Storming the Gates of Hell

Reflections on Christian Evangelism in Nuclear Security Areas

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> Through the church the great wisdom of God is to be made known to the principalities and powers in high places . . . [Eph. 3:10].

♦ ON A CLEAR, brisk pre-dawn September morning in 1979, two dozen Christians gathered at the eastern edge of the sprawling Rocky Flats nuclear weapons trigger plant near Denver, Colorado. As they sang, six persons cut through a fence, and walked with flickering candles a half-mile over rough terrain to a hill overlooking the humming bomb factory below. There they commenced a "liturgy of light." As the sun rose almost an hour later, the six were brusquely gathered into four-wheel-drive overland security vehicles and hauled off to jail. Citing the gospel in defense, they were convicted of trespass and served six months in Colorado jails.

On the Feast of the Epiphany 1980, two "prayer commandos" climbed a fence and entered the Bangor naval submarine base near Seattle, Washington. For 24 hours they hiked through the woods on the sprawling property, unnoticed by patrol vehicles. Early the next morning, the two men clambered over a 12-foot double-security fence into the maximum-security weapons storage depot at the heart of the base, where guards have orders to use "deadly force" against intruders. The two Christian pilgrims were not fired upon, and they proceeded to pray at each of six nuclear weapons bunkers before being arrested and taken away by marines armed with rifles. They have recently been released after serving one year in federal prison.

In September 1980, six men and two women entered General Electric's King of Prussia manufacturing plant near Philadelphia before the morning shift. They found their way into the security assembly line area, where GE's Mark 12-A re-entry vehicles for nuclear warheads were awaiting shipment. With hammers, some of the peacemakers began to "beat swords into plowshares," while others spilled blood, the biblical symbol for life, on nearby blueprints. They were arrested after having begun the "conversion" of several missile nose cones. After six months' imprisonment, the "Plowshares Eight" were tried, but were not allowed to present in their defense expert testimony on international law, the arms race or conscience. All eight were convicted, receiving three-to-ten-year prison sentences.

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A few months after the King of Prussia action, another small group of Christians gathered outside the Pantex plant near Amarillo, Texas, where components for nuclear weapons receive their final assembly. It was early morning, foggy and unseasonably cold. Six of them, using makeshift ladders, glided over the outside fence of the maximum-security area. As their feet touched the ground, overhead lights beamed on and blue security lights flashed. The prayer pilgrims made their way to a second fence, which was electrified, and there fell on their knees in prayer and praise. Found and arrested, they are now serving sentences ranging from six months to a year.

On March 11, 1981, four Christians slipped unnoticed into the security manufacturing area of Lockheed Missiles and Space Corporation near San Jose, California. The three men and one woman, after searching for 15 minutes, located a room filled with Trident submarine-launched strategic missile parts. The activists poured their own blood from bottles over the missile midsections, as well as over nearby files and blueprints. They were discovered and arrested 20 minutes later; they have served from two to six months in county jail.

Achieving Vision in an Age of Resignation

What are we to make of such behavior? Are these people lunatics? Are their efforts — no matter how well-intended — misguided, irresponsible and cavalier?

It is clear enough that these actions are nonviolent and firmly grounded within the political tradition of civil disobedience. But they also represent a new kind of tenacity that deserves thoughtful reflection. Although only a few of these and similar actions (at Commander-in-Chief-Pacific [CINCPAC] headquarters in Hawaii, Strategic Air Command bases in Montana or naval shipyards in Connecticut) have received significant media attention, they are making an impact. It is important to try to understand the nature and context of these actions, and to reflect on their political and theological implications for all who are working for peace.

The politics of the peace movement in the U.S. has always been ambiguous. Like any dissenting political effort trying to achieve vision from within an imperial belly, the movement is riddled with internal disagreements and full of contradictions. Yet two things ought to be clear when we consider the possibilities for peacemaking in the coming

