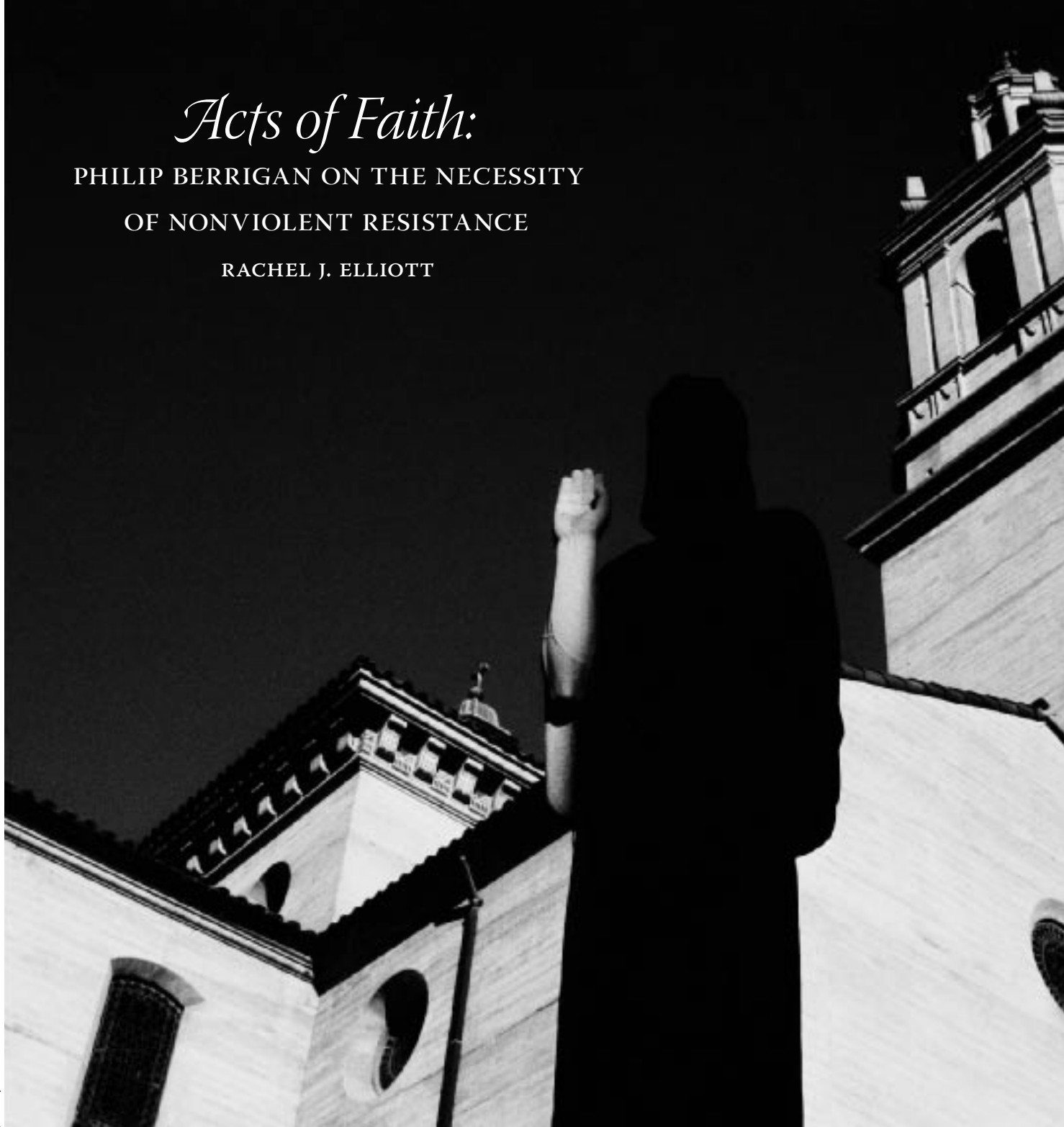


Acts of Faith:

PHILIP BERRIGAN ON THE NECESSITY OF NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

RACHEL J. ELLIOTT



JOEL JENSEN

I grew up attending antiwar demonstrations with my father, a Presbyterian minister and outspoken activist who often protested outside a nuclear-weapons facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Although he's been arrested numerous times for acts of civil disobedience, it wasn't until July 2002 that he was sentenced to a prison term — six months for trespassing on federal property in an act of nonviolent resistance. When I heard the news, it made me proud that he had acted so boldly, and angry that our government locks people up for crossing a line

and kneeling to pray.

It seemed like a good time to talk with someone whom I have long admired for his willingness to be imprisoned for nonviolent resistance: Catholic priest and disarmament activist Philip Berrigan. In the sixties, he and his older brother Daniel, a Jesuit priest, became celebrities of the antiwar movement. Although Daniel went on to become the more recognized of the two, writing prolifically and rarely shying away from the spotlight, Philip, in his own steady, passionate way, remained a man



PHILIP BERRIGAN

Berrigan helped to found Plowshares in 1980, the movement has become international, spreading to the U.K., the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and Australia.

