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Daniel Berrigan and the Problem of Civil Obedience

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Clyde Ray

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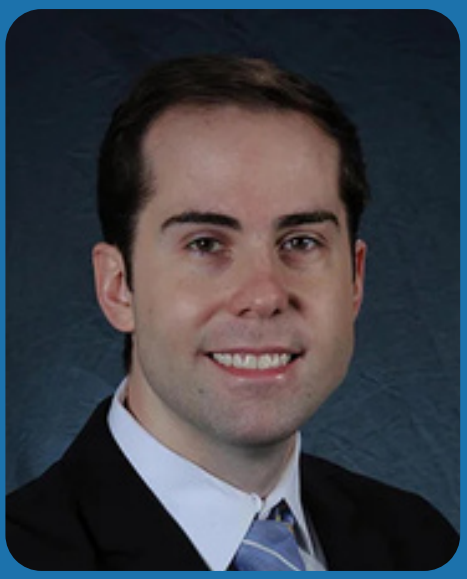
Partners

Table of Contents

About the Author

Clyde Ray is Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Service at Holy Cross College in Notre Dame, Indiana, USA. He has written books on John Marshall's Constitutionalism (SUNY Press) and Defining Statesmanship (Lexington Press), as well as several articles on American constitutionalism, political theory, and jurisprudence. An award-winning instructor who has taught at a range of institutions across North America, his recent work focuses on the relationship between religion and civil disobedience.



Clyde Ray

Abstract

The priest-activist Daniel Berrigan has been largely overlooked as a leading representative of the antiwar religious left during the twentieth century. This article seeks to correct that neglect at a moment when most religiously-informed cultural and political critiques of the United States tend to issue from conservative scholars and intellectuals. Drawing on Berrigan's activism and his voluminous writings, Berrigan's political critique of America is based on a disruptive and radical understanding of Christianity counterbalanced by a rejection of the Utopian hopes of many of his contemporaries. These views are held together by Berrigan's commitment to a constructive ethical and political theory he calls "peace-making," the significance of which continues to resonate in the polarized politics of today.

Keywords: protest, dissent, religious liberty, civil disobedience

Amid a deluge of recent articles and books involving religiously grounded social and cultural criticism of liberal democracy, few works from a left-leaning perspective stand out. At least in the United States, the religious right has largely eclipsed the religious left as society's self-appointed prophesiers of the breakdown of communal bonds as leading to political, economic, and cultural decay.[1] While the diagnoses and prescribed treatments may vary, the religious impulse emphasizing America's sinful trend toward materialism, atomistic individualism, and moral permissiveness remains constant. Often in these twenty-first-century iterations of the culture wars, civilizational collapse can be mended only through a conservative renewal of the religious ideas that purportedly imbued earlier social fabrics with a richness and solidity modern man can scarcely fathom.

It could be forgiven if one were to think that progressive religious thinkers lack any countercultural spokespersons of comparable philosophical and religious heft. Yet such a belief would be as unfortunate as it is mistaken, even as representatives of the religious left are eclipsed by their more reactionary opponents. Throughout the twentieth century, the American Jesuit thinker and priest Daniel Berrigan lived at the intersection of politics, faith, and protest. Following his interpretation of Jesus Christ as a radical reformer whose mission was to disrupt the political, religious, and cultural status quo, Father Berrigan was one of many religious figures that were important if often overlooked element of the protest movements against the Vietnam War in the 1970s and beyond. Yet in spite of his Christianity, Berrigan recognized that he was not only a missionary but also a citizen, an American with the duty to challenge the government as well as a Christian answerable to the church hierarchy. Rather than being paralyzed into inaction between these two worlds, he drew on both identities as a source for moral and political awakening.

1. For religious and lay overviews and critiques of such authors, consider Mathew Rose, A World After Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Rigelements,,whoht (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021) and Francis Fukuyama, Liberalism and Its Discontents (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022). Nor is the influence of these jeremiads limited to reforming the United States along earlier American, small government lines. See Elisabeth Zerofsky, "How the American Right Fell in Love with Hungary," New York Times Magazine (Oct. 19, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/19/magazine/viktor-orban-rod-dreher.html [https://perma.cc/J6594Q4D].

Thus, he conceived his message of protest against war and other social ills —articulated in a considerable number of books, essays, speeches, and poems—as simultaneously civic and moral, oriented toward transforming laws and institutions no less than hearts and minds. Moreover, he articulated a form of dissent that unsettles without destroying the foundations of society, guided by the belief that challenging moral and political evils also required one to offer a positive vision of the country's future. As we seek with new urgency in these heady times to enunciate a form of dissent that is both critical and constructive, Berrigan's model of democratic citizenship merits renewed consideration.

Early Years: Rebel Priest with a Cause

Berrigan's humble origins offer little indication of the public notoriety he would later attract as a crusading political and religious activist. Born to modest means in Virginia, Minnesota, on May 9, 1921, his parents and five brothers moved to Syracuse, New York, when Daniel was five years old. After attending a host of parochial schools as a child, Berrigan joined the Jesuit order and shortly thereafter the priesthood in 1952. It appeared to be an odd choice, given his experience in the classroom.

Daniel Berrigan

He looked back with little warmth on his formal education, having bristled under the rule of martinet nuns or seminary instructors who valued rote memorization of the catechism over the pupil's unique encounter with the message of the Gospels. Too often, he observed, guardians of secular as well as sacred learning taught in a manner that was demanding in its expectations but "incomprehensible in dispensation,"requiring students or non-specialists requiring students or non-specialists to "take it on faith" that from the dust of their fields of specialization "a miraculous nostrum" might be compounded "for the mind, ourselves, our age—a healing for every ill."[2] Gathering intellectual and spiritual strength despite the presence of bad teachers, Berrigan formed early on an acerbic skepticism toward theories and dogmas trumpeted without argument, especially when issued by those in authority.[3] Upon his ordination as a priest, Berrigan served as a military chaplain in West Germany, offering the sacraments to American soldiers stationed on the front of the emerging Cold War between the West and the Communist Bloc. Lending support to his assertion that his foremost target was the system that sent young men to die rather than those who took up arms, Berrigan gave no hint of animus directed toward the military during this period. Yet his interest in social justice was piqued by a brief period of time spent in France, where he was introduced to the worker-priest movement later suppressed by Pope Pius XII for its Marxist leanings.[4] Returning to America, he published and taught on a range of subjects before landing a campus ministry position at Cornell University, just before the dramatic student-led protests and sit-ins of 1969.

2. Daniel Berrigan, To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 101.

3. Berrigan's fairly typical adolescent attitude was reinforced by a volatile relationship with his father, whose tempestuous and prideful disposition mirrored that of his teachers. He recalls his father as constructing a domestic life "by neglect and industry, by violence and tenderness, by virtuous word and singularly unvirtuous conduct, by yelling and weeping and pieties and cruelties and inexplicable uxorious moods, by anger and obscenity and embraces and tears—an extraordinary conglomerate of passion and illusion" (Ibid., 7).