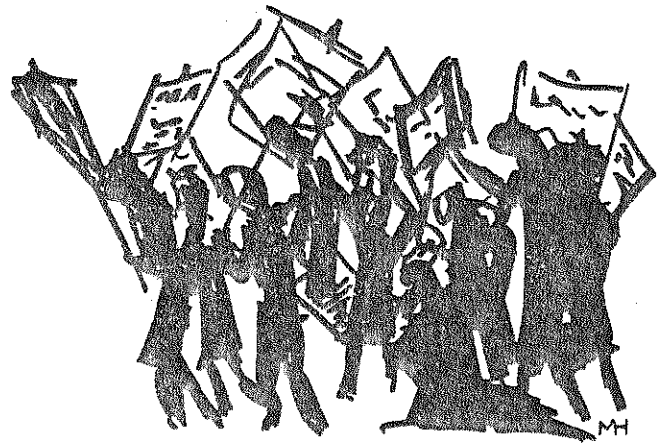
decade. First, there is no longer any ground for believing that the governmental, industrial and academic managers of the arms race will, on their own initiative, do anything significant to slow the present rush to nuclear conflagration. Given the present momentum of militarism, historical realism compels us to acknowledge that we do not have time for official arms negotiations to do a turnabout. This fact demands that political approaches of petition need to be buttressed more and more by popular refusal to cooperate with continued governmental procrastination. In short, the politics of exhortation must become a politics of resistance.

There are signs that this may be happening. The practice of military tax refusal, which was an important, concrete tactic of opposition to the Vietnam war, is beginning to spread again, and in the wake of the "middle-class tax revolt," has real political potential. Similarly, statistics have shown that tens of thousands of young men did not comply with recently renewed draft registration orders. There are other stirrings of hope as well. Nevertheless, we are far from the kind of popular outrage necessary to stop an arms race that threatens to grind history to a halt.

It must be admitted that the traditional peace movement has so far failed to embody a moral and political vitality or creativity able to ignite the consciences of American people. The dictum of C. Wright Mills in his famous 1959 polemic, "The Causes of World War Three," still stands: the paralysis of nuclear stand-off has all but stifled political imagination in the West. The cold shadow of impending apocalypse has created a psychological and social cul-de-sac, wherein indeed "hearts grow cold" and "even the elect are deceived."

Sociopolitical resistance and moral imagination must be linked. The lack of such a synthesis, however, has compelled many astute and committed activists secretly to concede to the view that only when nuclear weapons are used will people wake with sufficient force to stop the nuclear juggernaut. The hope, then, is that nuclear first-use will be tactical and limited! The "politics of resignation" soberly concludes that only the Damoclean sword is adequate to cut the Gordian knot.

There is something to be said for this "new realism." Political renewal can never be based on illusion. All signs point to the fact that nuclear conflict could erupt soon. The official mood of government is brinksmanship, while the new strategic wisdom appears to have embraced the viability and inevitability of tactical nuclear war. At the popular level, socialization for acceptance of nuclear battle is broad and deep. Theologian Harvey Cox tells of a recent poll in which a random sample of people were asked if they believed there would be a nuclear war in their lifetime, and whether they thought they would survive it. Astonishingly, 85 per cent of those surveyed answered that they *did* expect a nuclear war, which they would not survive. The end of the world, as peace activist Elizabeth McAllister has suggested, has become virtually platitudinous. We are a people with a deep sense of futurelessness.



Yet it is precisely in the face of this growing paralysis that a new spirit of resistance is arising, struggling for some kind of "moral equivalent" to thermonuclear holocaust, and calling for a resurrection of political imagination. It is being initiated by Christian people who believe that an atmosphere of capitulation in nuclear nations challenges Christian faith and political hope to come together. These people agree with Thomas Merton, who wrote in the darkest days of the Cuban missile crisis (a moment of similar paralysis) that "Christian faith *begins* at the point where all others stand frozen stiff in the face of the Unspeakable."

The Holy Spirit as Subversive Co-conspirator

As people responsible to both Word and world, Christian activists have long been seeking new ways to keep pressing moral questions upon the nation, the church and themselves. At stake is the integrity of faith, of democracy and of freedom in a culture resigned to the destruction of life. Beginning in the mid-'60s, a particular vitality was forged by religious antiwar activists who joined the nonviolent politics of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., with "symbolic" actions informed by the biblical-prophetic tradition. From Catonsville to the recent women's Pentagon action, symbolic direct action has persisted in the grass-roots resistance to atomic weaponry and the nuclear economy.

