

## **Radical but not Extreme: The Dilemma of the Christian Peace Activist**

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A response to Kristen Tobey, “‘Something Deeper Than Reason’:  
Violence and Nonviolence in the Plowshares Nuclear Disarmament Movement”

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In his 1973 classic, *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, Gene Sharp listed 198 tactics available to those who wished to engage in nonviolent activism. Kristen Tobey’s essay detailing recent actions of the Plowshares movement and exploring their symbolic and theological significance brings Sharp’s total to an even 200: activists might consider taking a jackhammer to nuclear missile silos, or pouring one’s own blood on the ground of military installations. It is the latter tactic that provides the platform for Tobey’s rich analysis and reflections on what might be called a “counter-Girardian” deployment of myth and ritual.

Organized in 1980 by the noted antiwar activists Daniel and Philip Berrigan, among others, Plowshares has vocally and dramatically resisted nuclear proliferation and a U.S. foreign policy that remains deeply wed to the use of violent force. Plowshares activists have been noted primarily for their willingness—even eagerness—to go to prison after illegally entering and protesting at military facilities. Tobey draws our attention to their dramatic use of blood as part of their protests, an element that has been systematically purged or downplayed in official military and media accounts of Plowshares activities. She suggests that their use of blood introduces a certain ambiguity to their protest, however, as its “multivocal” properties mean that it may at once be “a symbol of Christian nonviolence and a mark of violence” (3).

Immediately striking is the Plowshares activists' theological understanding of their own blood as a "countersacrifice" to the blood offered to (and taken by) the idolatrous and militant nation-state; their ritual is designed to "metaphysically tip the scales" weighted toward injustice by the military-industrial complex and the complacent American public that idly stands by (10). Many other religiously inspired peacebuilders have fashioned their responses to deadly violence as a kind of *imitatio Christi*, whether founded on Jesus' self-sacrificial ministry to the poor and marginalized, or based on his rejection of coercive power as expressed most eloquently in the Sermon on the Mount, or modeling his ethic of reconciliation and forgiveness.

The particular theological innovation of Plowshares is the notion, rooted deeply in the Hebrew Bible and expressed in the New Testament's Epistle to the Hebrews, that the shedding of innocent blood is redemptive, purging consciences and offering remission of sins and ultimately sanctification. Thoroughly biblical in its symbolism and theology (though perhaps at odds with many Christians who read the New Testament as saying that Christ provided the last and ultimate sacrifice which put an end to the Mosaic law's prescribed shedding of blood), the Plowshares ritual seeks not to hide the sins and violence of the community, in a kind of Girardian reading, but rather to reveal it. In a sense, Plowshares activists have assumed the role of modern Levites, consecrating innocent blood sacrifices to God in the hope of restoring balance to the cosmic scale of justice and atoning for the sins of their fellow sojourners in the wilderness.

In examining the political and social dimensions of the protesters' spilled blood, Tobey astutely highlights what we might call an ethic of expectant futility. Aware that her protest is likely rendered futile in concrete political terms by the reign of evil in the world, the radical Christian peace activist is nonetheless animated by the expectation of the coming reign of God. Employing sacred theatre to dramatize the contrast between these kingdoms is both an end in

itself and a means to awaken consciences. As Tobey rightly notes, the Plowshares witness is performative, just as many acts of terrorism aspire more to symbolic than tactical ends.

Without conflating terrorists and radical peace activists, we can nonetheless observe an underlying logic and praxis embraced by both types of religious militants, whether they be extremists who steer airplanes into buildings or militants for peace who pour blood on the ground of nuclear missile facilities and then sprinkle seeds in the wet earth. Neither is effective in achieving political goals, but their success cannot be measured in purely quantitative, rational terms. Indeed, on a rational level they know their actions are futile in the immediate sense, but there is a hope, or expectancy, that their sacrifices are efficacious nonetheless.

Indeed, the scholarly literature on religious militancy explores the distinctive cosmological calculus that informs the spectrum of “holy warriors,” ranging from the “extremists,” who seek destruction of the enemy and provide justification for deadly violence, to the “militants for peace,” who ultimately seek reconciliation and reject or strictly limit violence. In this shared imaginary small numbers and social marginality indicate chosen-ness and election, not irrelevance. Gains and losses are not measured by mundane standards, nor tracked in ordinary time. The efficacy of blood, sweat, and tears consecrated to the God of compassion and justice, who ushers in His reign in ways beyond understanding, cannot be measured by mundane standards of pragmatism and utilitarianism. Such metrics are insufficient, even deceptive, for those responding to the divine mandate. Misunderstanding and persecution, whether from accommodationist religious moderates or the secularist government, are tokens of divine favor.

The ideological and strategic tension within Plowshares seems to turn less on the question of violence versus nonviolence, per se, as Toney’s title suggests, but rather on an

ongoing debate over the appropriate tactics and expressions of faith-inspired militancy. It is true that all members of the Plowshares movement are committed to a radical application of the Christian gospel, in which devotion to a political cause such as nuclear disarmament is the contemporary expression of a Christian ethic of nonviolence. Further, they are willing to break the law and to suffer imprisonment and marginalization from their families and the mainstream church.

But none suggest that violence against fellow humans is an acceptable means of accomplishing their holy task, let alone a sacred duty or religious prerogative (as religious extremists would claim). The most extreme actions of Helen Woodson, perhaps the most militant of the Plowshares activists, have been limited to symbolic acts including setting a fire in a prison yard and sending bullets to corporate CEOs—suggesting, significantly, not that they deserved the bullet, but that they *were* the bullet. Certainly, from its inception Plowshares broke with “the tactics and attitudes of traditional nonviolence” (20), at least in its more conservative forms typified most famously in the early Civil Rights Movement. And while their theatrical use of blood might evoke violence in the minds of some observers, it is performed precisely to highlight the system protested by Plowshares activists, not to suggest that they would spill others’ blood in the pursuit of ending war.

The challenge for the radical religious organization that disavows violent extremism, then, is to avoid the forbidden extreme of deadly violence while remaining faithful to a theology of God that subordinates all other concerns to obedience to an eschatological vision of justice, demands total commitment unto self-sacrifice, and embraces an ethic requiring prophetic witness to a fallen world.