

**Claiming Place for a Beloved Community:  
An Examination of Sacred Space in the Nashville Sit-Ins**

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Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies 2017  
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July 2017

Today and throughout history, social movements have proved a powerful way for citizens to band together and assert their dissatisfaction with and distrust in a political system that seemingly opposes the unity and freedom it promotes. The 2017 Women's March on Washington, for instance, eclipsed the record for the largest single-day protest in U.S. history.<sup>1</sup> On January 21, the day after President Trump's inauguration, an estimated 500,000 demonstrators, including myself, gathered in the streets of D.C. and peacefully marched through the National Mall to the White House to advocate for reproductive freedom, LBGTQUIA rights, Civil Rights, disability rights, immigrant rights, and environmental justice. Having been my first time to D.C., there was something powerful about making the 15-hour drive to assert my presence within the heart of the nation, where democracy is to be preserved and rights are to be protected. That day in the National Mall, we 500,000 demonstrators formed what seemed to be the ideal community, where diversity is valued and voices are heard. By just *being* there, it felt as if we had already achieved something; we transformed the space of the national capital with our presence and our vision of a better America.

The Women's March revealed to me the importance of space in relation to the power of social movements. John Hammond wrote, "Locations carry meanings, and those meanings can telegraph the message that the movement wants to convey."<sup>2</sup> In his article "The significance of space in Occupy Wall Street," Hammond analyzes the ways in which the Occupy Movement transformed space, and how this transformation undergirded the power

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Broomfield, "Women's March against Donald Trump is the Largest Day of Protests in US History, Say Political Scientists," *Independent*, January 23, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Hammond, "The significance of space in Occupy Wall Street," *Interface* 5, no. 2 (November 2013), p. 501.

of the movement in promoting awareness and producing change; he explained, “Through a subordinate group’s challenge to a ruling group’s claim, space is socially produced: contestation in and over space changes the space itself.”<sup>3</sup> As Hammond suggests, opposing social constructions of spaces are at work in occupation demonstrations. Examining the ways in which these social constructions act on communities and the spaces themselves brings to light new ways of thinking about social movements.

Central to understanding social constructions of space is the work of French philosopher Émile Durkheim. Durkheim is widely known as the Father of sociology; he maintained that society – social structures, institutions, and relations – are essential to understanding human thought and behavior.<sup>4</sup> Durkheimian theory offers different ways of thinking about community and the power of social connection in the formation and cultivation of social movements. His theories of religion, society, and sacred space offer a spiritual, sacred element to spatial interpretation. According to Durkheim, to contest a space is to promote a form of idealized community; it is by and through the sacred force of social connection that social movements are formed and spaces are transformed.

The transformation of space is a perennial facet of social movements that has undergirded the power of some of the most successful demonstrations in American history. The spatial concerns of protest movements, for instance, was an important element for civil rights advocates in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In Nashville, Tennessee, members of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council and the Nashville Nonviolent Student Movement organized the first nonviolent direct action sit-in demonstration to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 88.

succeed in desegregating the lunch-counters of local department stores. Unlike contemporary movements like the Women's March and Occupy Wall Street, the Nashville Movement was not confined to one space. Moreover, the sit-ins in Nashville yielded relatively quick success compared to other demonstrations of its kind.

The Nashville cohort has been extensively recognized for their strong adherence to the philosophical and religious ideologies that formed and shaped the sit-in demonstrations, yet the *function* and *complexity* of the core element of faith within the Nashville movement has been relatively unexplored by religious studies scholars. In the spiritual pursuit of the ideal "beloved community," the Nashville Sit-Ins brought the civil rights battle to the church, the lunch counters, and the jail cell, ultimately transforming the physical and symbolic meanings of these places.<sup>5</sup> This paper will examine the sit-ins through the interpretative frameworks of space and religious theory to contribute nuanced ways of conceptualizing how communities claim and contest space in social movements. Beneath the organized and disciplined nature of the Nashville sit-ins lies a compelling and powerful narrative of social solidarity and the contestation and space.

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<sup>5</sup> David Halberstam. *The Children* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998), p. 79.

## THEORIES OF RELIGION AND SPACE

*"The idea of society is the soul of religion."*

– Émile Durkheim<sup>6</sup>

On a Tuesday night in September 1958, a small group of students gathered in the basement of First Colored Baptist Church to hear Reverend James Lawson discuss the power of nonviolent resistance and the global religious pursuit for justice. Little did they know that over the following eight months, they would be a part of a historical movement that would transform the heart and soul of Nashville. From December 1959 to March 1960, hundreds of students and civil rights activists occupied the segregated lunch counters of downtown Nashville to assert their rights as citizens to inhabit a public space and confront the hypocrisies and corruption of the Jim Crow system. Unlike other sit-in demonstrations that occurred across the country, the Nashville Movement was rooted in faith, selflessness, and a vision of a Beloved Community. By embracing a life of nonviolence and an unconditional love for humanity, the protesters resembled the society they hoped to build. John Hammond terms this approach to social movements as "prefiguration" – he explains, "A prefigurative movement tries to create within the movement itself, social relations without alienation or exploitation, anticipating (or 'prefiguring') the social relations of the new society it hopes to create."<sup>7</sup> While the Nashville Sit-Ins may be employing this prefigurative approach, it was the element of faith that transformed the strategy of nonviolence into a way of life; the prefigurative facet of the Nashville movement was undeniably undergirded by religious ideologies.

