

## CHAPTER 1

# The Nevada Test Site and the Socializing Practices of a Nuclearized World

The Nevada Test Site is a devastatingly holy place.

—Anne Symens-Bucher<sup>1</sup>

“So this is how it feels,” Mary Ann Cejka thought, as she stared down at the handcuffs loosely fastened about her wrists. Writing about the act of nonviolent civil disobedience she took part in at the Nevada Test Site the first week of January, 1986, Ms. Cejka mused how, strangely, “I felt perfectly calm as I waited my turn to be frisked by a female official from the U.S. Department of Energy.”<sup>2</sup> A campus minister at California State University Long Beach at the time, Cejka had been drawn by a compelling sense of urgency to take nonviolent action at the United States’ nuclear proving ground sixty-five miles north of Las Vegas. Concerned about what she perceived as the increasing threat of nuclear war, Cejka decided to take part in the Nevada Desert Experience “New Year’s” ritual of prayer and nonviolent witness.

Driving east from Southern California across the Mojave Desert and then skirting Death Valley, Cejka had arrived at St. James Catholic Church in Las Vegas the day before the activities at the test site began. She joined nearly two hundred people in preparation for their journey to a site where the United States and Britain had detonated hundreds of nuclear bombs. They participated in a nonviolence training that set the tone for the peace witness and prepared some of them to risk arrest. They also listened to a series of speakers, including Shelley Douglass of the Ground Zero Community, Jim Driscoll of the National Nuclear Freeze Campaign, and Roman Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton from Detroit.<sup>3</sup> For Cejka, Bishop Gumbleton captured the heart of the matter:

He spoke of a ten-year-old American girl who had been gunned down by terrorists in an airport in Geneva last week—a beautiful, bright, happy child. Yet, he said, if the weapons such as those we are testing

at the Nevada Test Site were ever to be used, millions of innocent children like her all over the world would be killed indiscriminately. Thus, any use of nuclear weapons would be an act of terrorism on a massive scale, and our testing of them is preparation for such an act—*an act which no cause could justify*. The bishop concluded that when Christians find their government engaged in this kind of evil, they are obliged to resist it. He expressed his concern that most people do not understand the urgency of the situation, or at least haven't grasped it in their heart—that unless more and more people are willing to *risk* themselves and put something of their own life's agendas aside to reverse the arms race, it will be too late to stop the holocaust which is being perfected at the Nevada Test Site.

Yes, it is terribly urgent. That is why we went to Nevada. That is why we had to do this action.

The next morning she traveled north from Las Vegas to the southern gate of the test site near the town of Mercury. The participants fanned out along the edge of the road to greet many of the 7,500 workers who were rolling in to work on buses from Las Vegas. "We spread out . . . and greeted them with signs, smiles, and waves," she wrote. "Many returned our friendly greetings." Bishop Gumbleton then led the group in the celebration of the Eucharist. "A few hundred yards away, the police were assembling with their security vehicles and flashing lights. . . . They watched from a distance as we shared together the bread and cup, the body and blood of Christ." Then she felt the spiritual enormity of what she was doing:

I was suddenly tempted to self-pity . . . I felt very alone, in a strange place and in a risky situation with people I did not know very well.

But God is merciful and a breeze, cold and cleansing, seemed to sweep through my mind like the breeze that was sweeping across the desert floor at that moment. It startled me like a slap in the face. I realized that my self-pity was a last-ditch effort of the Evil One, the Liar, the Hater of Life, to discourage me from doing action in defense of life. . . . A greater dependence upon God alone! I had been praying for this grace for several days and now it was being granted to me only a few minutes before my arrest.

After the open-air mass, those planning to risk arrest were prayerfully encircled by the others who would continue the legal vigil. They walked to the white line that Nevada Test Site (NTS) officials had painted across the road for just such occasions. After exchanging greetings with the sheriff in charge, Cejka joined thirty-four others by crossing the line and being arrested. Later she would write:

Me? Arrested? I had always gotten along well with the authority figures in my life. I was always the well-behaved child in my family, the apple of my teachers' eyes. . . . So something in me was convinced that when I, Mary Ann Cejka, stepped over the white property line at the Nevada Test Site where nuclear weapons are routinely tested, surely the mountains would fall, the desert ground would shake, the sky would darken, and the world would end. But none of these things happened. The mountains watched my act of trespass as calmly as for the past forty years they have watched the scarring of the desert floor—where weapons capable of wiping out life on this planet are tested. They watched it as calmly as, for the past ten years, they have watched the brown-robed priests and brothers, followers of Saint Francis, do just such acts as mine in protest of the testing. . . .

More such actions will take place at the Nevada Test Site during Lent. I want to encourage many of you to attend . . . I promise that you will not be unmoved by your experience in the desert; its awesome, silent beauty, the prayerful and loving spirit of those present, and the opportunity to say "Yes!" to life. You will come away with a sense of having spent yourself a little for that which is essential.

After being charged and booked, Ms. Cejka was released. A few months later she was convicted of trespass and served four days of a six-day sentence in a county jail in Tonopah, a small town two hundred miles north of Las Vegas in a remote part of the windswept Nevada desert.

Mary Ann Cejka is one of thousands of women and men who, over the last two decades, has journeyed to the Nevada desert to pray and to act for an end to nuclear testing. She followed in the footsteps of Franciscan friars, sisters, and Catholic laity who, beginning in 1982, organized increasingly frequent and faith-based nonviolent action at the Nevada Test Site to urge an end to nuclear testing and the abolition of all nuclear weapons. In doing so, they traveled to a part of the United States that, in part because of its obscurity, had, since the early 1950s, become a significant and central terrain of nuclear America.

