

the Grain of salt

Union Theological Seminary

THOMAS CRITICIZES CHURCHES SILENCE.

FORUM ON BERLIN CRISIS

Chances for peace in Berlin do exist, but the churches have generally failed to speak out in this desperate situation, Norman Thomas, widely-known American Socialist party leader, minister and author, declared at the Monday Noon Forum October 2.

Speaking on "The Berlin Crisis" Thomas first discussed the political side of the problem and then considered the position of the churches in the current situation.

"If there isn't peace, there isn't much else that will matter", Thomas began. He said that those who believe right and liberty will live only if the United States stands firm--even to the point of using nuclear weapons--fail to reckon with the consequences of war.

According to him, the consequences are: "Both the United States and the U.S.S.R. will be obliterated. Neither can emerge as the victor. The power vacuum will be filled probably by China. ...As for liberty or any other humane qualities surviving, there is hardly a chance".

Thomas conceded that some Americans may survive a nuclear war, but he argued that immediate general and widespread destruction would be a deep psychological blow. He contended that a severe dictatorship would result and those Americans who are left could not be much defense against anything else.

To those who believe "God will take care of the consequences", Thomas remarked, "God has never overruled the consequences of man's folly".

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OUR STYLE OF LIFE.

THEME OF CABINET RETREAT

The Student Cabinet recently spent a day at Lake Sebago in retreat from Union Seminary and New York City. We thought talked, played, planned, and worshipped. It was a good day. But now we are here, and what does it mean?

We discussed plans for the Cabinet's work in the coming year. In this we watered (if not planted a tree) that will be known by its fruits in the months to come. With each Monday Noon Forum we will be aware that there is a forum committee at work. With each mimeographed sheet conveying information on a social issue we will be reminded that we have a social committee doing its job. With each Sunday evening struggle back from field work to the Social Hall for cocoa and cookies we will utter a brief prayer of thanks for the Social committee.

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SPECIAL FEATURE.

FREEDOM RIDES IN RETROSPECT
By Robert McAfee Brown.

I have been asked by the editor of the Grain to offer some reflections-in-retrospect about my participation in a Freedom Ride early this summer. What did I learn from those swift-moving, dramatic and occasionally frightening episodes, that might have ongoing meaning for my understanding of Christian ethics and Christian faith? I shall try to speak honestly and I shall speak en famille, trying to sort out a few of the reactions that emerge after a passage of three months.

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1. I must first point to a danger, of which the very writing of this article is an example. This is the danger of "taking a stand" in a particular situation and seeking to make spiritual capital out of it in lots of other situations. I have often remarked about the easy way we flabby American Christians use the East German Christians as a proof that Christian faith has vitality. I am afraid it is similarly easy to let isolated actions of our own get us off the hook of continued involvement. If someone says to me, "What are you doing about racial injustice?", I hope I will have the grace not to respond self-righteously, "Look, Mac, I went on a Freedom Ride." But it is painfully easy to let something that I "did" in June become a rationalization for doing nothing in October. That I "did something" for a few tumultuous days and nights, does not give me the privilege of disengaging myself for the next few tumultuous months and years, even if in my weary moments I wish it did. We cannot, in other words, let past involvements go bail for contemporary responsibilities; the most we can do is draw on the past involvements as resources for meeting contemporary responsibilities a little more creatively.

2. I have learned something else while riding busses from Washington to Tallahassee. I learned what it means to be hated. I learned what it means to be a terribly lonely minority surrounded by many people almost all of whom hate your guts. I learned, in short, what it means in many parts of America today to be a Negro. I didn't, of course, learn this the way the Negro learns it. For my intensive identification with his cause was only temporary. In whatever distresses our group might be plunged, we knew that in a short time we would be released from them and would return to our fairly comfortable, fairly bourgeois, modes of existence. And that, of course, was not a possibility for the Negroes we met on our trip. They had to remain with the sullen hatred always around them, with violence always a possibility, with suffering their lot for enduring the status quo and greater suffering their lot for challenging it. But, at least for a few days, I knew something of this. Not much, as any Negro I am sure would tell me, but something. Enough at least so that I can never again (if I ever could) give any credence to statements like, "Race relations in our town are excellent," or "Negroes prefer things the way they are."

3. I also learned that it isn't very easy to love people who hate you. Perhaps that's the understatement of the century. To be fully honest, I'd have to say that my reaction was a desire to "hate them with perfect hatred," and although that sentiment may have canonical status, I'm afraid we can't allow it to be binding on us. The waitresses in the Tallahassee bus terminal who glared at us with such total disgust, and refused to serve us because we were sitting, Negro and white, next to one another, did at least one thing for my spiritual life. They helped me to realize that my attitude toward them stood under just as heavy condemnation as their vigorous dislike of me. I didn't feel much of the "active, outgoing goodwill" we were supposed to epitomize in such situations, and I marvel (in recalling that part of the trip) that any Negro can feel anything but deep and burning and bitter hatred toward all white people.

4. I discovered that one must be prepared to be misunderstood. So long as one is convinced of the rightness of what he is doing (as I was in this case), this is not too difficult, perhaps, to live with. But where, in one's own mind, the issues of right and wrong are not fully clear, it can be jarring and upsetting to be so totally misunderstood. The misunderstandings were particularly apparent in the mail I received. Item: "So you publicity-seeking ministers finally managed to get yourselves arrested. What do you want now - a Purple Heart?" Item: "You are a moral coward." Item: "Your appeal to violence and agitation by going on a communist-inspired Freedom Ride is no way for a minister of the gospel to behave." Item: "Your action will undo the patient work of decades."