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<sup>6</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, tr. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), p. 419.

<sup>7</sup> Hammond, "The significance of space," p. 509.

Sociological and anthropological theories of religion provide an interpretive framework that can be employed to unravel the complexities of any given community, event, or process. Moving forward, it is important to discuss how religious scholars approach defining the abstract. Religion, for example, cannot have a definition that is too specific or theological, as a belief in God or gods does not constitute all religions. As Daniel Pals explains, “the business of defining religion is closely linked to the enterprise of explaining it.”<sup>8</sup> Functionalists like Émile Durkheim are less concerned with the content – the beliefs and ideas – of religion; instead, they explain religion exclusively in terms of how it operates in society and what it does for humankind.<sup>9</sup> Functionalist theories hold that there is some underlying structure, whether it be social, biological, or psychological, that constitutes the foundation of religious behavior – *not* the ideas or beliefs imagined by religious people.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, I am less interested in defining the phenomenological aspects of Christian theology in relation to the Nashville sit-ins; rather, I am interested in analyzing the ways in which religion undergirded and perpetuated the power of the movement.

Durkheimian theory grounds all understanding of religion in societal terms. As a reductionist, Durkheim proposed that religion is merely a byproduct of some other reality, which he claimed to be society itself. Thus, Durkheim understood religion to be a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things set apart and forbidden...that exist to unite us all into one moral community called the church.”<sup>11</sup> The function of religion, is not intellectual, but social: it is what keeps humankind working for each other. In *The*

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<sup>8</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 47.

*Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim explains, “religion serves as the carrier of social sentiments, providing symbols and rituals that enable people to express the deep emotions that anchor them to their community”.<sup>12</sup>

Further, Durkheim asserted that the core of every religion is the force of communal unity. The powerful, all-consuming force that drives religious belief and worship is not a deity, but an actualization of the intense social connection within the community in which he termed “social solidarity.” The sacred element of social solidarity instills in an individual the sense that they are their best self because they are a part of their community – one’s “soul” is “the clan within.”<sup>13</sup> This sentiment is then projected into a space, object, or symbol that embodies the focus of worship. In other words, the force in which people worship is the sentiment of the coactivity it inspires.

Durkheim termed this as a process of idealization, objectification, and projection. God, he contended, is an *idea*, objectified by the idealization of social solidarity. The ways in which people understand and affiliate with a community, the process of idealization, is then objectified by the presence of the sacred – for some, the presence of God. Durkheim wrote, “The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under a visible form which serves as totem.”<sup>14</sup> This presence is then projected onto something – a symbol, a place, a person. Thus, Durkheim proposed that *nothing* is inherently sacred.<sup>15</sup> Rather, people’s ideas and

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<sup>12</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 206.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

constructions are projected into a space, object, or signifier, rendering it sacred. The sacred, according to Durkheim, embodies the interests and sentiments of the community.<sup>16</sup>

Durkheim's conception of a communal force that drives spirituality resonates with spiritual and social facets of the nonviolent ideologies maintained by the Nashville Sit-In demonstrators, and this becomes strikingly clear when we consider how these ideologies influenced the Nashvillians' approach to the contestation of space: driven by the force of social solidarity manifested in the vision of a Beloved Community, the activists transformed the spaces they occupied by projecting this idealized society into the church, the counters, and the cell, rendering them sacred. By contesting public spaces, the Nashville Movement actualized the community they idealized.

In *American Sacred Space*, scholars of various disciplines document conflicts over issues within various sacred spaces of America, demonstrating how the contestation and transformation of spaces have brought about historical, even national, social change. In the Introduction, Chidester and Linenthal offer alternative means of approaching sacred space. In what they call the "pivoting of the sacred," they assert that thinking beyond the spiritual and attending to the conflicts of power that occur within spaces allows for new ways of understanding how they may be "produced and reproduced" as sacred.<sup>17</sup> *American Sacred Space* analyzes the sacred nature of various "counter-sites of political resistance," expanding the interpretive framework by which we consider sacred space. By doing so, it brings to light the troubling facets of hierarchical power and sentiments of intolerance that

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<sup>16</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> Chidester and Linenthal, "Introduction," *American Sacred Space*, ed. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 9.



plague American consciences, spaces, and social realities.<sup>18</sup> As Chidester and Linenthal wrote, “These local instances of sacred politics resonate with larger questions of national memory of the past and aspirations for the future...at these sites, local sacred space is negotiated and renegotiated in ways that shape the religious contours and character of the entire nation.”<sup>19</sup>

Considering the extensive intersections of spiritual, societal, and spatial conflict that took place in Nashville in the 1960’s, it is clear that the sit-in demonstrations situate well into this discourse. By transforming the nature of public places with the projection of an ideal “Beloved Community”, the Nashville Movement forced onlookers from all over the nation to confront their own complicity in the social violence of Jim Crow, and the physical violence that helped perpetuate and sustain it.