4. As part of an effort to reunite disaffected Catholics with the church, the worker-priest was excused from parochial work and "lived only by full-time labor in a factory or other place of work, and was indistinguishable in appearance from an ordinary workingman" See Gregor Siefer, The Church and Industrial Society (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1964), 4.

At what he called this "poison Ivy" he first encountered the "boring sterility of bureaucracies" along with the "infinite variety of pretense, self-justification, myth, inaccessibility, bumptiousness, pomp and circumstance, with which [bureaucracy's] emptiness was concealed"—a description that he would in time apply to both the Catholic Church and the United States government.[5] When student protestors stormed and occupied university buildings to protest the absence of programs and teachers of African-American history, those who knew Berrigan were unsurprised that he sided with the students, criticizing the "bureaucrats" who shut their eyes to the inequities and racism that existed outside the safe environs of Ithaca. Given that his relationship with educators throughout his life could be best described as testy, Berrigan's decision to become a teacher—he served on the faculty of Fordham University, Columbia University, Yale University, and the University of California, Berkeley, to name just a few —strikes one as as odd as his choice to join the priesthood. In fact, such institutions provided a testing ground for arguments that would be refined and amplified in the coming years, as he helped lead America toward a moral reckoning with poverty, racism, imperialism, minority rights, and other issues that, then as now, divided the United States. As an activist, Berrigan initially came to public notice during the Vietnam War when he assisted in the organization of an interfaith movement protesting American military involvement in Southeast Asia: Clergymen and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV). Consisting of more than 100 clergy members, including Berrigan's priest brother, Philip, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., CALCAV became a significant social movement organization during the Vietnam years and beyond.[6] Even so, as the toll of dead Americans and Vietnamese rose, so did Berrigan's impatience with what he saw as ineffectual and modest forms of dissent on the part of the antiwar left, particularly with regard to the military draft.

5. Berrigan, To Dwell in Peace, 195.
6. See Mitchell K. Hall, Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

While many war opponents talked up great change, he realized while at Cornell that "one simply could not announce the gospel from his passbook ... when he was not down there sharing the risks and the burdens and the anguish of his students, whose own lives were placed in the breech by us, by this generation that I and others belong to."[7] Thus, on May 17th, 1968, his anger toward the American military crossed over from discussion to action, as he and eight other religious dissenters broke into the offices of a draft board in Catonsville, Maryland.[8] With members of the press invited to watch, Berrigan and his accomplices set fire to 378 selective service files using homemade napalm while reciting the Lord's Prayer. Arrested and sentenced to three years in federal prison for the destruction of government property and impeding the administration of the draft, Berrigan made a life-altering decision. He chose to flee from law enforcement, eluding capture with the hospitality of friends and fellow dissidents while still publishing writings and delivering furtive public speeches denouncing the war. Eventually apprehended by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1970, he served nearly two years in a Connecticut prison. It would not be his last run-in with the law. In fact, the Vietnam War and Berrigan's participation in the burning of draft cards were only the beginning of Berrigan's political activism. Up until his death in 2016 at the age of ninety-four, he was arrested on dozens of occasions for his opposition to different manifestations of what he once described as America's "interlocking directorate of death" bent on "killing people in various ways," be it in the form of nuclear proliferation, capital punishment, the AIDS epidemic, medical abortion, and U.S. military interventions in Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, to name just a few of the causes in which he spoke out against.[9]

6. See Mitchell K. Hall, Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

7. Quoted in J. Justin Gustainis, "Crime as Rhetoric: The Trial of the Catonsville Nine," in Robert Hariman (ed.), Popular Trials: Rhetoric, Mass Media, and the Law (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 169.

8. The other members of the group included Daniel's brother, Phillip; the Christian missionaries Tom and Marjorie Melville; the activist Mary Molan; Tom Lewis, a Baltimore artist; David Darst and John Hogan, both of whom were dissident Catholic activists like Berrigan; and George Mische, Army veteran and peace movement organizer.

9. Interview by Lucien Miller, Reflections, Volume 2.4 (Fall 1979), 1-2.

Nor was his political activity confined to writing and speechifying. Accompanied by the author Howard Zinn, he flew to Hanoi, Vietnam, to negotiate the release of an American prisoner of war, which proved successful in securing the soldier's release. A perennial gadfly that was unafraid to provoke politicians, his superiors in the Catholic Church, or others in power, Berrigan blazed a path that sought to antagonize those who perpetuated injustice in society, whether expressed through racism, organized religion, political power, or exploitive economic systems.[10] Whatever or whoever his target, he balanced outrage with an abiding hope for a more just world, however remote its realization appeared. He once stated that looking upon the "gentle tormented face" of the terminally ill or prisoners of conscience awoke in him a "longing to reverse the very course of the world" by reclaiming "the lost art of justice," an art that might purge public life of its many social and political "parasites."[11] If the efforts of the "cottage industry of malcontents" to which he belonged proved successful in raising public awareness and outrage, there might yet arise "decent political conduct" when the "gentle and clean of heart, the poor of spirit and rich in grace" would take their place in the seats of power.[12] Given his outspokenness on so many of the political issues of his day, it is surprising so little has been said about Berrigan's political thought. One reason may have to do with the strident tone and unsystematic character and grandiose tenor of his oeuvre, qualities that lend credence to the charge that Berrigan was a political fanatic rather than a philosophic writer worthy of academic study.[13]

10. Berrigan was viewed as an embarrassment by many in the Catholic church, notably the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman, who repeatedly sought to reassign Berrigan to various churches in Latin America. The antagonism between the two was mutual: Berrigan once described Spellman as "the epitome of the old Martian spirit" who sanctified the very institutions and exercises of power that Berrigan condemned. Daniel Berrigan, Essential Writings, ed. John Dear (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 47.

11. Daniel Berrigan, *Sorrow Built a Bridge: Friendship and AIDS* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 134.

12. Ibid., 135.

13. In an otherwise sympathetic eulogy in the Catholic periodical Sojourners, Jim Wallis noted that Berrigan's "critics often accused him of disorderliness, creating drama, and causing discomfort—all of which were true." See Jim Wallis, "The Unchained Life of Daniel Berrigan," Sojourners (2016). https://sojo.net/magazine/august-2016/unchained-life-daniel-berrigan.