### **Early Motivations: Responding to the Nuclear Arms Race**

The Franciscan Friars of California, the Sisters of St. Francis of Redwood City, California, and the Las Vegas Franciscan Center made the decision to mark the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis in 1982 with a forty-day vigil at the gates of the Nevada Test Site during the Christian season of Lent. This decision coincided with a growing worldwide concern that the nuclear arms race was spiraling out of control.

The Reagan administration, which took power in 1981, rapidly stoked the bellicose nuclear rhetoric of what one historian calls “the second cold war.”<sup>4</sup> Ratifying the Carter government’s 1979 decision to station a fleet of Tomahawk cruise missiles and Pershing II ballistic missiles in Europe beginning in 1983 as a means of countering the Soviet Union’s deployment of the SS-20 (a solid fuel, two-stage theater-based ballistic missile), the White House announced a dramatic buildup in nuclear arms production and deployment, including its intention to build the MX missile (dubbed by Reagan “The Peacekeeper”), to stockpile the neutron bomb, and to build thirty Trident submarines, with each ship carrying atomic ordnance capable of destroying hundreds of cities. At the same time, the U.S. refused to rule out a “first use” of nuclear weapons, and Secretary of State Alexander Haig unnerved citizens and policy-makers the world over by speaking on the record about detonating “demonstration bombs” in the event of imminent conflict with the Soviet Union. Framed as a remedy to the “Vietnam Syndrome”—characterized as a malaise of defeatism and weakness in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina in the mid-1970s—Reagan’s nuclear and conventional buildup would cost over \$1.5 trillion and dramatically accelerate the spiraling nuclear arms race.

The Reagan administration’s initiatives not only sparked a quantitative increase in nuclear weapons—by mid-decade the nuclear powers would possess between them over 50,000 strategic and tactical nuclear arms—but also a qualitative shift. Whereas the presiding nuclear theory of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) promised a “balance of terror” that served to deter nuclear war, the efforts of U.S. nuclear policy-makers and weaponeers were aimed at deploying strategies of nuclear *flexible use* and nuclear *first strike*. The U.S. government touted the possibility of “limited use” of theater nuclear weapons in battlefield conditions, thus seeking to legitimize the possibility of crossing a firebreak that, since 1945, had been “unthinkable.” Hence its deployment of thousands of tactical nuclear weapons, some of which fit in the backpacks of U.S. infantry scattered across the frontiers of Europe and elsewhere. At the same time, capitalizing on a series of technological breakthroughs since the late 1950s, the U.S. began deploying weapons capable of “striking first,” including Pershing II missiles, the Trident II warhead and missile, and the proposed MX missile. First-strike weaponry is supported by missile guidance systems and command-and-control capabilities that permit the U.S. to deliver nuclear weapons with destabilizing accuracy. Coupled with advanced submarine technology (which makes it virtually impossible for the adversary to take out one of the three prongs of the U.S. strategic

forces), this precision had begun to take the United States well beyond the traditional rudiments of the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD).

### The Bomb: Seen and Unseen Social Reality

This Reagan-era nuclear buildup was rooted in forty years of the design, testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons. In addition to the vast impact the presence of nuclear arms has had on the earth's environment and all of its inhabitants, they have played over these four decades an incalculably determinative role in the political, military, economic, and ecological life of human beings and human societies. Intimately linked to these material, geopolitical consequences has been the dramatic impact of "The Bomb" on the social psychologies, worldviews, inner lives, self-understandings, and cultural and symbolic forms of these societies and their members. The ground zero of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while inflicting unimaginably catastrophic suffering on the citizens of these two Japanese cities, also instantly became ground zero in world-historical consciousness, whose blast flashed infinitely across space and time, whose fallout fell into every part of life, and whose fire burned—and continues to burn—relentlessly into psyches and cultures alike. As Robert Manoff puts it when reflecting on the impact of atomic arms on U.S. society, "Nuclear weapons have not and never will be an inert presence in American life. Merely by existing they have already set off chain reactions throughout American society and with every one of its institutions."<sup>5</sup> And beyond institutions. The Bomb's corrosive impact has been incalculably felt, cultural historian Paul Boyer holds, "on the interior realm of consciousness and memory."<sup>6</sup> It is as if, Boyer continues, "the Bomb has become one of those categories of Being, like Space and Time, that, according to Kant, are built into the very structures of our minds, giving shape and meaning to all our perceptions."<sup>7</sup>

This preeminence of the Bomb's overt and covert presence in the consciousness and behavior of persons and societies in the postwar world was, however, not *inevitable*. It was not *necessary* that nuclear arms would culturally come to approximate a Kantian category of Being. Such primacy did not naturally follow from the development and use of atomic weapons. There are many paths that could have been followed in the wake of the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, including a profound horror energizing a comprehensive and genuine worldwide political commitment to disarmament. The monumental

presence, proliferation, and legitimation of atomic weaponry in the post-World War Two environment was not a *given*. It was, instead, a construction flowing from an evolving ideology of power buttressed, embodied, and carried out by means of social practices in the emerging nuclear states.