In addition to protesting nuclear warheads, Plowshares has decried the use of shells containing depleted uranium, a byproduct of the uranium-enrichment process used to make nuclear fuel and weapons. Depleted-uranium shells, which release radioactive particles on impact, have been used in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the former Yugoslavia. Although the Defense Department claims that the uranium residue poses no significant health risk, the UN says that the "sale and use of such weapons are incompatible with international human rights and humanitarian law," and Plowshares has called the military use of depleted uranium a form of nuclear warfare.

*Referred to by a judge at one of his trials as "a moral giant" and "the conscience of a generation," Berrigan authored several books, including *Prison Journals of a Priest Revolutionary* (Henry Holt & Company) and *Fighting the Lamb's War: Skirmishes with the American Empire* (Common Courage Press). He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize six times.*

Berrigan married activist nun Elizabeth McAlister in 1969, and the two were later excommunicated because of their union. They had three children, and together helped start Jonah House, an intentional community of nonviolent resisters and social activists in Baltimore, Maryland. When I met with Berrigan at Jonah House in August 2002, he was recovering from hip surgery. He remained seated when I arrived, but greeted me warmly. At

of action, planning and committing acts of civil disobedience right up until his death in December 2002.

I spoke with Philip Berrigan several months before he died. At that point, he had resisted war and the U.S. nuclear buildup for more than forty years. He was a veteran of World War II, and his belief that nuclear weapons shouldn't exist had made him a veteran of the penal system as well; all told, he spent eleven years in prison. He was the first Catholic priest in American history to be imprisoned for a political crime:

burning draft files with home-made napalm. In the eighties and nineties, Berrigan poured his own blood on the Pentagon and hammered on cruise missiles. His steadfast insistence on the appropriateness of his tactics alienated some peace activists and inspired many others.

A major part of Berrigan's legacy is the Plowshares disarmament movement, which takes its name from the second chapter of the biblical book of Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares. . . . Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Since

seventy-nine, he had stark white hair and a disarming smile. Neither of us knew then that he had cancer, which would kill him just a few months later.

On his deathbed, his convictions were as strong as ever. He dictated these final thoughts to his wife: "I die with the conviction, held since 1968, . . . that nuclear weapons are the scourge of the earth. To mine for them, manufacture them, and deploy them is a curse against God, the human family, and the earth itself."

Jonah House is located right next to a cemetery, tucked behind dilapidated row houses in a downtown-Baltimore neighborhood full of abandoned buildings and liquor stores. The Jonah House residents built their cedar-shingled home themselves, and the light-filled rooms and large vegetable garden made me feel as if I had stumbled upon an oasis. A police helicopter circling overhead brought me back to reality.

Elliott: Do you think the military has any legitimate role in modern society?

Berrigan: No. War is never justified. Christian resister Ben Salmon put it succinctly: "Either Jesus was a liar, or war is never necessary." It was Leo Tolstoy's view that any military is intended first for use against its own people. I agree. If we were sane and just, we'd dismantle our military today.

Elliott: How did the Plowshares movement begin?

Berrigan: In the late seventies, disarmament activists began singling out General Electric in their protests, because GE was — and is — a big weapons manufacturer. GE was making missile nose cones — re-entry vehicles for the Minuteman III missiles — at a plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. One of our number walked into the front vestibule of the plant, located an in-house telephone book, and ripped out a page that had a rough floor plan of the plant. Then we walked around the perimeter of the plant and saw these huge tractor-trailers backed up to a ramp. We figured that the nose cones would be moving to that shipping point.

On September 9, 1980, eight of us went into the back of the plant, where the workers entered, to try to locate the missile nose cones. Our contingency plan, if we were stopped, was to drop to our knees, pour some blood, and say some prayers. But God was with us. It took us about ten seconds to locate the nose cones. And we began to belabor them and pour our blood on classified blueprints. We damaged a lot of the hand-made tools they used in testing those things. That was our first Plowshares action.

Faith is a major component of Plowshares: You have to believe that hellish weapons are not the will of God. You have to believe that, with God's help, you can get to these weapons. And, finally, you have to believe that you can do both symbolic and real damage to them. "Hellish weapons" means battleships that deploy Tomahawk cruise missiles; it means Aegis destroyers, B-52 bombers, and B-1 bombers; it means the whole array of nuclear first-strike weapons.

The most recent action I did was in East Baltimore. We disarmed A-10 Warthog warplanes. They are nuclear weapons because they fire depleted-uranium shells. At last count, I heard



that a thousand American GIs from Desert Storm have already died from depleted-uranium poisoning. And such deaths are enormously painful and protracted. Their immune systems shut down. Like AIDS victims, they become pushovers for any disease that comes along. That's what these GIs have gone through, and that's what the Pentagon suppresses.

Elliott: Isn't the use of depleted uranium considered a war crime by international law?

Berrigan: Yes, but we were not permitted to argue that in court. Ramsey Clark, a former attorney general of the United States and a dear friend, defended us in several trials. He's an



SARA SAFRANSKY

expert on international law, which, according to the U.S. Constitution, supersedes federal law. But anytime we tried to use that in our defense, the prosecutor would shout, “Objection! Objection!” and the judge would defer to him.