Political conservatives often derided his many protests and arrests as so much dramatic theater, designed to play to the emotions of the crowd rather than to change its mind.[14] More sympathetic writers have placed Berrigan within the general framework of eloquent religious resisters to military imperialism during the latter part of the twentieth century, a designation that, while correct, is too broad to include the more radical elements of his theological and political beliefs.[15] Still others who have studied Berrigan's work, including his friend Thomas Merton, have located his philosophy as lying beyond the categories of the political left and right, summing up his outlook as one of an eccentric Christian anarchist.[16] Berrigan admitted he was skeptical of politicians and political parties, viewing them as a ruse for elite machinations. "Conventional politics," as he marveled in his 1987 autobiography, To Dwell in Peace, acts as a "wondrous false front behind which the true drama of power is played out."[17] Yet these accounts, too, neglect the positive vision he had for revitalizing a community based on life and love rather than death and hatred. Regardless of where Berrigan is positioned on some ideological spectrum, there exists a reasoned political

14. Andrew M. Greeley, "Phrenetic?" Holy Cross Quarterly 4.1 (1970), 17; Walker Percy, "The Discussion Continues," Commonweal, September 4, 1970: 4; Michael Novak, "Blue-Bleak Embers...Fall, Gall Themselves...Gash Gold-Vermilion" in Conspiracy: The Implications of the Harrisburg Trial for the Democratic Tradition, ed. John C. Raines (New York: Harper and Row, 1974),.37-71.

15. See Michael True, Justice Seekers, Peace Makers: 32 Portraits in Courage (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985), 29-34; Anne Keljment, "The Berrigans: Revolutionary Christian Nonviolence," in Peace Heroes in Twentieth-century America, ed. Charles DeBenedetti (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1986), 227-254; Joy James (ed.), Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefeld, 2003), 239-247; War No More: Three Centuries of American Antiwar & Peace Writing, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald (New York: Library of America: 2016); Can I Get A Witness? Thirteen Peacemakers, Community Builders, and Agitators for Faith & Justice, eds. Charles Marsh, Shea Tuttle, and Daniel P. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2019).

16. Anne Klejment, "War Resistance and Property Destruction: The Catonsville Nine Draft Board Raid and Catholic Worker Pacificism," in A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker, ed. Patrick G. Coy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 272-312: 299; Ross Labrie, Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 207; Phillip Berryman, Our Unfinished Business (New York: Knopf, 1989), 221; Joseph A. Polermo, "Father Daniel J. Berrigan: The FBI's Most Wanted Peace Activist," in David L. Anderson (ed.), The Human Tradition in America Since 1945 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2003), 71-93: 74. Merton included himself with Berrigan as members of the "Christian non-violent left" who proudly rejected the label of "liberal" in favor of "anarchist." See "Merton to Martin E. Marty, Sept. 6 1967," in The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concern, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1985), 458.

17. Berrigan, To Dwell in Peace, 69.

theory, inseparable from and informed by his activism, that deserves greater attention than it has received to date. Among the most important principles of this theory was one that also informed his activism: the pressing need for radical action in the face of injustice and moral wrong.

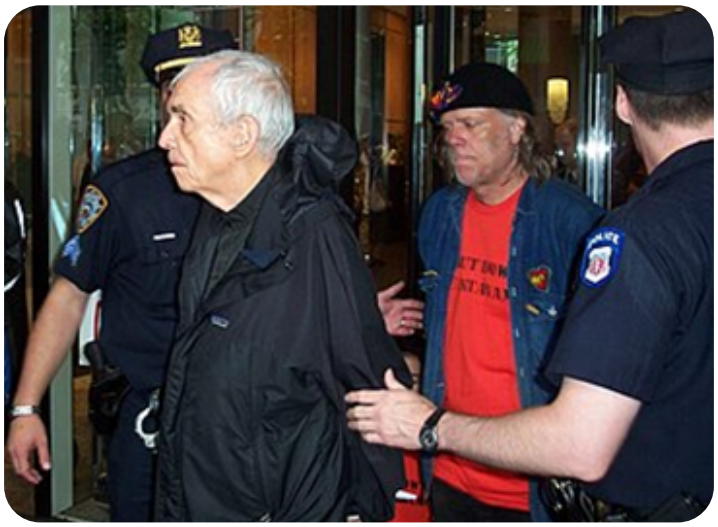
"A time to tear and pull down and root out": Resisting America's "False Idols"

Timidity was never an expression that could be applied to Berrigan's thought. He was withering in his condemnation of traditional American politics, and none suffered more under this heading than those who offered only platitudes designed to treat the effects rather than address the causes of the world's ills. That he might inflict "friendly fire" did not concern him: he could condemn those belonging to the antiwar movement with the same vitriol he directed toward presidents Johnson and Nixon. Beginning in the 1960s, he lamented the "moratorium" that seemed to have been self-imposed on "radical or disobedience protest," as many opponents of the war in Vietnam passively placed their hopes in the promises of politicians who, in fact had little interest in upsetting the status quo. For Berrigan, better confrontation and action were needed in the face of injustice and violence, something with bite and more tangible than the tired sayings of politicians, priests, and others in places of authority. Berrigan despaired over "the failure of reasonable people" to offer genuine change, particularly post-Kennedy liberal politicians such as Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey who spoke in conciliative, poll-tested language that attempted "to do justice to all sides."[18] Such moderates, he lamented, "disappear into a scene, no matter how chaotic or evil, with nothing to offer it except a salve, a Band-Aid, a blessing."[19] Echoing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s warning of the dangers of the white moderate, Berrigan cautioned against those inclined to co-exist with evil rather than join efforts to repel its advance:

18. Daniel Berrigan, Essential Writings, ed. John Dear (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 112.
19. Daniel Berrigan, No Bars to Manhood (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 125

> We have assumed the name of peacemakers, but we have been, by and large, unwilling to pay any significant price. And because we want the peace with half a heart and half a life and will, the war, of course, continues, because the waging of war, by its nature, is total —but the waging of peace, by our own cowardice, is partial.[20]

Berrigan believed it was the duty of every American citizen, indeed every person, to confront and act against evil where possible. For him, this obligation had an explicitly biblical sanction. Drawing on the example of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, Berrigan emphasized that "there are times so evil that the first and indeed the only genuinely prophetic function is to cast down the images of injustice and death that claim man as victim."[21]As he saw it, where evil exists beyond cure in society, "to build, to improve, to ameliorate conditions" is a mistake that renders one complicit in such injustice as remains intact. In times of grave sin and corruption, only a new beginning suffices for creating meaningful and lasting change. Thus, having concluded that America and its institutions of power could no longer "represent us, mediate our sense of justice, judge our actions, [or] punish us," Berrigan and his fellow dissidents made the conscious choice to "confront Caesar's stronghold, his induction centers" at the Catonsville draft board office.[22]



Daniel Berrigan is arrested for civil disobedience outside the US Mission to the UN in 2006

20. Berrigan, Essential Writings, 112
21. Berrigan, No Bars to Manhood, 50.
22. Ibid., 50, 63.

Far from being sinful or impious, Berrigan believed that in disobeying unjust authority one drew closer to Jesus Christ, whose revolutionary message and mission he never tired of emphasizing. Christ's life and death "allowed Christians to see themselves as perpetually at a beginning and an end of things," he wrote, awakening them from passivity toward the secular world and rendering them "acutely aware of life as a point of conflict, an inevitable juncture of the power of life and death."[23] Dissent was not simply about the Tet Offensive or the military draft, but could be a prophetic act, disrupting and confronting the status quo on behalf of what he believed God was trying to communicate to a complacent people. As he saw it, the courage to stand against injustice was deeply American as well as deeply Christian, with the federal courtroom a puerile imitation of the divine judgment yet to come.