In its better moments, symbolic direct action has been neither a politics of token pressuring nor a fixation upon "kamikaze heroism," as its detractors maintain. Its use of a new political language (symbolic and suggestive rather than ideological or propositional) and a new political locale (e.g., weapons factories rather than Senate chambers) has attempted to create a public moral/political crisis through confrontation. Whether particular actions have succeeded in this aim is not

always clear, but this "tradition" of activism has been a consistent goad to political creativity and self-examination.

Theologian-activist Jim Douglass has written that resistance must

> deepen in a way that might begin to correspond to the depth of the nuclear crisis. Nuclear weapons, and their security measures, remain when mass demonstrations are over. The test of non-violence is to maintain its commitment just as steadily as our friends in the military maintain their commitment.

Along these lines, some Christians are trying to escalate their witness in proportion to the crisis, confronting the bomb with a militant gospel, employing prayer pilgrimages, hammers of hope, symbols of life.

Though these actions have multiplied without coordination, they do share a common orientation. The participants are all experienced activists with years of more conventional organizing behind them. They undergo rigorous physical, mental and spiritual preparation for their ventures into high-security areas. The actions are small and controlled, carried out by people deeply committed to nonviolence as a way of life. There is clear recognition that these actions are risky; one does not climb double-security fences without understanding the implications: jail, possible personal injury, even maiming or death. All participants have had to grapple personally with these questions as well as discuss them with family and friends. Thus, the actions become, literally as well as symbolically, faith journeys of life and death.

It is also important to understand that each action commences with and culminates in prayer. Moreover, those "inside" are supported by wider networks of praying co-conspirators. As one Pantex pilgrim put it, "All the unknowns of this prayer venture [inside the weapons plant] met with more unknowns — the mystery of mustard seeds, seeds of prayer throughout Christian people and communities across the country and beyond." In prayer lie both the poverty and the strength of these witnesses.

Perhaps most scandalous of all, however, is the resisters' claim to be led by the Holy Spirit. All have felt the deep security of the Spirit's protection during high-risk witness ventures. To some this claim may seem presumptuous, but to those familiar with security measures at nuclear facilities, the "success" of these actions is indeed remarkable, and the active conspiring of the Spirit is perhaps the only explanation.

The Politics of Trangression

The question must be pressed, however, as to whether this "new spirit" of direct action is in fact the right direction to take in seeking "moral equivalency." Is this new escalation in itself a concession to a kind of desperation? Can't these aims be achieved just as effectively in a more representative fashion, outside the danger of high-security areas, or even (as many argue) outside the boundaries of factories and bases altogether?

It will help in considering these questions to reflect on how the use of nonviolent direct action has developed in the peace movement. We are concerned here not with the question of mass demonstration versus small actions, but rather with the question of "political geography." It is quite arguable that a major breakthrough in the consciousness of the peace movement has come as a result of shifting the locus of action from Senate offices to bomb plants, from the White House to military installations. Those who consider this tactic naïve (managers and workers don't make the decisions!) need to understand that perhaps the single most important factor determining popular acceptance of the nuclear status quo has been the very anonymity of the bomb itself. The existence of the nuclear economy and of bomb factories was largely hidden from public consciousness for years, with only the respectable and sterile mask of official policies visible. When popular opposition to nuclear terror waned in the early '60s after the phasing out of civil defense drills and the retreat underground by the nuclear testing program, the suspicion was confirmed that in a society gripped by the spell of "mutual assured destruction," ignorance was, by definition, bliss.

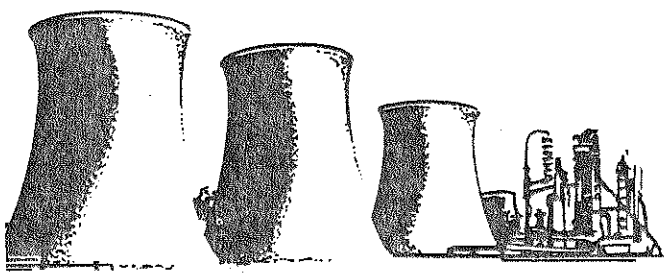
The key, then, to suppressing dissent in an age of widespread nuclear fatalism has been to keep the crisis out of sight and mind, something masterfully achieved in the Soviet Union. In opposition to such secrecy, protests at the location of management, research and development, production and deployment of nuclear weapons have stimulated popular sensitivity to the reality of nuclear destruction. A map of "nuclear America" is today considered a standard organizing tool for resisters, and the intricate network that makes up the nuclear weapons complex has, through research, investigation and dissenting presence, been exposed to public view.