Elliott: You were also not allowed to use the “necessity defense” in the Plowshares trials. Could you explain the necessity defense?

Berrigan: The simplest example of necessity is breaking down a door to save a child from a burning building. You aren’t charged with breaking and entering. You are commended for having saved a life.

We’ve never been able to use the necessity defense because the government has argued that we cannot prove nuclear war is imminent. We explain that nuclear war could happen at any time as long as the government is designing, building, and deploying nuclear weapons; that the government has poisoned our air, water, and food supply with radioactive isotopes; and that atomic testing has already killed millions of people worldwide.

Elliott: In the documentary film *In the King of Prussia*, depicting the trial of the Plowshares Eight, one of the jury members admits that he didn’t know the GE plant in his town

was making parts for nuclear missiles. How aware do you think most Americans are that our country is still *building* nuclear weapons?

Berrigan: It's not so much the unawareness of the American people that's the problem. Even when we are aware that the weapons are being built, we don't *understand* what this is doing to us. You're looking at fifty-eight years of nuclearism. You're looking at more than a thousand atmospheric or underground nuclear tests. You're looking at 103 nuclear power plants in this country, all of which are emitting radiation. You're looking at 149 nuclear-weapons factories in the U.S., 104 of which the Department of Energy says are so toxic we can't clean them up. Plus, we have fought four nuclear wars: in Japan, Iraq, Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan — the last one perhaps the worst of all.

Trying to root out Al-Qaeda fighters in the Hindu Kush mountain range in Afghanistan, we used huge rock-penetrating bombs made of depleted uranium. And we left a fierce residue of depleted uranium in that mountain range, which, when the snow melts, waters most of the agricultural land in neighboring Pakistan. So we have the same situation there that we have in southern Iraq: a saturation of air, soil, water, and vegetation with nuclear material.

Elliott: Are nuclear weapons the biggest threat we face today?

Berrigan: Yes. The near showdown between India and Pakistan over Kashmir should highlight that. Furthermore, all those tests, wars, nuclear power plants, and uranium mines have so saturated the planet with radioactive rubbish that we have a global cancer epidemic on our hands. We are all carrying questionable material in our bodies, and it is going to kill some of us. You can't escape it. And you never know you've contracted cancer until it starts to kill you.

The vast percentage of people are in denial about this. A friend of ours, Carole Gallagher, wrote a notable book on the Nevada Test Site, titled *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War*. One interview she did sticks out in my memory: She walked into the room of a dying man who had been a worker at the Nevada Test Site. At the end of every workday, he had gone to a trough of radioactive water and washed his face.

When Carole went into his sickroom, this once two-hundred-pound man was down to ninety-five pounds. She asked him if his illness was related to his work at the Nevada Test Site, and from his deathbed, the old guy began to roar and curse at her. She left at the request of the man's wife. But he carried his denial to the grave.

Elliott: Many of the actions you have participated in involved hammering on weapons of mass destruction and so forth. There is disagreement within the peace movement on the destruction of property as a tactic. What kind of criticism have you faced from within the movement and how do you justify this destruction?

Berrigan: We haven't received much criticism in our immediate circles, but some people, including many Quakers, say that destruction of property is violent, that it's vandalism. But for us it goes deeper than property issues: These weapons

don't have a right to exist. And at some point they're going to have to be dismantled and returned to their original forms.

The twenty-fourth Psalm says: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." Look at the fabrication of a weapon. All these brilliant scientists and skilled technicians are taking things that don't belong to them. They're taking the materiality of this world and fabricating from it a lethal weapon to use against other human beings. They're saying that, under certain circumstances, we will damn well use this weapon. And we have used it. We are the only country in the world that has used nuclear weapons on other human beings.

The making of such a weapon is a wholesale act of robbery. We have to restore this material, symbolically and in reality, to its original state. What we're doing through Plowshares is converting property back to that which is proper to human life.

In 1996, six of us climbed aboard a new Aegis destroyer at the Bath Iron Works in Maine and worked our way to the navigational center of the ship. We used hammers to dismantle the sophisticated navigational panel that runs the length of the pilot house and poured our blood over everything. Our actions said: This weapon doesn't have any right to exist. So we are disarming it — symbolically and in reality.

Elliott: I was interested to learn that you served in the U.S. military during World War II.

Berrigan: I didn't have a clue in those days. I was really a dim bulb. When I came home from the service, my Jesuit brother Daniel was studying theology at a seminary outside Baltimore, and I went directly to see him. The atomic bomb had just been dropped, and they had a victory parade, of all things, there at the seminary, because the Jesuits didn't know any more than I did. Since I was the only officer there, I led the parade, carrying an American flag. It was a very bad moment, a confession of my total ignorance.

I believed President Truman when he said that we'd saved millions of American lives by dropping those two bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But it caught up with me, because I'd seen so much devastation and death in northern Europe — especially in Germany. Eventually, I had to put two and two together: if conventional bombing had done that, what had the atomic bomb done to Japan?

(end of excerpt)