What separated Berrigan's kind of civic disobedience from that of many other reformers of his time was his unwillingness to endure punishment for breaking laws if doing so would merely sanctify the legal status quo. While admiring the example set by religious leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., he chose a different course in terms of his own response to legal punishment. As he once told The Village Voice, "I wanted to confront the mythology of the good guy whose goodness depends on his willingness to go to jail, the sort of idea that spread with the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King. All that's over now. The important thing to do is to keep working."[24] While dissidents as different as Mahatma Gandhi and Alexei Navalny have accepted prison sentences to highlight attention to their causes, Berrigan hoped that becoming a fugitive of the law would be recognized as consistent with his critique of a broken and fraudulent system of justice. For Berrigan, the decision to flee authorities was a conscious and calculated one, based on a "sense that we were facing both a great opportunity and a great danger."[25] While "it was a strict canon of nonviolence that one took the consequences of illegal activity and paid up," compliance seemed farcical in light of the broader illegality of the Vietnam War.

23. Ibid., 92. In contrast to this active approach to Christian belief, Berrigan derided persons who had submitted to the "slavery of the actual" and "literally cannot imagine themselves in any life situation other than the one in which they live." Such persons as these "inherit a style, a culture, a religion" simply "because they are there: useful, comfortable, logical, venerable" See Ibid., 55.

24. Quoted in Jack Nelson and Ronald J. Ostrow, The FBI and the Berrigans: The Making of a Conspiracy (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1972), 55.

25. Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 238.

How well could one square surrendering to a law that no longer applied to the very men it was designed to constrain? Furthermore, the peaceful tactics employed by Berrigan and his accomplices had done little to blemish the luster that covered the law's corruption; indeed, the resistance's moves till then "had failed even to mitigate the war." Thus, there arose "a choice before us: to delay the unwarrantedly high price exacted for an act of conscience! And more: a chance to underscore once more, in a highly imaginative way, our opposition to the war" by eluding and symbolically defying those responsible for enforcing unjust laws and punishments.[26]

While Berrigan followed in the steps of many dissidents who tried to raise public awareness of the wrongs being committed in the name of the people, he took an approach designed to provoke law enforcement and the courts by shattering the sense of invincibility they and other institutions so skillfully projected. By calling into question the strength and capabilities of law enforcement, he made most Americans less complacently sure of the system that claimed to protect them, so long as they stayed within the boundaries of acceptable conduct. Berrigan's stance was, in multiple senses, an act of faith that drew inspiration from religious convictions that, in his view, brooked no passive resignation or half-hearted compromise with a system complicit in the needless deaths of thousands of human beings. By refusing to water down either his beliefs or tactics, he shunned the counsels of church, state, and most of proper society – all contributors to the somnolence of the American people as they sleepwalked through state-sponsored violence and destruction. As Berrigan put it, the "trouble with the state" was not civil disobedience. On the contrary, society's ills could be traced to the message of "civil obedience," a softly whispered lullaby of "don't rock the boat" maintained by the media, politicians, church leaders, and our own humdrum routines.[27] Scratch the surface of American citizenship, he believed, and one would uncover a hollow, self-satisfied form of subjection. And while effective protest might jolt people out of their sense of self-satisfaction, letter-writing campaigns and peaceful marches were the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the harder, positive work of creating a more just political order.

26. Ibid., 239.

27. Daniel Berrigan, The Trouble With Our State, ed. John Dear (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021), 1.

Taken alone, such an attitude might well justify those critics of Berrigan who see in his conduct the actions of an immature and naïve ideologue. Yet balancing out the critical elements of his philosophy is the constructive vision he offers about one's responsibility to work within the limits of the possibilities that a fallen world can offer the reformer.

"Lord Cut My Cloth / To a Human Measure": Political Reform and its Challenges

If Berrigan opposed many policy solutions for their piecemeal attempts to solve society's problems, he also recoiled from activism moved by impulse and emotion rather than forethought and reason. Berrigan was, after all, an academic, and for much of his life, he had not been the furthest thing from the "renegade priest" caricatured by his detractors in the mass media. Prior to 1968, Berrigan had not once broken a law, blithely supposing "that being good Americans was an acceptable secular task" fully compatible with his religious beliefs.[28] To Catholics and non-Catholics who saw a conflict between American and Christian values, Berrigan warned that the state did not hold a monopoly over dogmatic thinking. Indeed, Berrigan lamented that society was plagued by too many "fanatics," religious and secular, whose proposals varied but all of whom shouted "definitive solution[s]" that promised to bring "everything to a good end." This impatience for "one solution" afflicted young people especially, and so he warned his fellow protestors that "those who are seeking to offer alternatives to the noxious directions of public life" should be careful that they do not substitute one orthodoxy with another. Fanaticism, be it political or religious, was more a symptom of mental sloth than of intellectual energy. "It is a fact that as men grow weary of their tasks, they seize upon one or another alternative as being the only possible alternative," he noted. "They lose all perspective. They lose the faculty of listening." If a reformer is mindful only of making society "bend in their direction," respect for human diversity is replaced with a vision of politics that regards nonconformists as defectives in need of reeducation.[29] Such pretensions are not unlike the "cheap unity" we are born into and inherit, our beliefs forming a kind of bloodline that all too easily "becomes a curse, the inheritance a slavery."[30]

28. Berrigan, *No Bars to Manhood*, 49.

29. Ibid., 126.

30. Berrigan, Essential Writings, 73.

In addition to criticizing the pride and sloth implicit in the ideologues' stance, Berrigan also thought that attention to how individuals talk about their beliefs is equally important to building a better society. Berrigan argued that the best way to change minds and reshape society was through dialogue, not violence, but that such dialogue had to be oriented toward the moral reckoning and improvement of the listener. Somewhat surprisingly, given his status as a dissenter, he was no free speech absolutist. To be sure, he believed that free speech was a democratic society's most cherished possession and should be jealously guarded against all foes. Yet he lamented that whereas the ancient Greeks thought man to be most like the gods in the use of speech, "we have almost reversed that claim," to the point that "truthful speech is a rare achievement" in modern politics, an arena "of public conflict, ambition and pain."[31] Instead of fostering the free exchange of ideas, speech was often deployed as an instrument of manipulation. Whether "the speech of power politics, the speech of military murder, [or] the language of religious mystification," all such rhetoric reinforced society's special interests while pretending to preach the truth. As shadows playing upon the walls of our Platonic cave, such illusions too often served "ambition and pain, [and] the onslaught of bestial forces" that threaten to sever communal ties of compassion and charity. Nor did such rhetorical feints pertain to only those in power. Berrigan believed all Americans possessed a key "responsibility for right use of language," one befitting our status as reasoning humans capable of sorting truth from error, distinguishing facts from fiction, thus leading ourselves to imperfect apprehension of the general "logos at the heart of the world."[32] It's an important if often ignored admonition: you are not God, and your opponent is not Satan. Recognizing our fallen nature obliges careful attention on the part of listeners to the nuances and strong points of alternative perspectives. Thus, in contrast to those who would confine the virtue of patience to the meek sufferance of one's lot in life, Berrigan counters that "patience itself is a revolutionary virtue," especially in a culture based on quick fixes and self-gratification.[33]

31. Berrigan, *No Bars to Manhood*, 68.

32. Berrigan suggests that personal struggle in moments of crises seems to exercise a salutary benefit upon the individual as well as the impact one seeks to leave upon one's community. "Jeremiah wrestles with the meaning" of things; indeed, "his wrestling is the meaning; it defines the moral substance and limits of his activity in the world" (ibid., 106).