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In the face of all this one can say to himself, "It is a small thing to me to be judged of men; he that judgeth me is the Lord," but it is not always easy to say it with the ringing conviction of St Paul. At the same time it would be very dangerous to count on the plaudits of men as a way of vindicating one's action. Here, I think, one simply walks by faith, offering up both the little successes and the many failures to the God who can make even the wrath of men to praise him.

5. I discovered in a new way the importance of law. That's a truism on paper. But it's a blessedly real thing when you are face to face with angry White Citizens Council members who would like nothing better than to clobber you, and would do so willingly if the police weren't on hand.

But the law is not merely a defensive help. It is also an offensive weapon. One of the things that has been hardest to get across to people has been the notion that the Freedom Rides are basically trying to test the enforcement of existing laws. The law is clear: interstate passengers may not be discriminated against in interstate busses or terminals. All we asked for were the rights to which we were entitled under law. The objectives, therefore, were almost absurdly minimal. We were simply asserting our right to sit together, wash together and eat together, under pledge that under no circumstances would we demand these rights save by peaceful and non-violent means.

But another matter is at stake in the whole complex issue of integration and law. In our case, we felt the federal law was good, and we were merely trying to abide by it. But there are situations when the law is bad. And these are the more difficult situations, for these are the situations in which one may feel called upon to break the law (and pay the penalty), in the name of a conviction that the law is evil and therefore not binding upon the conscience. This is the last action of the Christian, I feel, rather than the first, but it may often, in local situations, be the only way of witnessing against injustice.

6. This raises another baffling matter. How, in practical terms, does law relate to love? Law is very clearly, on a Freedom Ride, several cuts below love, just as it is in Niebuhrian theology. For the impact of a Freedom Ride is not likely to be the impact of a great wave of engulfing love. It will almost inevitably arouse hostility and hatred. Is it, then, no longer a valid exercise of love? It can be, I think, on two counts. First, it can be an act of identification with Negroes in a community, an attempt to show that somebody cares enough to endure with them for at least a few hours. That's not very much, and not very much must be claimed for it, but I remain humbled by the degree to which southern Negroes thanked us just for being there. Secondly, I would hope that it can be an act of love toward some of the white people in these communities. That some action is taken at least paves the way for those locally who feel they cannot initiate such action, but are glad that someone has, and who will try to build on whatever has been accomplished. That Freedom Rides leave a wake of hostility as well as a few ripples of love is, I am afraid, the price that must be paid for doing something rather than nothing. I have no recollection that anywhere in church history has the impact of the gospel been greeted by all as an unalloyed blessing. Wherever we attempt to deal with injustice we will create enemies. But we can try not to hate them, and we can try to love them - and that I say this is tones of less than casual assurance is a token, at least, that I have discovered that it is not easy.

7. Through these days and nights, always encompassed by uncertainty and sometimes encompassed by fear, stood the firm reality that we were all part of a community - a community of faith. We have community among ourselves, Negro and white Protestants and Jewish rabbis, so that we could pray together and read Scripture together, and sing together. This community extended back in time, as the pre-

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sence of the rabbis made particularly evident, back far beyond 2,000 years, back to the temple, the exile and the desert, back to God the Father Almighty. And this community encompassed space as well. We knew that we were being prayed for, and when the doors of the jail closed behind us we knew that we were not forsaken as the haunted faces of the other prisoners made plain they felt their forsakenness. People were even then doing things for us: getting lawyers, raising bail, making phone calls and sustaining one another as the orbit of their own lives intersected through their common concern for us.

The sustaining sense of community had another dimension which I mention particularly to readers of the GRAIN, since there have been recent attempts in this quadrangle to downgrade the Protestant stress on Scripture, and to suggest that lack of social concern in the church is caused by overmuch attention to the Bible. Nothing could be further from the truth. During our lowest moments, in a beleaguered South Carolina Negro church, exhausted from an experience in which we felt we might have been cowards, it was our common heritage of Scripture that first pushed us to our knees and then brought us up upon our feet again ready to go on, no longer broken but once again God's people. And when, at 1.30 a.m. two nights later, we finally were ready to sleep upon the floor of a Negro church in Tallahassee (with State Police outside to see that we were the object of no "incidents"), it was our time of worship and prayer, grounded in Scripture, that helped us to get perspective on who we were and what might be asked of us, and to believe, in trust and confidence, that come what might, the God who spoke through the pages of that Bible that night was in our midst, and would remain there.

We spent twenty-four hours waiting to be served at an airport terminal. For doing this, we were arrested, imprisoned, and finally found guilty of "unlawful assembly" with incitement to riot. We were given the maximum sentence - \$500 fine or 60 days in jail, a sentence now being appealed to a higher court. But just two weeks ago, the leader of our group, a Negro minister, was in Tallahassee again, testifying about the discrimination practiced against us. He was told in court that henceforth Negroes could eat in the airport restaurant. On the way back home he and two other Negro ministers went through the restaurant door that had been locked to us and ate there. And I think that even if the fine still holds, it will be worth \$500 to me to have in my mind's eye for the rest of my life, the picture of the Rev. John W.P. Collier, of the Israel Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church, sitting in that restaurant, drinking a cup of coffee.