Within days of the first atomic bombing, this process of social transformation—aligning whole populations to the sudden advent of the nuclear age—began through the construction and propagation of what Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell in their book, *Hiroshima in America*, name the “Hiroshima narrative.”<sup>8</sup> In their study, they trace the historical steps in which an “Official Story” about the decision to use the atomic bombs against civilian populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was fashioned and propagated. Lifton and Mitchell document how this narrative “expanded and evolved by the hour”<sup>9</sup> as policy-makers sought to justify the first use of atomic weapons even at the expense of accuracy. They wove a story that ignored the heterogeneity of events leading to the decision to use this weapon and fashioned, instead, a plot-line that sought to appear consistent, rational, and moral, even if it did so selectively.<sup>10</sup> Lifton and Mitchell show that the “Official Story,” though inconsistent with the historical record, has functioned as a master narrative through which the creation of the nuclear national security state has been mobilized and legitimated. Spencer R. Weart, in his magisterial *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*, and Paul Boyer, in *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, profile the construction of this ideology by tracing the evolution of a range of cultural and political interpretations of the nuclear weapons regime in the United States, including those of the media and of the government and its newly created national security apparatus.<sup>11</sup>

The managers of the nuclear national security state understood that ideological education alone would not be enough to muster the Cold War “army.” Ideas and even relentless propaganda in support of the new “Atomic Age” by themselves would be inadequate. This was not simply because the advent of The Bomb could provoke incalculable terror and anxiety that words alone would be incapable of quelling. It was also because the creation of nuclear weapons had, in one stroke, abolished the preatomic world forever. The challenge for nuclear state managers was to construct a new one.

This society-wide training was not therefore simply conceptual or imaginal; it was embodied. Ideological statements provided the theology of the nuclear order and modern public relations techniques were used to evangelize it, but this doctrine was in turn inculcated and realized through public practices. It was not enough to declare the Cold War—

the practices that made such a war *real* had to follow. In fact, those practices became an important part of this unique form of war because they demonstrated resolve to the adversary and to one another, and because they were a significant element of incorporation of—and in—the nuclear state. These practices included, among others, society-wide participation in civil defense preparations, weekly drills in thousands of local communities across the U.S. signaled by the shrill blast of air raid sirens, the national construction of public and private fallout shelters, compulsory government loyalty oaths, television broadcasts of government films on nuclear war, scrambling under desks at school, learning to “duck and cover,” encouraging the public to watch and approve of nuclear tests, and subjecting the population to invisible radioactive fallout from above and below-ground nuclear detonations and from leakage from nuclear waste storage areas.

### Asceticism: Old, New, and Nuclear

The emergence and maintenance of the nuclear age ultimately hinged on the socialization of the citizenry rooted in a regimen of society-wide exercises. Rather than a set of discrete activities, these nationally sanctioned and organized practices reinforced one another in orchestrating the public consent that was necessary to the growing nuclear weapons system and its institutionalized regime of terror in the United States and around the world.

What are we to make of this phenomenon, and what tools can we use to clarify its meanings? This “social construction of nuclear reality” has had deep political, economic, cultural, and sociological dimensions. It has also unleashed a thorough reconstruction of the social self. In seeking to understand the dynamics and meaning of this interlocking societal and self-transformation—but in a way that at the same time also respects its political, economic, cultural, and sociological dimensions—I turn to recent scholarship at the intersection of religious studies, cultural studies, and the social and personality sciences: the study of asceticism. Current asceticism scholarship offers us suggestive ways of interpreting the nuclear weapons system in a way that sheds new light on its pervasive presence and the way it inculcates, and ultimately relies on, consent and allegiance rooted in processes of socialization.

The proliferating academic study of asceticism has yielded numerous, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of the subject.<sup>12</sup> As Elizabeth Clark reports with light-hearted exasperation, the greater the scholarly attention asceticism has received, the greater the confusion and lack

of consensus there is about what it means.<sup>13</sup> Clark reports how scholars define asceticism variously in terms of deprivation, liberation, plenitude, deconstruction of the transhistorical self, a technology of the body, a contextualized signifier of the larger society, an arena for the localization of social conflict, a structure of compensation, a source of power, or a gendered critique of hegemony.<sup>14</sup>

The original meanings of *askesis*, from which asceticism derives, were, according to scholar John Pinsent: 1) the practice of an art, craft or profession; and 2) a process by which this is acquired and improved. *Askesis* did not originally have a religious connotation.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the word *askesis* eventually came to mean “practice” in the sense of the rigorous training of the athlete and gladiator, which was appropriated by early Christian ascetics who regarded themselves as “athletes for Christ.” In taking these sometimes conflicting meanings into account, Dianne M. Bazell offers a general definition of asceticism as “*askesis*, training; a discipline or set of disciplines often (but not always) involving one’s body, and generally doing without things or pleasures otherwise permitted, or engaging in strenuousness not otherwise obligatory.”<sup>16</sup>

Theologian Margaret Miles, a specialist in asceticism studies, defines asceticism as a set of practices designed to achieve “a consciously chosen self” by decentering the social self created by socialization. In Christianity, ascetical practices—celibacy, fasting, withdrawal to the desert—was a means of disengaging from the social arrangements and expectations of Roman society that were in sharp contrast with the values articulated and embodied by Jesus. As Miles puts it, “The real point of ascetic practices . . . was not to ‘give up’ objects but to reconstruct the self.”<sup>17</sup> Asceticism functions to deconstruct the conditioning inscribed on and in the body by the social world in order to produce what Miles calls a new organizing center or “self.”<sup>18</sup>

Asceticism, however, has often posed a dilemma for Christians. As Miles points out, embodied ascetical practices could often subvert the tradition’s position—enunciated in Christianity’s doctrines of creation, incarnation, and the resurrection of the body—that the body is good. Christians have been perennially tempted to collapse the tension between constructive asceticism and the goodness of the body into a reductive dualism that distinguishes between spirit (that is good) and matter (that is evil).<sup>19</sup> When Christians have constructed practices and attitudes that have succumbed to this dualism, they have often functionally embodied and propagated hatred of the body and the earth, and have often lost sight of the original impulse of Christian asceticism: the transformation of the self capable of living according to a “way” more in keeping with Jesus’ vision of the Reign of God.