### THE CHURCH

*“No longer is the church solely in the business of saving individual souls from damnation, but it embodies the “great event” of the cross by making space for redemptive community.”*  
– Charles Marsh<sup>20</sup>

The establishment of the Nashville Movement began within the church. As racial tensions intensified with the exclusionary system of Jim Crow, there was an increase in urgency for justice as the recent *Brown vs. Board of Education* trial yielded relatively no change in the conscience of white segregationists.<sup>21</sup> According to Benjamin Houston,

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<sup>18</sup> Chidester and Linenthal, “Introduction,” p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil rights Movement to Today* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005), p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Linda T. Wynn, “The Dawning of a New Day: The Nashville Sit-Ins, February 13-May 10, 1960,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 1. (1991): 42, accessed May 23, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42626921>.

politics remained one of the strongest “tie-ups” between the black and white “underworlds” in Nashville.<sup>22</sup> Though Nashville was considered a “moderate” city of the South during the 60’s, its so-called progressiveness was characterized by a reserved Southern politeness towards African-Americans that was undergirded by assumptions of white superiority.<sup>23</sup>

In Nashville, and all over the country, ideas regarding the role of the church in secular affairs began to shift as religious progressives began to feel that the church was not doing enough to confront everyday issues of segregation. During this time, it was not an uncommon contention that the church’s purpose was to convert nonbelievers, save their souls, and “guide them to the land of milk and honey” – all other business was considered to be “in defiance of the Scriptures.”<sup>24</sup> With the establishment of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council in January 1958, the space of the church became the bulwark of the African-American “underworld,” a place that undergirded the power of the Nashville activists’ struggle for social justice.

Headed by Nashville native Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, The Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) played a central role in organizing and supporting the Nashville Movement. In the late 1950’s, Reverend Smith served alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Like Dr. King, Rev. Smith believed ardently in applying the central tenets of Christianity to ‘secular’ or ‘profane’ issues of injustice, segregation, and persecution. Smith was the current pastor of First Colored

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> John Lewis and Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 74.

Baptist Church, the only black-owned property in existence within downtown Nashville.<sup>25</sup> Nashville was revered as a “Protestant Vatican” – the religiosity of the city was undoubtedly a source of local pride, but was clearly contained within space of the church.<sup>26</sup> “I think that the other churches downtown ought to be open to all people,” Reverend Smith stated in an interview. He continued, “We have an obligation here. We have to do something aggressive and overt, to make known the fact that people of other ethnic identities should be welcome here. And of course, the church among the white people has not done its part.”<sup>27</sup> After an inspiring SCLC meeting held in Atlanta, GA in 1957, Rev. Smith reached out to every African-American minister in Nashville, urging them to attend a meeting to discuss the ways in which the Nashville network of churches could address prejudice and injustice in the city. It was at this meeting on January 18, 1958 that the NCLC was constructed as a local affiliate of the SCLC with the central goal of “attacking various social problems while always operating within the context of the Christian faith.”<sup>28</sup>

Although the NCLC initiated the social gospel objective within Nashville, it was Reverend James Lawson who transformed thoughts into action. Originally from Uniontown, Pennsylvania, Reverend James Lawson migrated South at the plea of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who urged Lawson to join the Southern civil rights struggle. Upon arriving in Nashville in late 1957, Lawson enrolled in Vanderbilt Divinity School and became involved with the local Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) chapter. Lawson fervently believed in the power

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<sup>25</sup> Houston, *The Nashville Way*, p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> “Kelly Miller Smith,” interview by Robert Penn Warren, *Civil Rights Digital Library*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>28</sup> Nashville Christian Leadership Council, “Toward the Beloved Community: Story the Nashville Christian Leadership Council” (document, Nashville, TN), accessed January 25, 2017, [http://www.crmvet.org/docs/61\\_nclc.pdf](http://www.crmvet.org/docs/61_nclc.pdf).

of the church to evoke change. This power, he believed, came not from heaven but from the people present in the church itself, and that the powerful sentiments of connection felt within the church must exist for a larger purpose.<sup>29</sup> Having performed missionary work in India, Lawson had extensive experience with Mahatma Gandhi's principles of nonviolence.

Upon joining the NCLC, Lawson was designated as "social action leader" by Kelly Miller Smith.<sup>30</sup> Reverend Smith graciously offered First Baptist Church as a space for Lawson to hold lectures and case studies to educate the public about the power of nonviolent resistance. These sessions increased in attendance fairly quickly, largely by students from surrounding colleges including Fisk University, Vanderbilt, American Baptist Seminary, etc. Each week, the students performed "socio-dramas" learning how to respond to violence with humility, and see the basic humanity in even the most hateful people. "Jim Lawson knew – though we had no idea when we began – that we were being trained for a war unlike any this nation had seen up to that time," Lewis recounted, "it would be a nonviolent struggle that would force the country to face its conscience."<sup>31</sup> By instilling in them a sense of compassion, righteousness, and commitment, Lawson taught the students how to become the society they wanted to create. Meeting violence with unconditional love, Lawson believed, was the most powerful weapon of all. As Lawson's sessions gained popularity in Nashville, First Baptist Church became a training arena for nonviolent civil disobedience, transforming the space of First Colored Baptist Church from one whose sole purpose was the redemption of souls into one where the discussion of societal and political issues was encouraged and even divinely sanctioned.

