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Faith, Resistance, and the Future: Daniel Berrigan's Challenge to Catholic Social Thought

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Faith, Resistance, and the Future: Daniel Berrigan's Challenge to Catholic Social Thought

James L. Marsh and Anna J. Brown (Eds.)
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The life and thought of Daniel Berrigan, S.J. has been discussed in many contexts. Yet, until now the influence his thought should have on academe, specifically Catholic universities and individual academics, has been absent. This is peculiar since a large part of his professional life was spent in preparatory schools and universities. In 2005, James Marsh, president of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, convened a conference on social justice with a special opening panel on the influence of Berrigan's life. The panelists and their papers comprise the core of this collection, which opens with a brief introduction to Berrigan's experiences and closes with an interview of the activist priest.

Those who know Berrigan's work will find his familiar themes discussed within various fields of academe, while those not fully aware of his thought will discover Catholic social teaching expanded in challenging ways. One of the strengths of this volume is the frequent use of Berrigan's own text. His writings, and especially his poetry, remain insightful, powerful, and prophetic to this day. His words are uplifting in their consistent Christian ethic, but horrifyingly still relevant, even decades later.

The essays of Martin De Nys and Robert Ludwig connect Berrigan's interplay of contemplation and engagement to the prophetic tradition in scripture. In particular, Ludwig argues that Berrigan revives biblical salvation and prophecy not only as a promise of the eternal, but as a transformation of the present moment. In this ancient truth made anew, we must retrieve Christian nonviolence as normative. Anna Brown's chapter is perhaps one of the most interesting of the collection, focusing on how individuals inside and outside the empire stay true to their being amidst a culture of death. Brown shows how Berrigan and Etty Hillesum, a prisoner in Nazi concentra-

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tion camps, both refused to submit to the culture of violence – Hillesum as a victim and Berrigan as a victimizer. As Berrigan later tells the editors, “It was very difficult to come home [from Hanoi] with that bag full of horror because I couldn’t just dump it somewhere and then go on as usual at Cornell” (p. 288).

Because Berrigan opposed the war in Vietnam, a Marxist state, his resistance took on a controversial political dimension. The essays by William McBride and by Patrick Murray and Jeanne Shuler both argue that while Berrigan did desire to overcome violent cycles of domination and subordination, he also raised ideological and sociological objections to Marx. Calling him a “Marxist” became one of the exclusionary labels used by American economic powers to marginalize his dissent—a tactic recently seen once again in response to Pope Francis’s promulgation of *Evangelii Gaudium*.

In each of their essays, authors Patrick Murray and Jeanne Shuler, Anna Brown, Christopher Harless, and Robert Doran S.J., address the question of what good comes from small acts of resistance. Berrigan’s response is that good is done for its own sake, not just as an end. The initial transformation is in an individual’s heart, not the social order, because until the individual changes, nothing changes. Anna Brown’s essay emphasizes Berrigan’s distinction that the saving work of Jesus is “more significant than merely taking sides” – instead he takes stands (p. 70). In this way, it is not surprising that the prophetic Berrigan maintains a consistent life ethic on war, abortion, and the death penalty, challenging those on both the political left and right.

As detailed in many of the essays, Berrigan saw scholasticism, particularly “just war” theory, as a break with the biblical tradition and too easily corrupted into nationalistic ideologies. He saw this especially in the United States, where affluence and comfort either numbs citizens or fear is manipulated to push citizens to act in self-serving ways (as elaborated in Presbey’s essay). Berrigan holds fast to Scripture with the understanding that, “You cannot survive in America without something better than America for a resource” (p. 152). Anna Brown’s analysis explores Berrigan’s challenge that our well-being, and even that of our family, should not be placed above justice for another.

Patrick Brown’s chapter points out that the greatest danger is a dull conscience that closes its eyes to injustice. To be a prophet requires saying *no* to the power and assumptions of society that degrade human life and saying *yes* to those that uphold life and human dignity. While a resistant and jailed priest is a scandal to some, Brown argues that this return to the biblical roots

of non-violence is a form of “radical orthodoxy.” De Nys presents Berrigan’s specific challenge that the university and individual academics should not promote conformity to the culture, but transform it by shattering the norm of ignoring systemic problems.

Marsh reflects on the difficulty of living as a Catholic Christian in the midst of empire. While the Catholic Church in America was once an immigrant church struggling against domination, Berrigan argues that the church is now allied with the empire. Marsh argues that the Catholic Church needs to regain the prophetic voice it lost in the 1960s as it became mainstream, for resistance remains especially important in the center of the empire, where “the temptation to be bought off, distracted, or narcotized is pretty high” (p. 95)

The life of a prophet is not easy, but looking for safety is not the call of the Christian. Presbey’s essay illustrates how resisters face the disapprobation of those in power and often friends and neighbors too. Those that resist need a community of faith to support the individual against the enormous power of the state to isolate and reject through fear. After the Catonsville action, Berrigan went underground, in a break with the concept of civil disobedience. Thomas Jeannot uses his essay to describe this radical break from disobedience to nonviolent direct action.

Presbey, Marsh, and Harak’s essays compare the Vietnam crisis of Berrigan’s time with the War on Terror in our own. They illustrate abuses prior to and following the terrible events of September 11 and ask why serious discussion on college campuses is not occurring as to whether such attacks are a provocation or retaliation for imperial terror. They ask why Catholic universities do not probe Church positions on peace and war that do not appear to consistently uphold the dignity and protection of life, why universities do not spend more time analyzing the profit-making cycle of war in the 21st century and the revolving door between corporate profiteering and policy making.

Many of the essays in this book acknowledge that liberal and conservative perspectives each have limitations, However, in discussing the modern war on terror, Presbey, Jeannot, and Harak diminish the force of their arguments by descending into partisan attacks. In tracing an arc from Berrigan’s time to ours, these writers fail to acknowledge that the Democratic and Republican parties are the yin and yang of American empire, both having responsibility for violent actions in Vietnam, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. It is far too simplistic of an approach to reduce the imperial enterprise to one person or party.

Daniel Berrigan's goal is to find freedom and liberation for all, both victims and victimizers. Once chastised and exiled by church hierarchy, Berrigan's prophetic voice now finds harmony with Pope Francis, a fellow Jesuit who also lived in solidarity with the powerless. In Pope Francis, the Church has another prophet for the twenty-first century. For that reason, the publication of *Faith, Reason, and the Future* is as timely as it is insightful.

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