Miles calls this form of dualistic ascetical practice the “old asceticism” in contrast to a “new asceticism” that recovers the original impulse of a “consciously chosen self” but does so in light of the particular challenges of modernity and postmodernity, including urbanization, sexism, racism, and ecological devastation.

A “new asceticism” takes on novel forms for the decentering and recentering of the self given the particular social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the current age. While, for example, the “old asceticism” involved traditional ascetical practices that reinforce traditional female social roles, a contemporary feminist asceticism would, according to Miles, undertake in the midst of patriarchal social structures the difficult but crucial work of dismantling submission and creating practices of assertiveness and self-definition.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Miles proposes that a contemporary male asceticism may involve the spiritual practice of letting go of the “privileged voice” and transforming patriarchy’s “male role belief system,” which assumes that men are the final authorities in social and interpersonal settings and relationships.<sup>21</sup>

The “old asceticism,” according to Miles, lives on unseen under the guise of contemporary urban life and the self-indulgence of alcoholism, promiscuity, drug dependence, and workaholicism. These are, for Miles, contemporary examples of a masochistic “old asceticism”—abusive practices that form and reinforce a self that ultimately inculcates a dualistic hatred of the body.<sup>22</sup> A “new asceticism” in such cases is a deconditioning process by which we are weaned from addiction.<sup>23</sup>

Miles offers us a starting point for broadly framing our understanding of lives lived in a nuclear world and the steps people have taken since 1945 to resist nuclearism, including those who have journeyed to the Nevada Test Site. Nuclearism depends on a double Faustian bargain with its subjects: the willingness to face catastrophic destruction of the earth and its inhabitants at some undetermined moment in the future *and* the willingness to live with this terror from moment to moment unendingly. In return for this socially enforced dualism and implicit hatred of the body (and all bodies), it has promised security for the very bodies it puts at deliberate risk. This has meant attuning the psyche to this contradictory state (security dependent on radical insecurity) and a willingness to offer one’s body. Both of these payments—body and soul—have been symbolized in a set of social practices that have signified social and personal consent, from the *commission* of rituals and role plays (for example, civil defense drills) to the *omission* of silence.

To see more clearly how this notion of asceticism can be understood in social and cultural terms—as taken up by whole societies, and not only by individuals—let us turn next to the thought of Richard Valantasis, another contemporary theorist of asceticism.

### The Social Function of Asceticism

Like Miles, theologian Richard Valantasis also understands asceticism broadly and creatively. For Valantasis, asceticism is a cultural system marked by specific and particular religious or cultural practices.<sup>24</sup> His methodology for understanding this cultural system reconciles two trends in asceticism studies (on the one hand, that of sociology, social history, and hermeneutics; on the other, that of more traditional historical studies) reflected in the work of Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Geoffrey Harpham.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explains the emergence of capitalism as a function of an “innerworldly asceticism” defined as “methodically controlled and supervised” conduct.<sup>25</sup> For Protestants, innerworldly behavior linked three elements of asceticism: the path of salvation; specific human conduct; and methods for training in that conduct.<sup>26</sup> Weber’s approach proved significant because it illuminated how asceticism can have wide economic and political implications. For Foucault, asceticism is “self-forming activity,” that is, the changes one makes to become an ethical subject.<sup>27</sup> Valantasis writes that “Foucault’s system . . . proposes a system of formation that involves a goal of life encapsulated in a system of behavior, which requires formation through processes of subjectivation and ascetic practices.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, Geoffrey Harpham, in *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*,<sup>29</sup> views asceticism as “the fundamental operating ground on which the particular culture is overlaid.”<sup>30</sup> Cultural integration and functioning require regulation, which in turn demands an ascetical resistance to appetites and desires. Culture, according to Harpham, obligates its members to practice an inherent level of self-denial.<sup>31</sup> Valantasis builds on the work of these three thinkers to fashion his own theory of asceticism.

“At the center of ascetical activity,” writes Valantasis, “is a self who, through behavioral changes, seeks to become a different person, a new self; to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture.”<sup>32</sup>

Asceticism functions to form selves, but also functions to form culture.<sup>33</sup> Valantasis defines asceticism as “performances designed to inau-

gurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity.”<sup>34</sup> Following performance studies theorist Richard Schechner, Valantasis compares the ascetic to an actor who undergoes a rigorous and systematic repatterning of behavior so that it can be reconstructed into a new system, known as a “performance.” Asceticism

operates in a similar fashion. By the systematic training and retraining, the ascetic becomes a different person molded to live in a different culture, trained to relate to people in a different manner, psychologically motivated to live a different life. Through these performances, the ascetic, like the performer who becomes able to “experience as actual” anything imaginable, can experience the goal of ascetic life as the transformed life.<sup>35</sup>

For Valantasis, these performances can, in turn, help shift the center of the culture.<sup>36</sup>

Valantasis enumerates three social functions asceticism serves. First, it teaches the ascetic to live in a new world.<sup>37</sup> Second, it provides a way for the new culture’s forms of narrative and theoretical concepts to be transposed into patterns of behavior. Finally, ascetical performance provides the ascetic with a form of retraining that allows her or him to perceive the world differently.

### Nuclear Physiques

The perspectives of Margaret Miles and the theory proposed by Richard Valantasis—asceticism as a process by which a cultural system that creates and maintains itself by initiating and socializing its members through sets of embodied, social practices—help illuminate the nuclear weapons regime as a contemporary form of “old asceticism.”

Since the dawning of the nuclear age, the U.S. nuclear weapons system ultimately depended on implicit and explicit political consent.<sup>38</sup> Valantasis’s notion of asceticism—linking embodied self-formation with culture-formation—clarifies how this consent was manufactured not primarily through “thought control” or “brainwashing” but by organizing a series of societywide practices that inculcated a nuclear ideology and sought to recruit and conscript the nation’s population in the Cold War.