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<sup>29</sup> Halberstam, *The Children*, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

At the core of the social gospel and nonviolent ideologies was the conception of a “Beloved Community.” In essence, this concept may be defined as the “realization of divine love in lived societal relations.”<sup>32</sup> In his memoir *Walking with the Wind*, John Lewis described the beloved community as the “fulcrum” of all that Lawson taught and the center of everything Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. worked toward:

According to this concept, all human existence throughout history, from ancient Eastern and Western societies up through the present day, has strived toward community, toward coming together... believers in the Beloved Community insist that it is the responsibility of men and women with soul force, people of good will, to respond and to struggle nonviolently against the forces that stand between a society and the harmony it naturally seeks.<sup>33</sup>

The vision of the beloved community was grounded in the belief that humankind is inherently pure and unified in nature. The “place” of the beloved community was to be a place that transcended all selfishness, a place where society made a “constant effort to address even the most difficult problems of ordinary people.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Nashville Movement was not just about gaining access to the lunch counters, it was about a “closing of the distance between human beings,” and changing the heart of a divided nation.<sup>35</sup>

The conception of the idealized “Beloved Community” brought forth an expansion of what First Baptist Church deemed their “community” to be – it instilled in the students a compassion for *all* of humankind, rendering *all* of society as sacred. Through the force of social solidarity manifested in the vision of the inclusive “Beloved Community,” the students were called to be a part of something bigger than themselves. The sentiment of unity and purpose transcended the space of the church itself. As John Lewis wrote, “I’d

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<sup>32</sup> Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> Halberstam, *The Children*, p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, p. 98.

finally found the setting and the subject that spoke to everything that had been stirring in my soul for so long. This was stronger than school, stronger than church. This was the word made *real*, made whole. It was something I'd been searching for my whole life."<sup>36</sup>

By redefining the terms of inclusivity within the community, the space of the church began to reflect the society the activists envisioned. John Lewis reflected, "there in Nashville...we were completely together, totally solid, a unit bound by trust and devotion. We were really our own Beloved Community."<sup>37</sup> Illustrating Durkheim's notion of projection, the First Baptist Church became a material representation of social solidarity through projection in the form of the Beloved Community. People of all races gathered to hear Reverend Lawson's lectures; by his example, the Nashville cohort exhibited a special sense of respect and unity – they talked as much as they listened and recognized that they must not only *act* in "emancipatory ways, but even more must seek to live in the present time that kind of reality they hoped to the movement would bring about later."<sup>38</sup> As Charles Marsh wrote, "the enfleshed church was built then on the trinity of social disciplines comprising incarnational organizing, nonviolence, and interracialism."<sup>39</sup>

The pursuit of the Beloved Community shifted the moral imperative of the church towards societal issues, transforming the sacred nature and physical functions of the space itself. As this focus on the public sphere drove people out of the space of the church, they took with them new interpretations of what constituted as 'sacred,' which allowed them to reconstruct the symbolism of otherwise mundane spaces. Never before had the student

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis and O'Dorso, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, p. 98.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

demonstrators felt so compelled to sacrifice the safety of their bodies to inhabit and transform public domains. As Chidester and Linenthal wrote, “If sacred places could be battlefields, battlefields could also be sacred places.”<sup>40</sup>

### THE COUNTERS

*“Space is fundamental to any exercise of power.”*

– Michel Foucault<sup>41</sup>

On February 13, 1960 around 12:30 in the afternoon, 124 protestors, 10 of whom were white, marched through six inches of snow from First Baptist Church to Fifth Avenue North, where they dispersed to Kress’s, McClellan’s, and Woolworth’s department stores. Dressed in traditional Sunday clothing, the students made their way from the pews to the counters, ready to put their bodies, hearts, and spirits on the line for a better, wholesome society. John Lewis reflected, “by now, I was so committed deep inside to the sureness and sanctity of the nonviolent way, and I was so calmed by the sense of that the Spirit of History was with us, that the butterflies were gone by the time we left the lunch and headed downtown.”<sup>42</sup> As they entered the stores, the students purchased an item to establish that they were paying customers, and then proceeded to the lunch-counter stools. Many of the stores responded by closing the counters, leaving the students sitting in the dark where they would remain until business hours were over.