33. Ibid., 41.

Together with humility and dialogue, activism as Berrigan understood it was also buttressed by hope in a better earthly future. At times, Berrigan suggests that his activism is an extension of caring for his spiritual flock and the pastoral work integral to his vocation. Corrupt systems of power, like sinful individuals, might be saved or at least deterred from committing further crimes. To this end, protest and civil disobedience were anchored to a principle of moral rehabilitation. As he put it in defense of his and his accomplices' actions at Catonsville, "we have tried to underscore with our tears, and if necessary with our blood, the hope that change is still possible, that Americans may still be human," and that "a unified and compassionate society may still be possible."[34] Fittingly, there is an element of penance and reform in his understanding of protest. Reflecting on the court trial following his arrest at Catonsville, Berrigan wished that "our experiences would urge others to discover alternatives to the imposition of death, to the socializing of death, to the technologizing of death."[35] Given the broader didactic purpose of the act, the Nine's actions were intended not to achieve mere destruction or anarchy but represented "a social method of achieving a future for man," addressed to the possibility of a radically different, morally grounded society.

Berrigan and the Waging of Peace

Given his efforts to draw on both revolutionary and accommodative approaches to civil disobedience, it might be said that Berrigan's theory is jarring as well as contradictory. At the least, it might hold out an impossible vision of prudential decision-making by those who stood in opposition to the unfolding crises afflicting America in the latter part of the twentieth century. In response, Berrigan might criticize the political polemicists of his day as the true utopian thinkers, promising to the American people a future of peace and prosperity if only the ideology du jour could be defeated. He believed such vows of a promised land avoided engagement with the historical record, which is littered with evidence about hucksters, politicians, and other gimcrack peddlers of political and personal salvation. A lifelong student of the Old Testament prophets, he viewed true servants of Christ's word as rare figures compared to those who merely claimed to speak in God's name.

34. Ibid., 52.
35. Ibid., 35.

Reviewing the "blood-ridden pages" of the Old Testament, Berrigan was struck by the various wars, betrayals, familial strife, murders, and overall mayhem conveyed in these "divinely inspired" histories.[36] Like the poor, conflict will always be with us. Yet the history expressed in the books of Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Maccabees also conveys important lessons for understanding the presence of evil in human affairs today, if one will only take seriously their teachings. First and foremost, the Old Testament's themes point to the need for humans to "move in great darkness before we are blessed and enter the light," as those confront injustice must overcome "the anti-human, the inhuman enthroned, wielding life-and-death authority," just as the prophets did. Evil and corrupt authorities are inevitable, and "the warriors, tricksters, and betrayers are not only our ancestors" but also pull the levers of power today, their handiwork apparent in the distortion of economic, political, and social structures that benefit the few at the expense of the many. Just as important as recognizing the prevalence of greed and sin among elites, however, is recognizing that ordinary citizens, too, "dwell in moral darkness, deep and often unapprehended," for it is the people who approve corrupt leaders or "are prudently silent in the face of their crimes."[37] However shrewd the latter path may appear in the short term, such complicity is only an effort to quell one's own conscience. We should suffer no illusions that we have reached a more enlightened, less barbaric time, Berrigan contends. On the contrary, "the system that fuels our world coincides with, even surpasses, the crimes—social, military, economic (and yes, religious)—recorded of the [Old Testament] Kings."[38] Thus, given the ingrained human tendency toward self-seeking and self-deception, there is no magic formula for purifying once and for all sites of authority that have become corrupted by our all too human failings. Replacing old "kings" or politicians with different ones is at most a temporary stop-gap. For Berrigan, the mature Christian and the humble citizen must recognize the moral pathologies that lie latent in all members of society, from those that walk the corridors of power to the meanest scofflaw on the city street. To paraphrase the Gospel of Matthew, he consistently urged dissidents to remove the beam from their own eye before the mote from another's.

36. Daniel Berrigan, *The King and Their Gods: The Pathology of Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 2.
37. Ibid., 3. "Tendencies in leader and follower are often alike and hold firm," Berrigan continues, "self-interest, ego, lust, greed, duplicity, [being] the common mire from which spring the wily and witless among us" (232).
38. Ibid., 4.

Berrigan's commitment to what he called "peacemaking" led him to reject physical violence as a tool of protest. Confronted with a world of coercion, disorder, and death, he believed the dissident should guard against the temptation to let the horrors of the world overwhelm one's moral conscience, allowing the abyss of sin to overtake the witness to its power. As he saw it, the long history of resistance movements indicates "how constantly and easily we are seduced by violence, not only as method but as end itself."[39] Those activists that succumb to such impulses frequently plunged off in all directions, reacting to events as they happened instead of the harder, long-term work justice requires. The dissenter had an obligation "to remember humanity," he claimed, to "[s]tay with history, Make something of it, by falling within its main line of action" and laying the foundation for "a community whose life will also be available to history".[40] Under the influence of violence and destruction, many movements unintentionally justify the old rule of might makes right, thus reinforcing the claims of "the armed, bellicose, and inflated spirit of the army, the plantation, the corporation, the diplomat."[41] To this end, Berrigan repeatedly criticized the actions of movements such as the Weather Underground, whose members took actions that he saw as endangering the lives of innocent Americans. Rejecting actions[42] whose moral purpose was drowned out by the visceral intent to destroy, Berrigan proposed "a very different ethos" in a letter he wrote to the Weathermen, one that held that "no principle is worth the sacrifice of a single human being."[43]

39. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 156.

40. Ibid., 143. Berrigan notes that "from the beginning of our republic / good men and women had said no / acted outside the law / when conditions so demanded / And if they did this / Time might vindicate them / show their act to be lawful / A gift to society / A gift to history / and to the community" (ibid., 124).