Ritual theorist Catherine Bell sharpens Valantasis’s insights by highlighting the role of the body in this process. Feminist scholarship and recent gender studies, Bell argues, suggest “both the primacy of the body over the abstraction ‘society’ and the irreducibility of the social body.”<sup>39</sup> In this vein Bell asserts that

the act of kneeling does not so much communicate a message about subordination as it generates a body identified with subordination . . . what we see in ritualization is not the mere display of subjective states or corporate values. Rather, we see an act of production—the production of a ritualized agent able to wield physically a scheme of subordination or insubordination.<sup>40</sup>

For Bell, ritualization creates an environment “through a series of physical movements . . . thereby producing an arena which, by its molding of the actors, both validates and extends the schemes they are internalizing.”<sup>41</sup> Or as she puts it more piquantly, “Nothing less than a whole cosmology is instilled with the words, ‘Stand up straight!’”<sup>42</sup>

The crucial step for the creation of a nuclear society was the effort to link “nuclear physics” with “nuclear physiques.” It was important for the citizenry to inscribe the “Official Story”—a narrative legitimating unceasing Cold War with the probability of stunningly Hot and Final War at any moment—into their bodies. In that way, the creation of a “nuclear body politic” would be possible, as Mary Douglas, in a different context, suggests when she writes that

the physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society . . . the stages it should go through, the pains it can stand, its span of life, all the cultural categories in which it is perceived, must correlate closely with the categories in which society is seen in so far as these also draw upon the same culturally possessed idea of the body.<sup>43</sup>

The emergence of the Atomic Age depended on the emergence of “nuclear bodies” that reflected, and reinforced, this new view of society.

How, though, have these “nuclear bodies” been created? In his book *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and Atomic Age*,<sup>44</sup> Alan Nadel delineates the “culture of containment” that flourished in the American postwar years. This national security state culture set up “a mythic nuclear family as the universal container of democratic values,” where personal behavior became part of a global strategy.<sup>45</sup> “Behind containment culture and in front of it lay nuclear power, with all its heft and threat,” Nadel writes.<sup>46</sup>

As part of this newly emerging culture, the U.S. government conducted a series of public practices as part of its Cold War *asceticism*, including the “duck and cover” exercise that was promoted on television to prepare people for a nuclear attack that could happen at any moment.<sup>47</sup> *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, an official U.S. government publication, counseled citizens on things they could do in the event of a nuclear

bombing, including the “duck and cover” maneuver, which largely amounted to jumping “in any handy ditch or gutter.”<sup>48</sup> If caught without warning in the open, people were advised to “fall flat and face down, ideally picking a spot protected from shattering glass and flying projectiles. The best move was to drop alongside the foundation of a ‘good substantial building,’ taking care to eschew poorly built wooden structures that would probably collapse.”<sup>49</sup> “Duck and cover” was an exercise practiced extensively in the schools in the 1950s. Children were instructed, upon seeing the flash created by a nuclear detonation, to scramble under their desks and to shield their eyes.

Critics frequently doubted that this practice would improve one’s chances of surviving a nuclear attack and ridiculed it for increasing fear more than dispelling it. Nevertheless, if viewed as an ascetical practice aimed at “nuclear incorporation,” it likely was deemed a success. The ultimate goal of such exercise was to normalize nuclear war, not to exorcise fear. Fear was a central part of a smoothly efficient nuclear war machine; citizenry fear would deepen citizen commitment to financing and consenting to the nuclear regime. Second, no matter the ostensible impact—including the range of emotions such an exercise may or may not have provoked—it was a practice in which the body was mobilized and trained. Each movement of the limbs, the torso, the knees was an act of filiation and affiliation, no matter one’s intellectual or emotional response.

This was only one of many nuclear social practices of the Cold War. Others included government employees taking loyalty oaths during the McCarthy era in an atmosphere of blacklists and the ritual of “naming names”; building and stocking personal fallout shelters; requiring tens of thousands of U.S. military personnel to participate in exercises at the site of nuclear tests in the South Pacific and at the Nevada Test Site; encouraging residents of southern Nevada to watch above-ground detonations at NTS; conducting medical experiments on patients unaware that they were injected with plutonium and uranium;<sup>50</sup> subjecting millions of U.S. citizens and foreign nationals to the streams of radioactive fallout from the nuclear bombardment of above-ground tests and, after 1962 (with the signing of the Partial Test Ban Treaty), from accidental ventings of fallout from below-ground explosions.

Grasping these practices as forms of asceticism bolsters the claim by some that the nuclear weapons regime is *the* civil religion *par excellence*. The most well-known proponent of this view is psychologist and cultural critic Robert Jay Lifton, who designates this contemporary atomic belief system “nuclearism.” Lifton, with Richard Falk, expressed nuclearism as a secular religion promising the mastery of death and evil,

but also unlimited creation. Like other religions, it involves a “conversion experience,” through which the follower undergoes “an immersion in death anxiety followed by rebirth into the new world view,” often marked by an overwhelming sense of awe.<sup>51</sup> It is, as theologian Michael Morrissey puts it, “the psychological, political, and military dependence on, and faith in, nuclear arsenals as a solution to the problem of national security.”<sup>52</sup> Nuclearism is a comprehensive political and psychological worldview instigated by the presence of nuclear weapons. Nuclearism dramatically constitutes a contemporary version of Miles’ “old asceticism”: a dualistic, self-hating sacrifice of “the body” in which the practitioner presumptively consents to “her or his own judgment and punishment.” This is less a matter of controlling this punishment, as Miles might suggest, and more about surrendering one’s self—flesh, soul, spirit—and one’s entire world to an overarching system that promises security but at the price of the greatest institutionalized insecurity the world has ever known. The social practices of nuclearism become gestures of allegiance and ultimate loyalty.

