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The Prophet and the Bodhisattva: Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Ethics of Peace and Justice

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A Review of *The Prophet and the Bodhisattva:*
Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh and the
Ethics of Peace and Justice

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The Prophet and the Bodhisattva: Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Ethics of Peace and Justice. By Charles R. Strain. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014, ISBN 978-1620328415 (paperback), \$32.00.

Charles R. Strain sets a laudable goal for himself in his recent volume *The Prophet and the Bodhisattva: Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Ethics of Peace and Justice*. That goal, he states, is to examine the two titular figures as “moral classics”, a phrase he borrows from David Clairmont. Strain clarifies, per Clairmont, that “. . . a classic is not an antique, something-- or in this case someone--relegate to an imagined pristine past. Persons as moral classics ‘point past themselves’ and do so in and through their own incompleteness” (3-4). While neither of his key figures can be rightly called a systematic ethicist, Strain notes that these two “. . . in their lives and in their writings *perform* their moral and religious visions” (11). It is this performative, existential mode in which these “classics” are to be examined.

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A further concern for Strain is the notion of ethical praxis. Neither Hanh nor Berrigan spent much time in the same kind of academic setting in which Strain and his presumed audience live and breathe and have their being. On this point, Strain is at pains to establish the possibility of using Hanh's "practice of being peace" and Berrigan's "symbolic acts of resistance" to build a theoretical "praxis of just peacemaking" in the university/institutional structure of his own social location (11). This, I believe, is his more difficult task. In simple political terms, Strain seeks to use two radical thinkers to achieve a liberal aim. That is to say, neither Berrigan nor Hanh seek to reform the systems of governmental or social interactions that they see as violent, exploitative and corrupt. Rather, they seek to replace them with better systems in which justice and peace can truly prevail. The tension between reform and replacement is key to negotiating Strain's project. To negotiate what he sees as a dialectical tension between compassion and justice in his two thinkers, Strain calls upon the "capability theory" of Martha Nussbaum. This practical application comes after what seems to be the heart of Strain's examination: Chapter Four, "Social Location and Social Ethics."

Strain quotes Berrigan, asking "How does one really raise ethical and political questions in a real way—as contrasted to an academic or intellectual way?" (104). This question is always lurking in the background for Strain, as it is for many of us in the academy. Indeed, given recent actions taken to divest from fossil fuels, we must still consider Berrigan's follow-up question: "Can someone question gross and blatant injustice from a life-situation that is tied in dozens of ways, often subtle ways to that injustice?" (104). Are we Lady MacBeth, forever washing our soiled hands? Strain does not believe this to be our fate, as he turns from Berrigan's critique to Hanh's active practice in justice.

"Thich Nhat Hanh's social location is a *community and practice*, as we have been examining it, is the form of ethical engagement suited to community building" (105). Social location, as previously mentioned, is

of great importance to Strain's construction of ethical action as a "classic." Here he makes the case that Hanh's history of community building means that his social location is indeed to be considered as a community. Strain moves on to paint the action of community building as a type of practice: "[a] Buddhist practice is experimental in character; sangha building is equally experimental" (107). The notion here of community building as experimental Buddhist practice can be read as foundational for Strain's forthcoming argument that social institutions (e.g., non-governmental organizations, universities, etc.) can be locations for ethical praxis.

As to Berrigan, it is indeed the case that he has lived in community. Here, however, Strain turns to his example to explain the notion of symbolic action, and describes Berrigan's social location as being within a movement. Symbolic actions, in Strain's interpretation of Berrigan, need not be successful by any standard metric.

Berrigan takes pains to insist that they [Plowshares actions] grew out of Bible study, prayer, spiritual retreats, and the Eucharist. In this light, the forswearing of strategies to achieve "success," the refusal to rely on any instrumental actions to attain political goals can be read as grounded in traditional Catholic sacramental theology . . . Here, too, as with Thich Nhat Hanh's understanding of practice, means and ends coincide. (110)

The coincidence of means and ends, and the eschewing of standard metrics of success, shape Strain's argument for the effective agency of the institution as an agent of change. "Institutions matter . . . I believe that universities also matter and in more than one university I have been part of reform movements seeking to shape the university as what I call a 'countervailing institution'" (114). Strain's aim is clearest in this section. Using the examples of Berrigan and Hanh as Christian and Buddhist moral classics, he argues for the role of institutions as moral actors against hegemonic oppressions. In order to do so, he argues, "[w]e

need a theory that sees institutions related to an internal, collective good and not simply as pursuing instrumental, external goods,” (115). He does address the trenchant critique of religious idealism from Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, however Strain insists that his notion of “strategic peacebuilding”—a peace action carried out by and within “countervailing institutions”—can both advance nonviolent resistance *and* address the moral ambiguity of power.

At this point, Strain invokes the ethical theories of Martha Nussbaum to construct his theory of praxis. The text seems to wander afield from its titular moral classics through this section. It is, however, both necessary and commendable that Strain attempts to do what so many moral and ethical critics will not. He gives a constructive strategy aimed at implementing the vision he has previously described. He is well aware of the impossibility of even countervailing institutions working with completely clean hands. “Our understanding of what constitutes a countervailing institution needs to be enlarged . . . To work within an institution is to forsake the illusion of moral purity” (249). We are all, apparently, at least a little bit like Lady MacBeth after all.

If there is a critique I can bring to this excellent and deeply comparative volume, it is one I’ve mentioned briefly already. Neither Hanh nor Berrigan are particularly dedicated to *reforming*, but rather to *transforming* or *replacing* hegemonic institutions. The radical political roots of both Hanh and Berrigan extend to Anarchism. In the case of Hanh, it is through Taixu, and the latter’s reading of Peter Kropotkin. “Much of [Kropotkin’s] currency among Buddhist reformers stems from his endorsement by Taixu, one of the leading Buddhist reformers of the day [the 1920s and 1930s]” (Ritzinger 102). Taixu, it is widely known, was a great influence on Thich Nhat Hanh’s early community building and understanding of mutuality.

In the case of Berrigan, Strain notes that the influence of Dorothy Day upon his thought cannot possibly be overstated. In a similar vein, it would be difficult to overstate the influence of Peter Maurin and Ammon

Hennacy on Day. Hennacy, in particular, wrote widely of Anarchist political philosophy and its role in shaping The Catholic Worker movement. No single volume, of course, can contain all possible angles and facets of thinkers as important as Hanh and Berrigan. Perhaps in the future, we will see a thorough examination of the political influences of these two men. At present, we have Strain's excellent and thoughtful examination of their religious ethics to tide us over.

Works cited

Ritzinger, Joseph R. "Dependent Co-evolution: Kropotkin's Theory of Mutual Aid and Its Appropriation by Chinese Buddhists." *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 26 (2013), 89-112.