Located at the northern edge of the Confederacy, Nashville was a “mix of racial progressiveness on the one hand and conflict and intolerance on the other.”<sup>43</sup> The city

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<sup>40</sup> Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (London: Harvester, 1980), p. 252.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 106.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 81.

rested “uneasily with Jim Crow legacies and racial contradictions.”<sup>44</sup> Downtown Nashville was no exception; as Benjamin Houston wrote, “whether by silent code or variable racial etiquette, in black-owned or white-owned spaces, racial interaction was shaped by urban spaces.”<sup>45</sup> White-owned banks provided African-Americans with accounts but would not provide loans, and department stores allowed blacks to shop but refused to serve them at the lunch-counters. By inhabiting the lunch counters, the Nashville Movement exposed contradictions between racial law and custom. James Lawson stated in an interview, “We adopted downtown because we felt that we wanted to somehow focus the attention of the city on the major problems of segregation, and the need for genuine integration. We felt that downtown was the best place to get this problem focused.”<sup>46</sup> The lunch counters provided a space in which the hypocrisies of Jim Crow were particularly self-evident – through occupation, the Nashville Movement redefined the terms of inclusivity within the very space from which they were excluded.

The demonstrations continued through early March of 1960, growing in size each time; by the end, over 400 participants flooded the lunch-counters of downtown Nashville. As the sit-ins progressed, the stores acted preemptively by closing ahead of time, stacking merchandise on the countertops, and unscrewing the seats at the counters. It was not long before mobs of white segregationists began retaliating against the demonstrations. Broadcasted by various news stations, the entire nation watched as the demonstrators –

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<sup>44</sup> Houston, *The Nashville Way*, p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Houston, *The Nashville Way*, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> “James M. Lawson Jr.,” interview by Robert Penn Warren, *Civil Rights Digital Library*, March 17, 1964.



both black and white – were pulled off of the stools, smeared with condiments, struck by violent blows to the head, and responded with dignity, integrity, and humility.

The Nashville lunch-counters became a place of confrontation over larger issues. The contested meanings of the lunch counter were driven by contested visions of what constitutes an ideal society. For protesters, the idealization of the “Beloved Community” drove them to occupy the counters in pursuit of an all-inclusive society. Conversely, the segregationists’ ideal community was exclusively white and racially pure, which spurred them to act in violent means to protect and defend the space of the counters. In essence, the lunch counters became two spaces for two oppositional communities, each projecting their own notions of community into these places. Both the segregationists and the protesters objectified their respective idealizations of social solidarity and projected them onto the contested space of the lunch counters, rendering those spaces as sacred. Sacred spaces ground worldviews, giving meaning to locations through perceptions of how the world is. Thus, the counters served as a synecdoche – places that resembled larger issues of a polarized, racially divided society. This was not just about access to hamburgers, it was about who has a place in the Nashville – and more broadly, American – community.

In *American Sacred Space*, Chidester and Linenthal contend that sacred places focus a classification of individuals by “carving out a place for a human identity that can be distinguished from superhuman persons...and those classified as subhuman who can be excluded, manipulated, dominated, and degraded.”<sup>47</sup> For segregationists, the dining table, with its prescribed practices, was a ritualized, sacred space that served as a tangible classifying system that perpetuated the contention that “brutes feed, barbarians eat, but

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<sup>47</sup> Chidester and Linenthal, “Introduction,” p. 12

only the cultured man dines.”<sup>48</sup> Communal dining, they believed, was an intimacy presuming equal status. Through the strategies of exclusion and what Chidester and Linenthal termed as “appropriation,” the segregationists worked to eliminate what they believed to be a pollution of racial purity of the sacred space of the counters.<sup>49</sup> The segregationists’ cruel and inhumane methods of maintaining exclusivity were anything but righteous, as they had been for centuries prior, but the Nashville Sit-In movement brought these methods out into the public, forcing witnesses to take a stand. By projecting their vision of the ideal Beloved Community within the space of the lunch counter, the protesters succeeded in revealing the true ugliness of Jim Crow.

The Nashville Movement gave witness to the ideal Beloved Community with their unrelenting adherence to active pacifism and Christian forgiveness. In a founding statement of the sit-in demonstrations, James Lawson asserted that “by appealing to the conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.”<sup>50</sup> With a new faith in the humanity of society, nonviolent direct action was less of a strategy and more of a manifestation of social solidarity that brought about an invigorated love for all of mankind; John Lewis explained:

It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence... This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion, is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day. It shapes your response to a curt cashier in the grocery store or to a driver cutting you off in traffic just as surely as it keeps you from striking back at a state trooper who might be kicking you in the ribs because you dared to march in protest against an oppressive

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey A. Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out: Student Movements in the American South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p. 56.

government. If you want to create an open society, your means of doing so must be consistent with the society you want to create. Means and ends are absolutely inseparable. Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred. Anger begets anger, every minute of the day, in the smallest of moments as well as the largest.<sup>51</sup>

By embodying the Beloved Community in the public space of the lunch counter, the Nashville Movement demonstrated a new form of social interaction. Employing the strategy of what Chidester and Linenthal termed “hybridization,” the activists erased the oppositional logic of violence and hatred of the Jim Crow system. Instead of fighting violence with violence, the demonstrators staggered their seating at the counters, making space for whites to sit among them. As Diane Nash reflected, “our goal was to reconcile, to create a community recovered or fulfilled rather than simply gain power over the opposition.”<sup>52</sup> The vision of the Beloved Community was not a vision of domination, but of all-encompassing unity.