### Civil Defense and Nuclear Asceticism

The practice of gestural allegiance and ultimate loyalty to nuclearism found its way into civilian society in the civil defense drills of the 1950s and early 1960s. These societywide role plays simulated what members of the armed services experienced directly, though these civil society “dress rehearsals” for nuclear war envisioned a nuclear attack, not in the desert expanse of the American Southwest but in the neighborhoods of U.S. cities. By participating in this most publicly visible “sacrament” of nuclear civil religion, U.S. citizens were socialized to expect the frontlines of the next war to be in the streets of their hometown. It was this government-sponsored regimented practice that, in turn, catalyzed the first systematically organized rituals of nonviolent resistance, acts that, as we shall see, directly laid the groundwork for nonviolent action at the Nevada Test Site three decades later.

The U.S. civil defense program featured the weekly sounding of shrill and vaguely ominous sirens that wailed across localities (often at noon), a procedure that aurally reinforced the nuclear threat and presence. More dramatic still was the series of national compulsory air raid shelter drills in which, beginning in 1955, citizens were required to participate in large-scale role-plays of nuclear war.

As Guy Oakes shows in *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture*, public support for the civil defense regime

was based on the assumption that it could protect Americans in the event of a nuclear war.<sup>53</sup> Yet national security officials knew that it would be impossible to offer such security. The real purpose was not protection but to inculcate in U.S. citizens the resolve needed to wage the Cold War. As Oakes states,

In the early years of the Cold War, American national security planners arrived at an interpretation of the probable reaction of the American people to a nuclear attack on the United States. They argued that the public would respond to the prospect of nuclear war with expressions of panic or terror. Such a response, however, was inconsistent with the role that the planners had reserved for the American people in the contest with the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup>

Oakes's historical research shows that the U.S. civil defense program sought to win public consent for the nuclear arms race through a program of emotion management that would substitute "credible fear" for "irrational terror." This program, though, was plagued by an internal contradiction. In addition to the misleading illusion that millions of people would survive a nuclear war as they huddled in shelters that very likely would become lethal ovens under these circumstances, postattack civil defense policies depended on infrastructure remaining intact and human survivors being psychologically and morally prepared to "maintain their everyday roles and fulfill their pre-attack responsibilities."<sup>55</sup> However, "These conditions were not secured by civil defense; rather, they formed the unsecured basis on which civil defense rested. . . . Paradoxically, if civil defense was necessary, then it was impossible. If it was possible, then it was not necessary."<sup>56</sup>

#### **"We Live in the Shelter of Each Other": The New Asceticism of Nonviolent Resistance to Civil Defense**

In June 1955 the United States government conducted a national civil defense test in which U.S. citizens were required to cluster in community air raid shelters. Millions took part. In Washington, D.C., according to theologian Eileen Egan, President Eisenhower and thousands of members of the executive branch rushed to shelters three hundred miles outside of Washington as part of "Operation Alert." In New York City the drill included the explosion of a hypothetical hydrogen bomb (equivalent to five million tons of TNT). In the mock attack, 2,991,280 New Yorkers were said to be killed, and 1,776,899 injured.<sup>57</sup>

Twenty-eight people were arrested for not going down into the fallout shelter in New York's City Hall Park.<sup>58</sup> In a statement issued at the time, the noncooperators explained that

the kind of public and highly publicized drills held on June 15 are essentially a part of war preparation. They accustom people to the idea of war, to acceptance of war as probably inevitable and as somehow right if waged in "defense" and "retaliation." . . . They create the illusion that the nation can devote its major resources to preparation for nuclear war and at the same time shield people from its catastrophic effects.<sup>59</sup>

This demonstration was led by Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, other members of the New York Catholic Worker, and long-time organizer and Unitarian minister, A. J. Muste.

During their arraignment, a contentious Magistrate Louis Kaplan called the protesters "murderers" who "by their conduct and behavior contributed to the utter destruction of these three million theoretically killed in our City."<sup>60</sup> The court's logic (that those millions who complied with the government's orders, though killed in make-believe, had been annihilated in reality by the handful of people who refused to play willing victims), though tortuous, is richly suggestive. In trying to make sense of the magistrate's statement, one first wonders if he is accusing the defendants proleptically of a *future* crime: the deaths of New Yorkers perhaps as yet unborn who may otherwise have been saved during a future nuclear war if such protests had not done away with fallout shelters. But the text itself is firmly anchored in the immediate past and the present: the protesters' unwillingness to join in this drill somehow sealed the fates of those who did.

This vignette highlights the centrality of ritual and performance in constructing, upholding, and contesting cultural attitudes and behavior, as suggested by Bell. Here two public rituals are in conflict: one officially sanctioned, with the aim of instilling consent and participation in the "public work" of consolidating a nuclear state; the other embodying refusal and resistance, and an insistent allegiance to contrary values. Though taking divergent approaches, both implicitly share Michel Foucault's intuition that the body is "the place where the most minute and local social practices are linked up with the large-scale organization of power."<sup>61</sup>

Second, it underlines the importance of social dramas for telescoping the fundamental dilemmas of a culture and inviting the members of that culture to consciously make choices about resolving those dilemmas. This demonstration, for example, was repeated for several years



during the late 1950s and early 1960s, leading to a 1961 event at City Hall Park where nearly two thousand people refused to take shelter, an act that directly resulted in a definitive end to compulsory participation.<sup>62</sup> The internal contradictions of the policy were now irretrievably exposed, and the political and social costs came to outweigh its presumed benefits.

