impact continues to nettle the state. The following may fairly be said to be major summary points made by Dr. Silver in his remarks:

"For more than a century Mississippians have refused to be bound by the national will. . . .

"Since Reconstruction Mississippians have had no real reason to believe that they were not free to handle the race question as they wished, without meaningful interference from the federal government; and when they now discover that all their bluster and subterfuge and intransigence will avail them nothing, they have little to fall back on except blind rage and fierce hatred.

"In committing itself to the defense of the biracial system, Mississippi has erected a totalitarian society which to the present moment has eliminated the ordinary processes by which change may be channeled. Through its police power, coercion and force prevail instead of accommodation, and the result is social paralysis. Thus, the Mississippian who prides himself on his individuality in reality lives in a climate where nonconformity is forbidden, where the white man is not free, where he does

not dare to express a deviating opinion without looking over his shoulder. . . .

### Intolerance Charged

"Mississippi is the way it is not because of its views on the Negro but because of its closed society, its refusal to allow freedom of inquiry or to tolerate 'error of opinion.' The social order that refused to conform to national standards insists upon strict conformity at home. While complaining of its own persecuted minority station in the United States, it rarely considers the Negro minority as having rights in Mississippi.

### Silence Deplored

"With the great silence from the men of good will," Dr. Silver concludes, "and the disposition of the good people to let things run their course, there can be little hope for anything constructive in Mississippi in the next decade. . . . There is small reason to be-

lieve," the professor asserts, "that they will somehow develop the capability to [resume their obligations to the nation] themselves, to do it, as Faulkner says, in time. If not, the closed society will become the open society with the massive aid of the country as a whole, backed by the power and authority of the federal government."

What is the outlook, then, for Mississippi today? he was asked.

"Civil rights workers in Mississippi," he remarked to this reporter, "instead of being defeated are more aggressive than ever. And on the other side, the 'status quo boys' also are more determined than ever. I foresee a full confrontation ahead."

One of a series of articles on Mississippi.

He was not without hope that Mississippians one day "will drop the mockery of the late Confederacy and resume their obligations as Americans."  
But on the other hand, he expressed concern that "for the foreseeable future, the people of Mississippi will plod along the troubled road of resistance, violence, anguish, and injustice, moving slowly until engulfed in the predictable cataclysm."

To those who question his loyalty to Mississippi, incidentally, he mentions that he is the only person from Missis-