By treating even the most hateful and violent people with dignity and compassion, the protesters gave a new meaning and applicability to redemptive suffering. For Lewis, redemptive suffering was essential in the pursuit of a unified society: “I always understood the idea of the ultimate redeemer, Christ on the cross. But now I was beginning to see this is something that is carried out in every one of us, that the purity of unearned suffering is a holy and *affective* thing... It opens us and those around us to a force beyond ourselves, the force of righteous truth that is at the basis of human conscience.”<sup>53</sup> It was by and through the sentiment of social solidarity that the Nashville Movement was able to delve into the

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<sup>51</sup> Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 86.

<sup>52</sup> Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, p. 88.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

white psyche and educate the public about the humanity of blackness and the injustice of racial stigma.

The amount of violence advanced as the sit-in demonstrations continued through the month of February. In search for some means of security, three students (Bernard Lafayette, Curtis Murphy, and Julia Moore) met with the Chief of Police to request that law enforcement personnel be placed on the inside of each store. Claiming that it would disrupt business, the Chief denied their request.<sup>54</sup> Just four days later, violence erupted at the counters like never before. White hecklers appeared in mobs and spit in the students' faces, beat them in the head with clubs, and pushed lit cigarettes into their backs. In response to uproar of violence, local law enforcement police arrived on the premises, claiming the students were transgressing the law by means of "disorderly conduct."<sup>55</sup> At the request of the store managers, approximately 100 protesters were led out of the counters and crammed into jail cells. This was the first mass imprisonment of civil rights activists in American history.<sup>56</sup> While the police acted as adversaries to organized black protest, the arrests worked in the favor of the Nashville cohort by giving them a chance to redefine the symbolic stigma of the jail cell from a place of punishment to a place of black liberation and empowerment.

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<sup>54</sup> Wynn, "The Dawning of a New Day," p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Zoey A. Colley, *Ain't Scared of Your Jail: Arrest, Imprisonment, and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013), p. 22.

## THE CELL

*"It is understandable that the ordinary jail or hoosegow is suddenly transferred and changed overnight from a detention house of evil-doers into a Golgotha where innocent men are crucified for their ideas." – The Afro-American<sup>57</sup>*

As Michel Foucault argued, prison is traditionally a place where criminals – those who lack a sense of morality – are shut away from the rest of society.<sup>58</sup> With the criminalization of black protest during the civil rights movement, the jail cell was one of the most overt symbols of black powerlessness in the South.<sup>59</sup> As Zoey Colley explained, "from arbitrary police brutality to the complicity of legal officials in acts of lynching, every aspect of this system reminded black communities that they had no claim to legal protection."<sup>60</sup> By claiming that the students were transgressing local laws and thus were enemies of the public, the Nashville police demonstrated how the criminal justice system was reconstructed by white segregationists to enable the suppression of challenges to an exclusive, white society. Thus, jail became a sacred space as juxtaposing idealizations of social solidarity were projected into the space of the cell. For segregationists, the jail was where those who violated the racially pure community were forcefully excluded.

Conversely, the students interpreted the cell as a place where martyrs of the Beloved Community gave witness to redemptive suffering. For many African-Americans, fear of imprisonment was driven by threat of being isolated, forgotten, and left defenseless in the hands of the authorities. But on that cold day in Nashville, the demonstrators showed no fear at all. John Lewis reflected, "I felt no shame or disgrace. I didn't feel fear, either. As

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<sup>57</sup> "Now it is a Nice Thing to Go to Jail," *The Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), March 5, 1960.

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin), 1977.

<sup>59</sup> Colley, *Ain't Scared of Your Jail*, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

we were led out of the store single file, singing 'We Shall Overcome,' I felt exhilarated."<sup>61</sup> Fueled and comforted by the force of social solidarity, the Nashville cohort relinquished the fear of imprisonment and embraced the pursuit of the ideal Beloved Community with unquestioning commitment. "It was really happening, what I'd imagined for so long," Lewis wrote, "the drama of good and evil playing itself out on the stage of the living, breathing world. It felt holy, and noble, and good. The paddy wagon – crowded, cramped, dirty, with wire cage windows and doors – seemed like a chariot to me, a freedom vehicle carrying me across a threshold... Now I knew. This wasn't just about that moment or that day. This was about forever."<sup>62</sup> Acting in utter certainty of the purity and righteousness of their cause, the Nashville cohort saw jail not as a space of isolation and punishment, but a place of sacrifice, a living testament of the Beloved Community.

The Nashville jail was overwhelmed with students – cells meant for three or four people were filled with fifteen to twenty each. John Lewis described, "When we got to the city jail, the place was awash with a sense of jubilation. With all these friends, these familiar faces piling out of those wagons, it felt like a crusade, as if we were prisoners of a holy war...the police could hardly keep up with the waves of students who were replacing one another back at those lunch counters."<sup>63</sup> Slowly but surely, the counters and the cells of Nashville were filled, physically and spiritually, with the idealized Beloved Community, a unified group of people dedicated to the fight for justice.