Third, although this explicit regimen of socialization was ultimately discredited, its initial tenacity tells us something about the system for which it serves as a metaphor. The nuclear weapons regime—and the national security state that it buttresses—is itself buttressed by a series of what Catherine Bell calls “techniques and discursive practices that comprise the micropolitics of everyday life.”<sup>63</sup>

To construct and maintain a regime of everlasting terror—where *potentiality* may become the *actuality* of an overbearing and undeniable power at any moment, perhaps before reaching the end of this page, or this sentence—requires of its citizenry a combination of passive and active compliance. This mandates our repressing an awareness of that terror but, at the same time, cultivating an acute consciousness of its power. This double vision inculcates itself through a set of highly nuanced socialization practices: embodied ritualizations of ratification and, in turn, incorporation in contemporary society’s nuclearized body.

Finally, this drama suggests religious themes. This is not only because the organizers of the 1955 demonstration were explicit members and leaders of religious communities, but because their actions threw in sharp relief the fundamentally religious issues at stake in the civil religion of Nuclear America. At the heart of the matter, these protesters claimed to rely on a God who longed for life and goodness in abundance for all living things, and nuclear arms did not square with this foundational theological orientation. Standing amid an excruciatingly violent century, the question of the mystery of evil—and the mystery of good in the face of the mystery of evil—remained ultimately and properly a religious question.

Since the beginning of the Nuclear Age, many religious antinuclear activists have understood the fragmentation and radical insecurity implicit in the nuclear threat (to social, environmental, and bodily integrity) to be symbolic of the more fundamental threat that a nuclear regime poses of spiritual, ethical, or existential disintegration. The existence of nuclear weapons has raised crucial religious questions that challenged their Christian identity and praxis and often provoked a fundamental clash between their faith and the civil religion of the dominant political, economic, and militarist culture in which they lived. Typically this dilemma has been articulated in terms of the classic biblical theme

of *idolatry*. Barbara Eggleston, then the national coordinator of Christian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in Britain, wrote in 1986 that “unquestioning and exceptionless obedience to authority has never been the Church’s teaching, and we are particularly bound to make clear our dissent—or to disobey—if the State is leading people into idolatry. To worship other gods, to place trust in them for salvation, both personal and corporate, is idolatry. . . . Idolatry relates to where we put our trust. . . . What is the image of power on which the modern state depends? . . . Clearly, security is seen to be achieved by the possession of nuclear weapons.”<sup>64</sup> Characterized by some Christian antinuclear activists as “gods of metal,” nuclear weapons have been seen to be symptomatic of a systemic arrogation of transcendent power by the dominant political, economic, and technological national security states. Such states have refashioned the more traditional social contract thusly: “In return for nuclear security, you must render your entire loyalty to the nuclear regime.” Antinuclear Christians identified and challenged the political contradiction of this arrangement—from their point of view, unquestioning fidelity to either Mutual Assured Destruction or more recent policies of First-Strike probably bred more insecurity than security—but they were even more leery of the religious dimensions of this Faustian bargain. The contemporary faith-based, antinuclear appropriation of this ancient Judeo-Christian motif was often formulated succinctly in the pressing theological query, “On whom or on what do we *ultimately* rely?”

There was, however, no unanimity in the religious community in general or the Christian community in particular that nuclear weapons were to be condemned or abolished. Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, a growing number of Christian theologians and ethicists, including Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Ramsey, articulated what came to be called “Christian realism” or “ethical realism.”<sup>65</sup> While deploring the evil that nuclear weapons were capable of visiting on the earth and its inhabitants, these thinkers believed that they deterred nuclear war and restrained aggression and thus were morally justifiable. In some cases rooted in the prescriptions of the “just war” theological tradition, this approach held that nonviolence or pacifism had “no way of avoiding wickedness or setting limits to it,” and therefore justice counseled marshalling a deterrent force.

Civil defense resisters Day, Muste, Hennacy, and others deliberately challenged such theology as morally suspect, physically dangerous, and ultimately at odds with the Christian vision of love and reconciliation. The nuclear arms race institutionalized on a global scale a regime of retaliatory violence that, in the view of its managers, must be main-

tained in perpetuity. Not only does such an arrangement functionally prevent unity, it also posed an incalculable threat of destruction through political miscalculation or technological failure. The premise on which “Christian realism” was based—that deterrence would prevent the use of nuclear weapons—would prove absurdly faulty in the event that they were, in fact, used. Moreover, they understood that such weapons are deployed not as a means of deterring attack but also as a means of exercising power and contributing to economic, political, and military control throughout the world. Rather than accommodate nuclear weapons, they sought to resist them in the spirit of the very power the realists rejected: creative and self-transcending love.

Day, Muste, and Hennacy embodied and conveyed the challenges of the Nuclear Age and indicated the direction that those who refused to accede to “nuclear terror” and “nuclear fear” could take in contesting the official nuclear narrative and practices by articulating and enacting a counternarrative and practice. This would be summarized in the argot of a later antinuclear movement, when it pithily held that “*civil disobedience* is civil defense.”

### From New York to Nevada

This improvised nonviolent campaign on the streets of Manhattan proved to be the paradigmatic event for virtually all rituals of nonviolent direct action against nuclearism since the 1950s.

In their action, Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, A. J. Muste—the quintessential outsiders—symbolized their freedom and noncompliance by resolutely remaining outside New York City’s warren of fallout shelters. The revelatory power of this act lay in how it dramatized the ways in which nuclear weapons had subverted ordinary life. Modern ordinary life was a life meant to be lived out on the streets, not one where millions crouched together fearfully in a sprawling, subterranean maze. In one stroke, Day, Hennacy, Muste, and their coconspirators clarified that, in the Nuclear Age, the ordinary is subversive.

