

Civil Disobedience as Prayer

by Jim Douglass

Red Letter Christians

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One way of seeing jail today is to regard it as the monastery. In a society preparing for nuclear war and ignoring its poor, jail is an appropriate setting in which to give one's life to prayer. In a nation which has legalized preparation for the destruction of all life on earth, going to jail for peace – through nonviolent civil disobedience – can be seen as prayer. In reflecting today on the Lord's Prayer, I think that going to jail as a way of saying "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" may be the most basic prayer we can offer in the nuclear security state. Because we have accepted the greatest evil conceivable as a substitute for divine security, we have become a nation of blasphemers. The nuclear state is blasphemous by definition. As members of such a nation, we need to pray for the freedom to do God's will by non-cooperating with the ultimate evil it is preparing. Civil disobedience done in a loving spirit is itself that kind of prayer.

On the other hand, civil disobedience can be done in a way that, while apparently non-cooperating with nuclear war, ends up cooperating with an illusion that underlies nuclear war. In any attitude of resistance to the state there is a kind of demonic underside, power turned upside down, which wishes to gain the upper hand. Civil disobedience which is not done as prayer is especially vulnerable to its underside.

A simple truth at the root of nonviolence is that we can't change an evil or an injustice from the outside. Thomas Merton stated this truth at the conclusion of one of his last books, [*Mystics and Zen Masters*](#), as a critique of "nonviolence" as it is understood by its proponents in the Western world. Merton questioned "the Western acceptance of a 'will to transform others' in terms of one's own prophetic insight accepted as a norm of pure justice." He asked: "Is there not an 'optical illusion' in an eschatological spirit which, however much it may appeal to *agape*, seeks only to transform persons and social structures *from the outside*?" Here we arrive at a basic principle, one might almost say an ontology of nonviolence, which requires further investigation.

Nonviolent noncooperation with the greatest evil in history is still, according to Merton's insight, a possible way into illusion, a more subtle form of the same illusion that we encounter behind the nuclear buildup. Even in nonviolent resistance, unless we accept deeply the spirit of nonviolence, we can end up waging our own form of war and contributing to the conclusion we seek to overcome. Because the evil we resist is so great, we are inclined to overlook an illusion inherent in our own position, the will to transform others from the outside.

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If one understands civil disobedience as an assertion of individual conscience over against the evil or injustice of the state, the temptation to seek an "outside solution" is already present. Conscience against the state sounds like a spiritually based or "inside solution." We are, after all, stating our willingness in conscience to go to jail at the hands of the state that threatens an unparalleled evil. But our conscience set off against the nuclear state takes an external view of people acting on behalf of that state. And ultimately such a view externalizes our own conscience.

In the acts of civil disobedience that I have done, I have never met "the state." In terms of my own ambition, that has been disappointing. I have met only people, such as police, judges, and jail guards, who cooperate (and sometimes non-cooperate) with the evil of nuclear war in complex and often puzzling ways. I have never met a person who embodies that state of nuclear war. In their nuances of character, police, judges, and guards come from the same stew of humanity as do people who do civil disobedience.

A spiritually based nonviolence, one that truly seeks change from within, has to engage deeply the spirits of both sides of a conflict. Civil disobedience as an act of conscience against the state tends to focus exclusively on our own conscience as a source of change. Yet in the act of civil disobedience we meet particular people like ourselves, not "the state," and the most enduring thing we can achieve through such an act is, in the end, our relationship to the people we touch and who touch us. Our hope should not be for any strategic victories over such representatives of the state but rather loving, nonviolence relationships with them in the midst of our arrests, trials, and prison sentences. The danger of seeing civil disobedience as an assertion of conscience over against the evil of the state is that it may get confused into an assertion against these particular people so that we may never really see our relationship to them as primary. Making friends with our opponents – in the Pentagon or in Al Qaeda – is our greatest hope of overcoming nuclear war.

A more fundamental question suggested by Merton is: Who is this "I," this self, that is doing the act of conscience in civil disobedience? If civil disobedience accentuates, or heightens, this sense of self – if it gives it a sense of power – is that necessarily a good thing? Civil disobedience is often referred to today as a way of empowering its participants. For socially powerless people, nonviolent civil disobedience can be a profoundly liberating way out of bondage, as one part of a larger revolution. But empowerment can also be used to cover a heightened sense of an individual self that may be a step into further bondage.