This dedication was further demonstrated by the Nashville Movement's refusal to pay bail. The students were the first and strongest advocates of what they called "Jail-No-

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<sup>61</sup> Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 107.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 108.

Bail.” To post bail, they believed, was to act in compliance with the system that allowed the injustice they were protesting. “We weren’t about to pay bail,” Lewis recalled, “We were in jail because of racial segregation in Nashville. Until that segregation was ended, we had nowhere else to be – we *belonged* nowhere else – but in those lunch counter seats or behind bars.”<sup>64</sup> The rhetoric of Jail-No-Bail demonstrated the transformative work the Nashville cohort had been doing – they gave the jail a new meaning by how they saw themselves. For them, the experience of jail did not bring about despair, but a divine sense of purpose, redemption, and liberation. As an *Afro-American* article read in response to the arrests:

It is customarily said that there is no remission of sins without the shedding of blood. It would appear seemingly true that there is no freedom for the humble, the disadvantaged and the exploited, unless they have served a term in jail because there is no such thing as winning freedom without voluntary sacrifices. The worst thing these Southern communities could do is to jail young people for their beliefs. Every incarceration simply stimulates their immunity to injuries and hatred of racial prejudice.<sup>65</sup>

By refusing to post bail, the Nashville Movement further inverted the stigma of the cell while also illustrating the righteousness of the redemptive and reconciled Beloved Community.

The sit-ins and the subsequent arrests demonstrated to the entire nation the very real, oppressive nature of the Jim Crow South. Word of the mass arrests traveled through homes, barber shops, and churches, galvanizing the African-American community to stand behind the students. Within days, the NCLC received approximately \$50,000 of donations from around the country. “It seemed that almost every move the city made backfired,”

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>65</sup> “Now it is a Nice Thing to Go to Jail,” *The Afro-American* (Baltimore, MD), March 5, 1960.

recounted Lewis, “No one had ever had to deal with this situation before. They had to make their own mistakes, and they were making them. The sight of many of Nashville’s – many of the nation’s – finest young men and women being led off to jail prompted outrage all over the city.”<sup>66</sup> It was not long before Nashville law enforcement acknowledged they could not sustain such an overcrowded jail. Within a few weeks, the students were let free.

As Chidester and Linenthal noted, sacred spaces constitute interpretive potential – an “efficacy in giving location to certain ways of thinking about human relations.”<sup>67</sup> The Nashville activists took metaphorical control of the jail and redefined conventional understandings of freedom, criminality, and human dignity. While the public spaces of the counters gave the Nashville Movement a platform so that their basic humanity could be recognized, the mass arrests finally unified local African-Americans into a mass-movement. It was through the transformation of these spaces that situated the city of Nashville right where it should be for the events ahead.

### **THE MOMENT ON THE STEPS: THE VATICAN CITY TRANSFORMED**

*“It is curious that conflict over a few lunch counters could bring a city to its knees.”*  
– Benjamin Houston<sup>68</sup>

At 5:30 a.m. on April 19, 1960, a package containing nearly 20 sticks of dynamite was placed on the front porch of Z. Alexander Looby, the esteemed black lawyer who represented the arrested students. The explosion left a two-foot hole in the ground, and shattered over 100 windows at the nearby Meharry Medical College. Amazingly, Looby and

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<sup>66</sup> Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 110.

<sup>67</sup> Chidester and Linenthal, “Introduction,” p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Houston, *The Nashville Way*, 119.



his wife escaped alive by nearly four-feet.<sup>69</sup> “These were killers,” the police inspector announced, “You don’t throw that much dynamite to scare somebody.”<sup>70</sup> Looby was a revered black figure in Nashville and surrounding towns for defending blacks accused of terrible crimes before all-white juries. Unlike many of the Nashville lawyers who felt the students had been overzealous and unruly, Looby admired them and had no doubt in their cause. Journalist David Halberstam reflected, “To the black community, given Looby’s status as a living local legend, the bombing of his house was the most immediate and direct threat imaginable.”<sup>71</sup>

The explosion of Looby’s house shocked the consciences of Nashville communities – both white and black – spurring the ambivalent and indifferent to action. By noon, nearly two thousand students and townspeople had gathered at Tennessee State University to march to city hall – according to Lewis, this was the first mass march in American history.<sup>72</sup> Lewis recounted:

We walked three and four abreast in complete silence, blacks and whites, ten miles through the heart of Nashville. People came out of their homes to join us. Cars drove beside us, moving slowly, at the speed of our footsteps. The line looked as if it went on forever. Everyone was very intense, but very disciplined and very orderly. It was a stupendous scene. There was some singing at first, but as we neared city hall it stopped. The last mile or so, the only sound was the sound of our footsteps, all those feet.<sup>73</sup>

Everything the Nashville cohort had worked for led up to this moment: the occupations at the counters captured people’s attention and the mass arrests pricked their consciences. The bombing of Looby’s home stirred their souls, solidifying the righteousness of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Halberstam, *The Children*, p. 230.

<sup>72</sup> Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 115.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 115.

students' actions. Standing in solidarity with the students, the city was unified and reconciled. That day, in the heart of the city, Nashville became the ideal Beloved Community.

