

The Purpose of Symbolism and Ritual in the Plowshares Movement:
A Response to Kristen Tobey's "Something Deeper Than Reason"

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From its inception in 1980, the Catholic Left-inspired Plowshares movement has stirred controversy. By damaging military property, Plowshares activists initially sent shock waves through American Catholic and peace activist communities where people debated the legitimacy of these actions and whether they transgress the parameters of nonviolence. One of the most contested but understudied elements of the Plowshares movement is its tradition of spilling blood over weaponry. In her paper, Kristen Tobey explores the symbolic significance and theological functions of this tradition. In response, I would like to explore the following question: who benefits from these theological "functions"?

Tobey argues that blood has political, theological, and social significance for Plowshares activists. Politically, blood is a shocking visual representation of the bloodshed that results from U.S. military policies. Theologically, the pouring of blood has sacramental and redemptive qualities – a "righteous counter-sacrifice" (page 4) that can "metaphysically tip the scales or right the wrongs committed by policy-makers" (page 10). Socially, the blood symbolizes the honored but marginalized identity of the actors who demonstrate a willingness to make the most dramatic sacrifices to end war, including years in prison. The blood, mirroring Christ's own sacrifice, links these actors to a long lineage of martyrs and distinguishes them from "less committed" peace activists.

Reflecting on Tobey's analysis, it appears that Plowshares activists themselves are the ones who benefit most from these blood-spilling functions while the broader public audience appears to have become largely irrelevant to their symbolic performances. Specifically, Plowshares participants gain satisfaction from knowing that they are contributing to the redemption of humanity's idolatrous behavior. They gain the respect of martyrdom from those who admire their deep commitment. Most significantly, they gain deep personal satisfaction from being faithful to their religious convictions. This last point is something they repeatedly iterate when asked whether their acts have any tangible, political effects: success, they argue, is defined as fidelity, not the actual transformation of military policies. This is not to say that Plowshares participants are primarily motivated by self-interest but the spilling of blood and the beating of swords into plowshares has become more an act of personal integrity than a prophetic act of public theology designed to transform attitudes. This point was made in a eulogy for one of the movement's founders and charismatic leaders, Philip Berrigan, who passed away in 2002. In the *National Catholic Reporter*, Coleman McCarthy wrote:

Some see ... Plowshares actions ... as street theatre that wins momentary applause but does little to change public policy. Others ... see the Berrigans and those who join them in a long line of prophets, going back to Amos, Isaiah, Buddha and others who believed in the value of witness, and in paying heed only to the idea that being faithful counts more than being successful.... A question about Phil Berrigan has been: What did all those years in prison really accomplish? An answer can be found in the parable of the Buddhist spiritual master who went to the village square everyday. From sunrise to sunset he cried out against war and injustice. This went on for years, with no visible result. One day the master's disciples implored him to stop: "People aren't listening. They turn away. Everyone's insane," they told him. "It's time

to stop.” “No,” said the master, “I need to keep crying out so that I won’t go insane.” Praise Phil Berrigan. He died sane.¹

Similar to this parable, many Plowshares activists believe that the broader population is insane with militarism and will not listen to their message. As a result, most place little emphasis on communicating their message broadly or publicly interpreting the symbolism of their actions. When a Plowshares campaign is carried out, activists release press statements but these statements mostly denounce the atrocities committed by U.S. policies and the damage that results from the production and use of nuclear weapons. There is rarely reference to the theological meaning of blood. Moreover, mainstream media coverage of Plowshares actions is minimal and tends to focus on the criminal charges involved, not the symbolic significance of the act.² Hence the only people who hear about the political, legal, and theological meaning of blood are the jury members and the judge reviewing their case. Thus, aside from the very first actions in the early 1980s, most of these campaigns have been conducted in relative obscurity, going unnoticed by all but those involved in or supportive of the movement.

¹ McCarthy, Coleman. 2002. “After Life of Resistance, He Died Sane: For Phil Berrigan, Being Faithful Counted More than Being Successful.” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 27, Vol. 39(19): 18.

² In my own research on the Plowshares movement, activists stated that they did not work with the mainstream media since reporters typically depicted them as common criminals or fanatics. They prefer to convey news through their own independent outlets and through sympathetic Catholic periodicals such as *Catholic Worker* newsletters or the *National Catholic Reporter*. While this enables the movement to maintain some control over the message they convey, it also limits the audience to those who are largely sympathetic.

The movement's lack of public communication about the symbolic meaning and theological significance of their actions – including the spilling of blood – has numerous ramifications. First, this explains why the movement is sometimes perceived as threatening despite its deep commitment to nonviolence. As Tobey notes, symbols can be interpreted in multiple ways. For most Plowshares activists, the blood is deeply rooted in Catholic tradition but the broader (often secular) public may be unfamiliar with this tradition and thus there is little symbolic resonance. As a result, those who encounter the spilled blood frequently associate it with violent or fanatical impulses, not theological acts of redemption.³ Ironically, then, Plowshares activists' symbolic use of blood makes the movement less understandable to outsiders in contrast to Juergensmeyer's claim that symbolism can increase the public's comprehension. Second, while Plowshares activists view themselves as part of the prophetic tradition of confronting unjust policies, their prophetic message is diminished, lost, or – even worse – interpreted in manner that is antithetical to the actors' motives. The movement has lost much of its transformative potency as actions become less and less comprehensible to movement outsiders and thus the foundation for a meaningful dialogue is depleted.

Let me be clear: I am not criticizing the Plowshares movement for emphasizing fidelity and moral witness over political efficacy. Symbolic actions are

³ For these reasons, the vast majority of Plowshares groups in Europe have elected to not pour blood since its communicative value is minimal and activists fear that the blood would actually inhibit rather than facilitate dialogue on disarmament issues. For further information, see my book *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement* (2008, Cambridge University Press), pages 160 and 213.

indeed important and do have a transformative capacity. However, by neglecting the public interpretive work that must go hand-in-hand with symbolic action (or only doing this interpretive work among sympathizers), they have undercut their prophetic voice and become insular. This is particularly surprising given that the movement was inspired by the draft board raids during the Vietnam War. Draft board raids were both performative and transformative, employing both practical ingenuity (interfering with the U.S. government's ability to wage war by tampering with its conscription system) and provocative symbolism. The Catonsville Nine raid – in which activists burned draft files with napalm – was particularly effective since napalm was a symbol that needed little interpretation. Thus the action stimulated national discussion because it vividly pointed out the contradiction between the public's outrage over the burning of paper but the acceptance of military policies that entailed burning children with napalm. It caused Christians to reflect on which was the greater moral transgression.

Like the draft board raids, Plowshares campaigns could trigger theological reflection and debate about Christian ethics vis-à-vis militarism but only if activists convey the theological meaning that undergirds their campaigns. Unfortunately, as the movement's interpretive work has dissipated, its prophetic voice has weakened; Plowshares campaigns have largely become ritualistic acts that primarily benefit the performers, not the audience – who is left to come up with its own interpretation of these events. If Plowshares activists intentionally and clearly convey the theological meaning of their tactics, it is only then that their symbolic actions will entail something “deeper than reason.”