We who see ourselves as peacemakers – and don't we all? – would be deeply shocked if we could see the extent to which we act personally for war, not only in our more obvious faults, but even in our very peacemaking. Our intentions and actions for peace lead to war if they are based on a false self and its illusions. If the purpose of civil disobedience is to "empower" such a self, it is a personal act of war.

The nuclear arms race summarizes the history of a false, violent self – of many such false selves magnified in national egos – in an inconceivable evil. What the nuclear crisis says to us, as nothing else in history could, is that the empowering of a false self creates a crisis which has no solution, only transformation. We can't *solve* an arms race based on enormous national illusions, illusions which both exploit and protect an emptiness at the center of millions of lives. Those illusions can only be cracked open to the truth and fear and emptiness at the core of each national pride, then revealed as truly reconcilable with their apparent opposites in the consciousness of another people.

Civil disobedience for the sake of empowering a false self serves as the warring nation state on a smaller scale. Civil disobedience as that kind of empowerment is an attempt to solve one's problems and frustrations by externalizing them in a theater in which innocence confronts the evil of the nuclear state. But we are not innocent.

The greatest treason, as T.S. Eliot points out in [*Murder in the Cathedral*](#), is to do the right deed for the wrong reason. Civil disobedience in response to the greatest evil in history, done to empower a self which can't face its own emptiness, is the right deed for the wrong reason. Because of its motivation, it may also twist itself into the wrong deed. An ego-empowering act of civil disobedience will in the end empower both the self and the nuclear state, which, while tactically at odds, are spiritually in agreement. Such resistance, like the state itself, asserts power in order to cover a void. Civil disobedience, like war, can be used to mask the emptiness of a false self.

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Civil disobedience as prayer is not an assertion of individual conscience over the evil of the state. Protesting against something for which we ourselves are profoundly responsible is a futile exercise in hypocrisy. The evil of nuclear war is not external to us, so that it can be isolated in the state or in the Nuclear Train loaded with hydrogen bombs. The nature of the evil lies in our cooperation with it. What Merton is suggesting is that as we cease cooperating in one way with that evil, our well-hidden tendency is to begin cooperating with it more intensely and more blindly in another way, defining the evil in a way external to us, which deepens and hardens its actual presence in ourselves.

The power of the evil of nuclear war is nothing more than the power of our cooperation with it. There is no evil exclusively out there, over us. The evil is much more subtle than that. This is why it continues to exist. When we cease cooperating with evil at its source in ourselves, it ceases to exist. When we accept responsibility for nuclear war in the hidden dimensions of our own complicity, we will experience the miracle of seeing the Nuclear Train stop and the arms race end. To paraphrase Harry Truman, the Bomb stops here. Civil disobedience as prayer is not an assertion of self over an illusion but an acceptance of God's loving will because of our responsibility for evil: *Not my will but thine be done*. The prayer of the gospels like the prayer of Gandhi is at its heart an acceptance of what we don't want: the acceptance of our suffering out of love. Jesus and Gandhi are precise about what is meant by God's will in a world of suffering. Gandhi in summing up Jesus' life said, "Living Christ means a living cross, without it life is a living death."

To be nonviolent means to accept our suffering out of love. The evil which causes suffering is an evil whose source is more deeply interior to ourselves than we have begun to understand. The prayer of civil disobedience which says, "*Not my will but thine be done*" – by sending us to death or to that sign of death which is jail – is a recognition that in truth we belong there, and that we will in any event ultimately find ourselves there. Civil disobedience as prayer is not an act of defiance but an act of obedience to a deeper, interior will within us and within the world which is capable of

transforming the world. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” To live out the kingdom of God through such an action is to live in a loving relationship to our brothers and sisters in the police, in courts, and in jails, recognizing God’s presence in each of us. It is also to accept responsibility for an evil which is ours: As we are, so is the nuclear state.

The two most violent places I’ve ever been in my life have been the [Strategic Weapons Facility Pacific \(SWFPAC](#) [47°44'45"N 122°43'40"W]), where nuclear weapons are stored at the heart of the Trident base, and the Los Angeles County Jail, where people are stored. I went to SWFPAC in order to pray for peace and forgiveness standing in front of enormous concrete bunkers, the tombs of humankind, a prayer which took me in turn to the LA County Jail (on the way to a more permanent prison) where ten thousand people are kept in tombs. The deepest experiences of peace that I have had have been in these same terrible places.

I believe that a suffering God continually calls us to be in such places for the sake of peace and justice. I believe that the kingdom of God is realized there. Civil disobedience as prayer is a way into that kingdom.

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