As the crowd approached, Mayor Ben West stood on the steps of the city hall to greet them. Reverend C.T. Vivian approached Mayor West, accusing him of authorizing the violence of the city through his lack of decisions and moral standing. Mayor West responded, "We are all Christians. Let us pray together." Another student quickly responded, "How about eating together?" The crowd behind them cheered in agreeance. Mayor West replied, "I appeal to all citizens, to end discrimination and to have no bigotry, no bias, no hatred." It was then that Fisk University student Diane Nash, through what she called "divine inspiration," took control of the conversation.<sup>74</sup> She asked, "Do you mean that, to include counters?" "Little Lady," the mayor replied, "I stopped segregation seven years ago at the airport when I first took office, and there has been no trouble there since." Knowing she needed to reach Mayor West's conscience, as a man and not as a politician, Nash persisted with yes/no questions: "Then, Mayor, do you recommend that the lunch counters be desegregated?" Mayor West replied, "Yes." The crowd roared. With just one word, the deed was done: Mayor West lent his voice to their cause and brought forth the end of segregated eating-facilities.<sup>75</sup>

That night, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Fisk University to commemorate what he called the "best-organized and most disciplined" Southern civil rights demonstrations in history. He honored the students who "lifted the jails from badges of dishonor to badges of

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<sup>74</sup> Halberstam, *The Children*, p. 233.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

honor,” concluding with the words of an old spiritual: “We will meet your physical force with soul force and wear you down with our capacity to love. Let’s keep moving; let’s walk together children, don’t you get weary.”<sup>76</sup> King’s speech further rallied the black community, giving a false face to the notion that the sit-ins were merely a student fad.

At 3:15 in the afternoon on May 10, 1960, less than a month after the historic moment on the steps, six downtown Nashville department stores opened their lunch counters to black customers. While it is undeniable that notions of white supremacy remained entrenched in the consciences of many white segregationists in Nashville, the sit-ins bred a spirit in Nashville of a renewed sense of solidarity, community, and humanity. Collectively, the NCLC and the Nashville Student Movement formed a living embodiment of the Beloved Community, demonstrating the ability of the downtrodden, the exploited, and the oppressed in inhabiting and reshaping an entire city without raising so much as a fist.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Nashville Sit-Ins demonstrate the powerful relationship between place and identity. The meaning of place comes out of how we understand who we are. When we physically inhabit a space, we bring with us preconceived ideas of how our identity, individually and as a community, situates into that space. As a moderate and seemingly racially “progressive” city, Nashville composed a narrative of harmony and unity. Yet the shame and utter brutality African Americans experienced in the supposed “public” spaces their tax dollars helped to build shows how narratives and conceptions of space are anchored in assumptions of power (or lackthereof) and identity.

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<sup>76</sup> Houston, *The Nashville Way*, p. 117.

Durkheim's theories of idealization, objectification, and projection offer new ways of understanding human thought and behavior. The ways people interpret spaces and behave within them reveal their worldviews, their ideas of how the world – and society – should be. By this logic, we can begin to try to understand why people choose to act the way they do. And even more importantly, we can use these understandings to challenge the consciences of those with whom we disagree: for the Nashville Movement, this entailed an occupation of the spaces that signified the oppressive issues they hoped to change. With the sacred ideology of the Beloved Community, the activists found a new hope and compassion for all of society, and projected these sentiments into the counters and jail cell by giving witness to a new community and a new way of social relations. In the words of Benjamin Houston, the Nashville Sit-Ins was an “unlikely story of how people from different backgrounds, diverse social contexts, and range of beliefs could meld a new existence.”<sup>77</sup>

Just as the lunch counters and jails became two different kinds of sacred spaces for two opposing communities, the spaces we inhabit each day reflect opposing ideals and mindsets. Yet, as the Nashville activists demonstrated, these spaces also provide opportunities to promote awareness, understanding, and reconciliation. By occupying the lunch counters, the activists not only transformed the space but by doing so, they reached the consciences of those around them, showing them that they had not come to “destroy”

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<sup>77</sup> Houston, *The Nashville Way*, p. 120.

the segregationists' way of life, but to show that they were "live human beings who wanted the same things they wanted, had reasons for it, were willing to suffer and sacrifice."<sup>78</sup>

When asked in an interview how the movement ultimately brought about change, Reverend Kelly Miller Smith explained:

This is an aspect of it that is much more strenuous and significant than many people seem to think. It's less dramatic, but it's a tremendous thing, to sit there with a group of people who come from two entirely different worlds... And to sit there and try to get together on something is a rough experience. But it was through the negotiations, of course, coupled with the openings that came from the demonstrations that we were able to get the crack in the wall.<sup>79</sup>

As Rev. Smith suggested, occupying a shared, communal space allows activists to bring to the table, so to speak, their concerns of an unjust society and their ideas of a better one. It is through occupation that people are seen, voices are heard, and reconciliation becomes possible.

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<sup>78</sup> Kelly Miller Smith," interview by Robert Penn Warren, *Civil Rights Digital Library*, February 13, 1964.

<sup>79</sup> "Ibid.

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