Even though weapons installations have been identified, however, the weapons themselves remain apparently untouchable. High security is, after all, high security. The Department of Defense policy of "neither confirming nor denying" the presence of nuclear weapons at any particular place, and its strict secrecy surrounding nuclear weapons accidents serves to promote this sense of "nonexistence." As researcher-organizer Jim Albertini has argued in a campaign to expose nuclear weapons storage near the Honolulu International Airport, this secrecy is not to hide the fact from the Russians, who through their intelligence know where most of our weapons are; rather, the weapons must be hidden from the American people, the very constituency they purport to protect. Would you want

to raise your children next to a nuclear stockpile?

Another "breakthrough" has been needed to strip away the last myth of the sacredness of nuclear weapons, for the sanctity of weapons installations has had in fact a kind of neo-religiosity about it. Nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles reside in the "holy of holies," the high-security bunkers and buildings. Members of the "priesthood" need security clearance to approach these military altars; others who venture too close will surely meet their doom. Clearly, this idolatrous "theology of secrecy" must be challenged, on both democratic and Christian grounds.

This, then, is the context out of which escalated resistance grows. In a historical situation giving such power to nuclear weapons and the policies behind them, it is not enough simply to refuse to accept them, though that is the beginning of liberation. We must begin to transgress their "holy ground" in order to challenge the deepest assumptions about nuclear weaponry, to journey to the very point where the sanctity of their violence is most strongly defended and justified. In unmasking the genocidal instruments themselves, the most crucial crisis is opened up: do these weapons, delivery systems, assembly lines, fences and bunkers have a right to exist? Will we kill, maim or jail nonviolent people in order to protect *this* property right? If these vehicles of death are scratched or stained with hammers or blood, shall we then be forced to defend the sanctity of *this* private property?



Depending on what we believe concerning the legitimacy of nuclear weapons, as the resisters at the Bangor base near Seattle have pointed out, we will either regard barbed-wire fences that protect the weapons from us as a deterrent or an invitation, as a red light or a green one. Jim Douglass has posed the question with particular clarity:

> No one believes in nuclear weapons as such, but many Americans have given up hope of reversing the world's (and our own) reliance on them. Thus for the sake of security the premise of the "real world" carries with it the escalating threat of nuclear weapons and all the heightened security measures necessary to protect the weapons: . . . intruders should be shot on sight. A belief in nuclear weapons demands it. . . . To those who see a different reality, . . . that we're now living in a global Jonestown and that a different world is possible, then bet your life on the truth of climbing . . . fences to spill those nuclear vats across the public conscience, to awaken us as a people from insanity to responsibility. Let the "real world" beliefs of those who defend [nuclear] weapons against terrorists and the hope-filled beliefs of nonviolent resisters who see the terror as already there, meet as conflicting truths at those fences.

Bringing Darkness to Light

There is a powerful biblical logic to this kind of peacemaking. While most of these resisters will appeal to the Nuremburg principle or to international law as a kind of moral "hermeneutic" in the courts and in informing the public, the real source of discernment and guidance comes from biblical visions. It is remarkable how all those engaging in actions in high-security areas have gathered around one text in particular:

> Don't be deceived with empty rhetoric
> For judgment is coming because of the children of disobedience;
> Therefore: Do not associate with them!
> For once you were yourselves darkness,
> but now in the Lord you are light;
> Live then as children as light!
> (Remember that the fruit of light is all that is good, just, and true.)
> Struggle then to discern what the Lord's will is.
> Not only should you not cooperate with the unfruitful works of darkness,
> But more than that you must unmask them!
> Indeed it is shameful even to discuss the things done in secret these days;
> But when anything is brought to the light it becomes manifest,
> for light brings to light!
> For this reason we read:
> "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead,
> Christ will give you light!"
> Watch carefully therefore how you live your lives, not as unwise people but as wise,
> Seizing the moment, because the times are evil;
> Do not be fooled, but discern what the Lord calls us to do . . . [Eph. 5:6-17 — author's translation].