41. Ibid., 156.

42. Formed at the University of Michigan in 1969, the Weather Underground Organization was a far-left, anti-war Marxist group committed to the overthrow of the United States government. Designated a domestic terrorist organization by the FBI, members of the group carried out guerilla bombing and arson campaigns at government buildings and sites throughout the 1970s. Its tactics were criticized by many, and the group itself declaimed violence and the destruction of property after three of its members were accidentally killed while manufacturing bombs intended for use at a military ball at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

43. Ibid., 154. No matter how "enlightened" or "democratic" our ideologies, Berrigan once noted, they "can never be equated with the Realm of God." To revolutionaries of the right and left, Berrigan claimed, God responded to their cry of "no" against injustice with His own "no" to their ambitions for realizing heaven on earth: "'Not yet. Not yet the Realm of God.'" See Daniel Berrigan, *The Word Made Flesh*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 221.

The most breathtaking aspect of Christianity was its promise "to break the universal dominion of Death over humanity," as testified by Jesus' refusal to confront the secular sword with his own tools of violence, his willingness to turn the other cheek when suffering harm, all while proclaiming his kingdom as not of this world.[44] Such themes were a far cry from the militant and destructive ethos of the Weathermen. In 1968, when Berrigan encountered former friends that had joined the Underground, he saw "a new look in their eyes…their lives had spun about: they had entered deep waters, and were drifting toward terrifying shoals."[45] Indeed, "they were fast becoming highly secular, fervent enthusiasts of the old just-war theory; a theory of which they were, by and large, in wondrous ignorance." No longer, he feared, would such a fallacious theory be limited to justifying "colonial wars, wars of domination and settlement and economic control." Henceforth, he marveled, there existed "a new realization of the ancient theory. We had just wars of the left," carried out with the selfsame tools of violence, plunder, and coercion used by the American military. Wherever he seemed to look, "violence was the norm, war was the norm. The times, the bloodletting, these were normal." [46]

Yet however steadfast Berrigan was about the impermissibility of violence as a tactic for reform, he never counseled retreat from society and its problems. Few things rankled his conscience more than hollow slogans advising to love America or leave it or that the moral Christian should tend his own garden. Confronted with a world of death, too many Americans had chosen a kind of spiritual lethargy, closing their eyes to the mayhem surrounding them and resigning themselves to the presence of evil in the world through a kind of self-induced spiritual catatonia. He lampooned, for instance, his colleagues at Cornell, "all those prestigious profs, those incumbents of endowed chairs" who took offense to any intrusion upon their "value free turf." This neutral attitude[47], he believed, represented a form of cowardice that only worsened one's complicity toward injustice, rendering one an accomplice to crimes perpetuated by the state in the name of the people whose interests it claims to represent.

44. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 152.
45. Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 225.
46. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 196.
47. Berrigan, The Trouble With our State, 27.

Acknowledging the fallen character of mankind—that sin was an ever-present potentiality in humanity—did not absolve the individual from acting against corrupt systems whenever and wherever possible. In washing one's hands of society, one also rejected the call for community and concern for the common good that Berrigan believed was at the core of the biblical command to love one's neighbor as oneself. In their conduct, both the violent revolutionary and the socially detached Thoreauian neglected the social implications of the Gospels. As Berrigan states in his autobiographical play, The Trial of the Catonsville Nine, "I believe / I have always believed / that the peace movement must not merely say no / to the war / It must also say / yes to the possibility of a human future / We must go beyond frontiers / frontiers declared by our country or by the enemy." Those who seek to effect genuine change must conceive their work "as a positive offering to history, as connected with the most profound political and social change, the amelioration of humanity's despair."[49] Having "rejected the future they drafted us into, [and] having refused, on the other hand, to be kicked out of America, either by aping their methods or leaving the country," the foremost task put before protest movements was that of "what we can create."[50] Put simply, those who observe wrongs in one's community should resist the temptation to either give in to the violence they abhor or sever their ties with a sinful society entirely.[48]

In his more reflective moments, Berrigan described his own activity as a dissident as constantly trying to strike a balance between the tactics of shock and awe and constructive dialogue and change. How could one preserve one's integrity and decency as a participant in a corrupt system, indeed, a system that one is called to reform? The answer to this question puzzled Berrigan as they did many of his fellow-travelers who desired to bring order to a disordered world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Berrigan seized on the example set by Christ as a political radical who nonetheless saw the limits of revolution in a fallen world. Imagining "the glance of Christ, as it rests on the seats of power," a perception that is at once "level and leveling," he recalls Christ's admonitions to "those who ride high" in sanctimonious confidence of their righteousness.[51]

48. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 131.

49. Ibid., 64.

50. Ibid., 157.

51. Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 144.

The message of the Gospels, as he saw it, counseled "authorities to dig deep in the human condition, to discover there the roots and resources of authority" which must ultimately be grounded "in service rather than domination." Defining legitimate authority in these terms, Berrigan positioned himself not as a Christian anarchist but as a member of an open and frank community that might be revitalized if government were to regard them as brothers and sisters rather than enemies of the state. Achieving this reorientation involved efforts to get even those occupying the highest rungs of power to see things through the perspectives of the dissenter and others ignored or forgotten by society. Thus, the representative of state power should be led to "discover and imagine, for instance, the difference, often so troubling, between craziness and new turns of sanity, between coping [with injustice] and creating" positive change.[52] Far from being a symptom of weakness, Berrigan cast the willingness of those in authority to engage in critical self-examination as a sign of strength and "the health of power," in contrast to the conduct of stiff-necked Pharisees, past and present.

Berrigan defined such constructive efforts under the simple umbrella of "peacemaking." Peacemaking represented the positive efforts of the dissident to create community in a world of isolation, to build a sense of humanity in an America becoming ever more inhumane. His exhortations toward creating a better and more just political order applied to all that had been victimized by the state, not only their outspoken advocates. When one has been "kicked out of America," figuratively speaking, the proper response is not physical self-exile but to "go somewhere in America," to "stay here and play here and love here and build here, and in this way join not only those who like us are also kicked out, but those who have never been inside at all — the blacks, the Puerto Ricans, the Chicanos, the Native Americans."[53] Shunning cheap efforts to integrate such groups into the larger society under empty slogans of unity or American identity, Berrigan notes that building a genuinely flourishing community is difficult and unceasing work, involving "the slow inching forward of compassion and hope" within a framework "as large as life itself."[54]

52. Ibid., 145.

53. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 156.

54. Ibid., 75. Criticizing simplistic calls for harmony and unity, Berrigan held that one's "desire for purification must advance into the possibility of creating purity in others, and especially in systems of authority which had become persecutory" (ibid., 73).

The peace movement, as he understood it, entailed "a journey with others and for others," including those with whom we wholly agree, those with whom we disagree partly, and especially "those who confront us with unwelcome alternatives." These are all "our sisters and brothers," he reminded listeners, and as such they were bound up in the shared destination of the protest movement: "we journey toward humanity."

