"Non-Pragmatic Pacifism and Blood Rituals," A Reply to Kristen Tobey, "'Something Deeper than Reason:' Violence and Non-Violence in the Plowshares Nuclear Disarmament Movement"

By Jon Pahl, Ph.D.

In his wonderful survey, Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas, David Cortright documents the surprising, and little celebrated, successes of recent decades in nuclear disarmament that have cut U.S. and Russian arsenals by two-thirds. The Plowshares Movement, profiled in such well-structured detail here by Kristen Tobey, doesn't earn even an index reference in Cortright's book. Yet, Tobey's analysis might help us to see how the effectiveness of what Cortright calls "pragmatic (or "realistic") pacifism" might depend upon some quite non-pragmatic actors who creatively engage symbolic power in risky actions that articulate unexamined norms and that dramatize, in order to alter, the status quo. As it stands, Tobey's analysis doesn't quite get us to such a contextualized understanding of the Plowshares movement. But Tobey has done the archival work to advance such an argument. She is poised to help us understand the significance of all that blood that Plowshares activists have spilled over the years, and all the prison time (with a nod to Foucault) that they have served.

Tobey nicely outlines three levels of meaning to the blood used by Plowshares activists. Blood functions, she suggests, politically, theologically, and socially. Socially, it solidifies marginality among the community by evoking taboo. Theologically, it identifies the activists with the "redemptive sacrifice" of Christ. Politically, it "performs violence" symbolically in order to critique the violence of weapons of mass destruction. Blood also dramatizes the perception or representation of "threat" that the Plowshares activists intend--although I admit not being completely clear on what Tobey intended in this final section of her paper. That slight uncertainty aside, these conclusions seem eminently sane, and safe, readings of the evidence about these actions that Tobey has so cogently gathered.

I suspect, though, that with some additional theoretical tweaking, Tobey might discover slightly more risky, yet also more contextually focused, provocative, and important interpretations of all that blood, and of the movement more generally. I'll pose five questions for her (and readers in this forum) to explore, and hope that they contribute to her ongoing work on what is an excellent and thoughtful study with great potential.

First, Tobey highlights how the movement has aged, and how the number of Plowshares actions has steadily declined over the decades. This is worth exploring. What happens to a movement when it goes from a movement of youthful rebels to a movement of codgers? In some societies, elders carry a particular status as bearers of wisdom. Is this the case here? Or, does the aging of the Plowshares movement point, instead, to the kind of refusal to let go of the limelight, or refusal to mentor another generation, that is evident among aging rock stars who continue to perform the songs of their youth well into their Medicare years? If the blood-letting of the Plowshares activists is, as Tobey suggests, "performative," what does it mean when the actors stay on the
stage for decades, while performing in fewer and fewer performances of the same old play. There's at least a story of persistence, at best, or inertia, at worst, at work here. Highlighting the continuities and changes in time over the history of the movement might help answer these questions about the meanings of discrete actions.

Secondly, Tobey attends nicely to the modest (yet utopian) way "success" is understood within the movement, but I wonder if it's also important to explore how the movement has been received and perceived not only by those arresting or trying the activists for their crimes, but in the popular press and by other advocates of disarmament. No movement exists in isolation. As it stands, the Plowshares activists would appear to be more than a little masochistic, if not slightly "off." But I doubt this is what Tobey intends, or how the activists understand themselves. By juxtaposing the non-pragmatic practices of the movement with more pragmatic activists, and by teasing out whatever perceptions and relationships existed between the Plowshares members and other policy-makers and advocates (like those profiled in Cortright), Tobey's story gets situated in a context where "success" was, in fact, quite real, documented, and effective. History is made, of course, at the level of symbols. Perhaps the blood rituals of the Plowshares activists were the dramatic and even "crazy" invocation of symbolic power that made possible imagining START I and II Treaties as "realistic." Perhaps the "unrealistic" dramatic action of these religious individuals produced (or preserved) the moral imagination of a world without nuclear weapons articulated repeatedly by no less a "realist" than the most recent Nobel Prize Winner. In short, symbolic action like treaty-making takes place in swirling fields of symbolic possibility in which no contingency can be ruled out for its potential effect. Once engaged, cultural action deserves studying not only for its contextual origins, but also for its significance.