This Pauline exhortation, which offers a clear statement of the politics of the Kingdom in bad times, has long been a difficult one for the church to interpret, perhaps because it speaks of a vocation foreign to most Christian experience. It has been unintelligible to us because of our moral ambivalence. In light of present resistance to the bomb, however, the text has come alive as a manifesto of engagement with the unleashed powers of militarism in a national security state. Because this scriptural manifesto has been exemplified in the lives of Christian peacemakers, we can now better understand its summons for militance in truth-telling, for nonviolent steadfastness at the heart of a cosmic conflict between the forces of death and the spirit of life (Eph. 3:10, 6:10 ff.).

It stands to reason that direct action taken in

this spirit and this hope can break open both Christion faith and political imagination. As we are observing in El Salvador's present struggle, for example, a renewal of faith can indeed offer direction and vitality for a politics of "hope against hope." We must not marginalize actions such as the witness of Central American Christians, either through romanticizing or sacramentalizing — or through dismissal.

To those in the peace movement, such acts, and the efforts of those who invade nuclear production sites and missile bases, are meant to extend a call to deeper "response-ability" to the growing madness of U.S. nuclear policies. To those in the churches, they must be seen as an invitation to renewed and costly discipleship, "because the times are evil." The actions are offered to us not for imitation, but in the hope of engendering deeper experimentation with the truth. It ought to be increasingly clear that nothing short of militant resistance, nothing less than bold ventures of faith and conscience, and nothing other than betting our lives on the truth of nonviolence will awaken our people to the historical ultimatum of nuclear weapons. □

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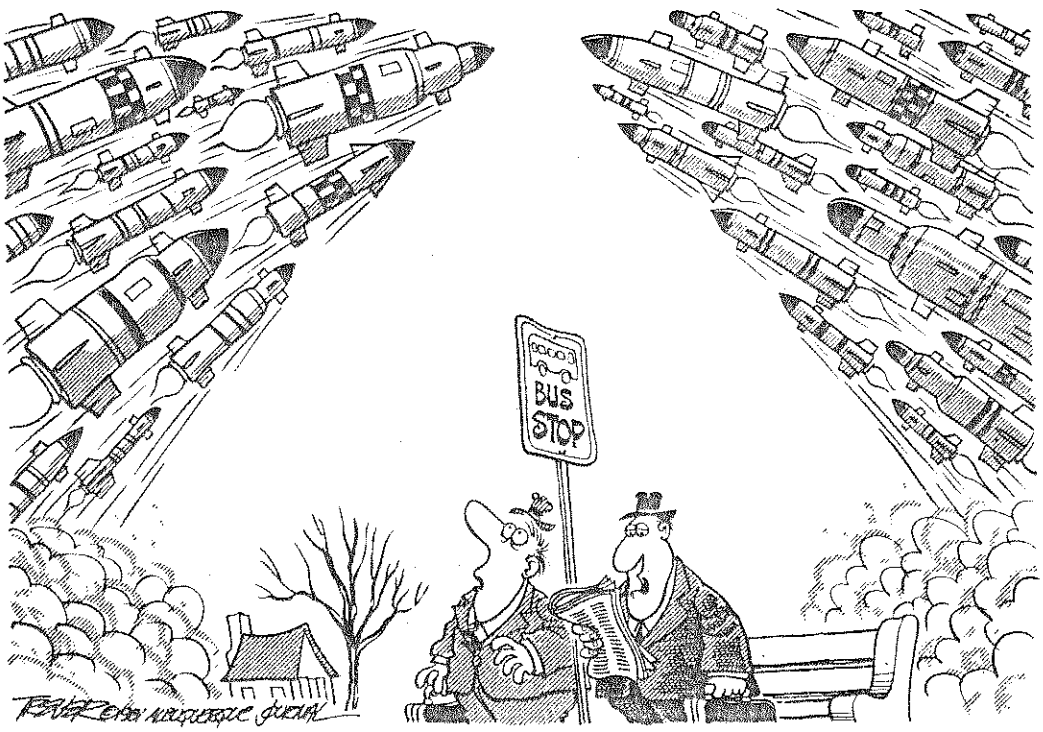

"PAY NO ATTENTION. IT'S PROBABLY JUST A SUPREME ACT OF LEGITIMATE SELF-DEFENSE."

Witnessing Against the Nuclear Threat

Ched Myers