Finally, rather than a rote blueprint to memorize and graft upon society, the work of peacemaking involves experimentation and adaptation. Surveying the setbacks and failures of the antiwar movement, Berrigan learned the necessity of flexibility. "We tried something, it failed; no matter, try again."[55] While still wanted by the FBI, he made a surprise appearance before a Methodist church in Germantown, Pennsylvania, where he urged his fellow Christians to do what they could to effect change, however ordinary or insignificant the gesture might be. One can "confront the law of the land, that law which protects the warmakers, even as it prosecutes the peacemakers. The Christian can refuse to pay taxes. They can aid and abet and harbor people like myself who are in legal jeopardy for resistance, along with the AWOLS," or, if worried about being arrested themselves, can "organize within their profession and neighborhood and churches so that a solid wall of conscience confronts the death-makers."[56] Indeed, he stated, "there are a hundred nonviolent means of resisting those who would inflict death as the ordinary way of life. There are a hundred ways of nonviolent resistance up to now untried, or half-tried, or badly tried."[57] Embracing the example of Gandhi, he once noted that through his long struggle in South Africa and in India he insisted "that the means and ends [be] so closely joined that the purity of the end can only be measured by the purity of the means," so that "the means were never allowed to foreshorten the end."[58] Consequently, there was no single, best way one might practice to say "no" to the state and "yes" to the needs of man. While he opposed half-hearted efforts to challenge authority, it was the lackadaisical motives that offended him most, not the mode of resistance itself.

55. Berrigan, To Dwell in Peace, 174. Berrigan pointed out that while "it was easy to set down a formula," it was "devilishly hard to live by it, even in minor matters."

56. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 160, 161. Berrigan's sermon to the surprised congregation ran twenty minutes and received wide press coverage, resulting in great embarrassment for the FBI. See Patrica F. McNeal, "The American Catholic Peace Movement, 1928-1972, PhD diss. (Temple University, 1974), 280.

57. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 161.

58. Ibid., 63.

While emphasizing "nonviolence first and foremost, with its fiery trail of implication," peacemaking also upheld "compassion for the adversary, care of one another, community discipline, prayer and sacrament, and biblical literacy."[59] For Berrigan, the individual who perhaps came closest to realizing this form of peacemaking was the activist and co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day. Then as now, elites in the government and the Catholic Church had turned a blind eye to America's "passion for orderly disorder," blithely declaring that all was "in good shape, even the misshapen whole."[60] Conversely, Day understood her "life in faith" as one where she used the abilities God had given her—her community organizing, written work, and ability to love her enemies, even those in the Church—to bring about "a kind of disorderly order." Reflecting an "order at the heart of things, an order of truth, mindfulness, secure vision, [and] follow-through" while all around her "disorder reigned, all but supreme," Day maintained "order in the heart amid disorder in the world." She searched for ways to effect change and was resourceful in doing so, using the tools of nonviolent protest, negotiation, and advocacy journalism to bring attention to such causes as the economic plight of the worker and the homeless. Her life provided Berrigan with an example of the kind of peacemaker, indeed the kind of person, he hoped to be: one guided by the belief that "the well-ordered heart can sustain, penetrate, interpret, resist, minister to, even at times heal, or at least mitigate, the whirlwind" of power that engulfed politics, economics, and frequently institutionalized religion itself.

Berrigan had no illusions about the challenging work of peacemaking. He lamented that so many were ready to assume the name of peacemakers but were "unwilling to pay any significant price for peace. We want peace with half a heart, half a life, and half a will." While the waging of war is total, the waging of peace was partial.[61] So many people were "afflicted with the wasting disease of normalcy that, even as they cry for the peace," they wish for a life where they preserve intact the "fine and cunning web that our lives have woven." [62]

59. Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 174.

60. Ibid., 173.

61. Quoted in Jim Douglass, "Peacemaking is Hard," in Apostle of Peace: Essays in Honor of Daniel Berrigan, ed. John Dear (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 49-51: 49.

62. Ibid., 50.

Consequently, he gloomily forecast that “we are unready for God; we are hardly more ready for one another.”[63] Yet there was a redeeming factor to the work of peacemaking: while war demanded that one sacrifice life and limb for their nation, peacemaking required thought and love in addition to the endangerment of one’s life.

Daniel Berrigan, October 28, 2006, at the 3rd Annual Staten Island Freedom & Peace Festival

Thus, while the particular tactics of civil disobedience varied based on considerations of time and context, the end objective, he believed, remained fixed: a community where people were fearlessly committed to a more just and humane state. At a time when political officials and social activists once again find themselves arguing about the proper definition of “peaceful protest,” Berrigan’s life and writings add an important voice to this debate, showing how dissidents can act within the confines of legal acceptability as well as engage in extra-legal civil disobedience.

63. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 245.

Conclusion

Throughout his life, Berrigan adopted both lawful and unlawful methods to make his objections heard. While his predilection to see conflict through the lens of Christian struggle and persecution may have struck some of his colleagues as sanctimonious, his loyalty to the principles of American democracy often clashed with the orders of the Catholic Church. Indeed, he adhered to the principles of liberal democracy, particularly free and candid speech, with an almost religious fervor in terms of their importance to individual freedom and the common good alike. Believing that genuine social bonds were worth saving rather than destroying, he stood out as a voice of moral conscience for the nation. Yet looking at the world as both a priest and a citizen, he perceived not only the defects of the American political system, but also the human frailty that rendered imperfect all political systems and, what's more, all proposed reforms.[64] While the dissident must understand their work as that of building an "internal revival community," a source of the "definition of our future," the practitioner of nonviolence should be realistic about the possibility of creating a culture of nonviolence.[65] In good times and bad, in ordinary times as well as moments of crises, "the nonviolent person is the one who appears as the realist, as what Camus loved to call 'the modest Utopian,' the one whose vision is implemented in the here and now for others" without being obsessed with "a prior, intemperate synthesis for the times." After all, he asked, "Who could waste thought on an abstract good" that is so often "disguised ego at best, manipulation at worst?" [66]

In repudiating absolutist theories or grand historical syntheses, Berrigan was ahead of his time in anticipating some of the solutions that have been offered to reconcile church and state controversies in twenty-first-century America. He would have rejected the hermetic "Benedictine Option" offered by some Catholic thinkers, which counsels gradual withdrawal from secular society.

64. Reflecting on the outcome of the Catonsville trwithdrawalial, Berrigan commented that "the law is less and less useful for the living, less and less the servant of men, less and less expressive of that social passion which in the early days of Greek and Roman jurisprudence brought the law into corporate being … as a spiritual resource" (40). According to Berrigan, the legitimacy of law rested not on any inherent value it possesses, but its instrumental role in serving mankind.

65. Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 155.