Thirdly, I suspect Tobey's analysis would benefit from asking more rigorously how the Plowshares actions not only follow a "template," but operate as liturgies or rituals. Clearly, Tobey recognizes how the patterned symbolic behavior that these individuals undertake are "counter sacrifices," a topic I will explore shortly. But there may be broader resonance from the history of Christianity at work here. William Cavanaugh has provocatively contended that the Eucharist, with its own scandalous blood associations, is a counter-torture liturgy. If torture is a ritual of imperial power and control, and the Eucharist with its "blood" a counter-imperial ritual, then might blood's taboo presence in the Plowshares actions (see Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger) dramatize the fragile human (and symbolic) power (see Eileen Scarry, The Body in Pain) as that which is precisely at risk in an imperial weapons regime? This association between Plowshares ritual and traditional Christian ritual is only one of many that Tobey might explore more fully, as a way to situate the actions of the Plowshares members more deeply in their Christian, and religious, historical contexts.

Fourthly, I wonder if there's room for more sustained analysis of the way "sacrifice" operates in these actions. In Empire of Sacrifice I happily reduce "religions" (including sacrifice) to a two-step dance in which people compress and displace desire into projections of transcendent authority (notably gods, but not exclusively) that exist to eliminate things, and most notably (following René Girard) to eliminate violence. I
wonder, then, if Tobey might situate these "sacrifices" by the Plowshares members more directly (and helpfully) to the invocations (and rituals) of "sacrifice" as evoked in American civil religion--for lack of a better term? Tobey helpfully recognizes how the Plowshares actions depend on a system of substitutions--their blood substitutes for the blood of soldiers, for the blood of Christ, etc. But it is the "etc" that's the important term in that sentence, because within the civil religion the blood of soldiers is a substitute for "America" and the various projections of transcendent authority that legitimize and sanction the power of the imagined community of the nation (see Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, Blood Sacrifice and the Nation). All in all, there may be more to the "counter-sacrifice" than Tobey develops here (and this doesn't touch the sacrifice of time in prison) that can situate these sacrifices in a broader taxonomy of religious activity oriented toward peace building and conflict reduction. Personally, I'm inclined to see the Plowshares activists (somewhat uncharitably, perhaps) as religiously impatient (yet remarkably persistent) individuals oriented toward utopia (if not some strange asceticism) who substitute symbolic drama for actual engagement with policy-making. Freud's infantile illusions might resurface here, along with more than a modicum of grandiosity and civilization's discontent in which drama trumps debate. Yet I'm not willing, as Tobey clearly isn't either, to write them off as nuts. Understanding what's going on in this movement requires, I think, situating the movement in relationship to a more nimble, and complex, understanding of religion than is typical, and especially (perhaps) requires asking questions about desire and elimination, authority and dominance, power and innocence, not only about violence and non-violence, in a world of hybrid identities and complex rituals that cross domains of cultural authority. It's all quite strange, in short, and Tobey's analysis highlights the strangeness, without quite explaining it.

Finally, as a historian of children and youth, I was struck by the way Plowshares activists invoked child-saving. Bruce Lincoln's work on both al-Qaeda and George W. Bush reveals the important political work such invocations of children can do. I wonder, then, if Tobey might fruitfully explore these issues along the lines of what I call "innocent domination." Children make effective pawns, to put it bluntly, in all kinds of power plays, and yet their voices, and actual stake, in these debates and in relation to these issues tend to be oddly absent and under-attended. I'm thinking that Tobey's analysis might benefit by exploring something along the lines of what Grace Jantzen proposes by juxtaposing violence to natality. Such an exploration might also open up issues of gender in her study that would be intriguing, to say the least, to analyze among the men and women profiled in her paper. And, then again, that might be an alley Tobey simply doesn't want to go down....

All in all, Kristen Tobey's excellent work in the archives promises to produce an analysis of the Plowshares Movement and its bloodiness that will take her well beyond the tame "political," "theological," and "social" categories through which she currently is reading this evidence. A dash more specificity about the meaning and function of discrete discourses and practices, a tad clearer set of connections to existing communities and institutions, and a wider web of theoretical associations will enable her work to help us realize how these non-pragmatic pacifists succeeded, and failed, in ways that highlight
where there is "something more than reason" at work in the world, and where there is not. I applaud her research, and will eagerly await more news about her findings.

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