66. Ibid., 181.

Were he alive today, such pleas to maintain one's moral purity by avoiding secular life would be to him abhorrent but unsurprising. After all, he lamented that churches in his time had narrowed the message of the peacemaking Christ, diluting its contrarian message and its radical implications for society and humanity. The attitude among many in the Catholic Church hierarchy, urging individuals such as Pope Francis to stay in his own lane and keep out of politics, is a refrain Berrigan knew well.[67]

Nor would Berrigan endorse efforts by some Christian and Catholic intellectuals to further "integrate" Christian and natural law principles into state institutions. Unlike Catholic thinkers that preceded him who defended Catholicism as complementary with American democracy, Berrigan shied away from befriending "Holy Mother State / humming an executioner's song."[68] Such attempts he feared would give religious imprimatur to already too-powerful institutions that have long forgotten their basic political or religious purposes, risking the fulfillment of his warning that the "twin powers" of church and state are "always in danger of becoming Siamese twins."[69] One must be careful not to mix two "radically opposed spiritual powers," with the same disastrous consequences found throughout human history. Just as we must resist pressure to "knuckle under, bend knee, bless war, pay taxes, [and] shut up," believers should be mindful of the overall trans-political message of their religion, resisting those that would transmogrify the message of the gospels into a state religion. As he once summarized the matter, the "disease of power" is a "malaise [that] strikes in church or state," and in the final analysis, "I could see no great advantage in my perishing at anointed hands rather than secular."[70]

67. Recalling criticism he received from church officials for his activism, Berrigan regretted that the attitude of his superiors was so confining: "Priests belonged where priests had always been; in church sanctuaries and rectories; certainly not in draft boards and courts and jails, places where the faith could be held only in ridicule and scorn" See Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 204. In the autumn of 1965, Berrigan was exiled by the Church to South America for months, without notice of return or the option of visiting family prior to his departure. "It was contemptible and saddening. For the first time, I had cause to be ashamed of my order, its honorable name, the history of holiness and probity I treasured" (ibid., 182).
68. Daniel Berrigan, The Trouble with Our State, 46.
69. Daniel Berrigan, *Portraits of Those I Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 152.
70. Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace*, 143.

Berrigan would have been equally suspicious of claims that freedom and liberal democracy were the best prescriptions for the world's ills. As Ross Labrie notes, Berrigan repeatedly criticized liberalism for its lukewarm reply to social injustice, for prizing doctrine over reality, relying on superficial reforms that he thought wholly inadequate for addressing the deeper spiritual problems at the root of many social ills.[71] Moreover, Berrigan believed most liberals were far too conciliatory, more drawn to contriving a shallow consensus and satisfying special interests. Too often, he argued, those projecting solidarity with the dissenter hid their personal lust for power under their tolerance of the status quo.

Repudiating the traditional political structure of America did not mean that Berrigan ignored larger questions about citizenship, justice, and the moral underpinnings of liberal democracy. Indeed, his writings forecast many of the same quandaries that Americans would have confronted since his death: What is the true meaning of "patriotism?" How does one "support the troops"? How can citizens show care for "the least of these," those on society's margins? In addressing these questions, he hoped that his answers would impel America toward a deeper self-examination, to reconceive what freedom should mean as something more than what was in his time: the "free to consume, free to vote in a moral void for vapid political clones, free to amass wealth, free to attend slack and superficial worship, free to build and pay for Armageddon weaponry."[72] In contrast to conservatives bewailing the loss of family values and liberals lamenting the domination of economic self-interest in American life, Berrigan's example indicates how both sides are addressing similar problems in different languages, based on an impoverished version of human freedom.

As Berrigan saw it and as his life attests, a rehabilitated vision of freedom must take into account the meaning and difference one can render to one's fellows in a broader historical context. In reaction to other religious activists who might confidently claim God to be on their side, Berrigan was never

71. Many "good, decent, peace-loving people," Berrigan wrote, are "so afflicted with the wasting disease of normalcy that, even as they declare for the peace, their hands reach out with an instinctive spasm in the direction of their loved ones, in the direction of their comforts, their home, their security, their income, their future, their plans…'Of course, let us have the peace,' we cry, 'but at the same time let us have normalcy, let us lose nothing, let our lives stand intact, let us know neither prison nor ill repute nor disruption of ties.'" See Berrigan, *Essential Writings*, 113.

72. Berrigan, To Dwell in Peace, 158.

caught up in the idea that he was a messiah, martyr, or saint whose work would usher in a New Jerusalem. He believed the past was marked not by a unilinear progress from superstition to enlightenment, but punctuated by "moral movement and crisis" that presented new fields of spiritual as well as physical combat.[73] Indeed, while evils may be temporarily vanquished, the threat of their return in a different guise is a constant possibility, as "no experience of man is totally strange or totally familiar," and "certain events occurring in another culture, another political climate, are recognizable by elements common to ours."[74] Thus, the life and death of Christ invites believers to see life "as a point of conflict, an inevitable juncture of the power of life and death."[75] History is "forever beginning anew," he declared, and progress is "forever being crushed by illegitimate power and immoral circumstance."[76] Yet one who acts against injustice should not be discouraged by either the resilience of evil or the impermanence of progress. Rather, one should know that "to exist at any given point of time is truly to exist at the end of time," embodying "in oneself the spiritual resources that will be purified and vindicated at the end."[77] Rejecting any understanding of time as the simple "the movement of planets relative to one another," Berrigan also cautioned against the optimistic belief that hard-won reforms will remain in place forever.

All told, Berrigan was a political as much as a religious thinker, and it is in the former role that his message and lived experience resonate today. As Americans continue to grapple with the role of dissent in society, Berrigan reminds readers of the importance of a citizenship based not on uncritical genuflection before the flag, but one alive to and engaged with the problems that his fellow citizens might understate or ignore. For those who might follow his example in objecting to new forms of injustice in systems of authority, his works show that the right to dissent should not neglect the responsibility to build a more just world, to engage in the peace-making that eliminates the root causes of violence.

73. Berrigan, *No Bars to Manhood*, 91.
74. Ibid., 119.
75. Ibid., 92.
76. Ibid., 91.
77. Ibid., 93.

As he repeatedly emphasized, such constructive efforts, in going beyond the standard policy band-aids offered by politicians, will be difficult, versatile, and guided by the humble recognition that a world without violence and injustice, contrary to whatever abstract theories and ideologies may proclaim, is not a Promised Land we are destined for. Rather, it is an idea, like America itself, that we can strive to seek, to work toward, to affirm, and, when conscience demands, to protest.

Potential Proposals

1) Peace-Making: A day of civic observance encouraging citizens to practice small-scale acts of nonviolence, community repair, and political reflection. Such events would institutionalize Berrigan's belief that peace must be "waged" with the same seriousness as war.

2) Faith and Democracy: Creation of a standing body of religious leaders, secularists, and policymakers who would deliberate on issues where religion and law overlap (war, poverty, immigration, capital punishment, etc.). Such forums would seek to create an ongoing dialogue, reflecting Berrigan's conviction that humility and listening are prerequisites for justice in a liberal democracy.

3) Teaching Dissent: Too often, narratives of national history are told based on an outdated, hagiographic "Great Man" view of history. Greater emphasis should be given to the contrarians, dissenters, and objectors who, while unpopular in their time, were on the right side of history about the role of freedom of expression in a liberal democracy.

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