Yet ordinary does not mean “natural” or “essentialized.” The “ordinary” world these resisters celebrated was an “ordinary” experience they had to construct, enact, and—over the next seven years—reenact again and again. (After all, how many “ordinary” experiences are accompanied by press releases?) Theirs was a carefully organized drama that functioned as a “recognition scene” (a term Daniel Berrigan, S.J., would later use to describe any successful nonviolent action) able to dissolve an opaque screen of illusions and reveal with a certain clarity the

situation at hand. In addition to emboldening many others to join them over the years, this activity led to a demythologization of the civil defense program that promised safety but in fact was designed to meet entirely different goals.

There are three other significant connections to the later movement against nuclear testing. First, A. J. Muste, the dean of twentieth-century pacifists, would play an important part in the antitestng movement that successfully clamored for the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty. Second, Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement would play an important role in developing a theology of nonviolent resistance to the Bomb by stressing the richness, sacredness, and interconnection of each person, echoed in Eileen Egan's use of an Irish saying as a twist on Day's resistance to compulsory air raid shelter drills: "We live in the shelter of each other."<sup>66</sup> Daniel Berrigan stresses the importance of this theology and its theologian on those who have come after her: "Without Dorothy, without that exemplary patience, moral modesty, without this woman pounding at the locked doors behind which the powerful mock the powerless with games of triage, the resistance we offered would have been simply unthinkable."<sup>67</sup>

Finally, the iconoclastic Ammon Hennacy was one of the first activists to make an antinuclear pilgrimage to the Nevada Test Site, a journey made just after taking part in this civil defense drill action with Day and Muste. Hennacy was a longtime peace and labor organizer. During World War One he had served two years in the U.S. Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia for refusing to register for military service. In 1931 he had organized a social workers union in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1952 and beginning in 1953 served as associate editor of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in New York.

From June 17 through June 28, 1957 Hennacy picketed the Atomic Energy Commission office in Las Vegas.<sup>68</sup> In his autobiography, Hennacy describes his activity in Nevada, which was prompted in part by the growing scientific evidence of the harmful effects of nuclear fallout engendered by the above-ground tests. "I belonged to a committee of pacifists who had planned to enter the atomic test grounds and if necessary be atomized as a protest against the biggest bomb which would be dropped in August of 1957," Hennacy's account begins. He explains that he already had plans for August—picketing at the IRS office in New York and an air raid drill protest, that would eventually net him thirty days in jail—so in anticipation of others descending on the test site at the end of the summer, he traveled to Nevada to vigil at the Atomic Energy Commission office, to engage in a twelve-day fast,

and to watch two nuclear detonations. Hennacy writes that “when I began to picket Lt. Col. Hunter greeted me kindly and said he would do anything to help me except to cease dropping bombs. And he had Don the guard bring out a chair each morning in order that I might rest in the shade at times.”<sup>69</sup>

Hennacy describes watching an atomic explosion with its flash, thunderous sound, and mushroom cloud. Then he reports that toward the end of his visit, the bomb that had been scheduled for detonation failed to go off. “About 10:30 A.M.,” he writes, “Col. Hunter came back from the field saying ‘Hennacy, you stopped this one, you had better go back to N.Y. and let us get to work.’ They had pressed the button and the bomb didn’t go off. My son-in-law later showed me the Pasadena Sunday paper with the headline ‘Atomic Test Foe Scores ‘Victory’” saying that I had an accidental moral victory inasmuch as the bomb was a dud.”<sup>70</sup>

For Hennacy, nonviolent action is a form of communication with one’s opponent (including one’s society) deploying the most powerful symbol at one’s disposal: the vulnerable, creaky, resilient human body message. Hennacy’s account serves as a parable for peaceful change that will consciously and unconsciously reverberate through many other efforts for nonviolent metamorphosis, including those undertaken in this same place three decades later.

Years after Ammon Hennacy traveled to the Nevada Test Site, the antinuclear weapons movement began to emerge again in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere, as concern grew about the latest stage of the nuclear arms race sparked by the policies of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Daniel Ellsberg—the U.S. government analyst who in 1971 had leaked the Pentagon Papers in an effort to contribute to an end to the Vietnam War and since then had been heavily involved in the antinuclear weapons movement—wrote a perceptive essay about the growing danger of the new arms race. The doctrine of first strike and limited nuclear war would be ratified and legitimated to the extent that publics throughout the world, especially in the U.S. and Europe, passively consented to these new policies and the weapon systems that made them possible. Ellsberg writes that

what [President Jimmy] Carter sought with his draft registration, what [President Ronald] Reagan now seeks with his trillion-dollar-plus arms build-up, what some NATO leaders have intended by pressing the “token” deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles to Europe, are active expressions of consent and commitments from their publics, the nuclear hostages in Europe and America.<sup>71</sup>

Ellsberg then makes a provocative analogy. Citizen passivity in the face of the deployment of a new generation of destabilizing, first-strike weapons is not unlike the cult mass suicide of 900 men, women, and children that took place in Guyana in November, 1979. For Ellsberg, acceptance of hair-trigger nuclear weaponry parallels “what the Reverend Jim Jones wanted with his suicide drills in Guyana.” Jones, Ellsberg writes,

called the practice sessions “White Nights,” rehearsing his followers in the gestures of sacrificing their children and themselves, training them to react passively to his message (in the recurrent tones of every American president and every other leader of a nuclear weapons state since 1945): “Trust me. This time it’s only a drill. *I* will decide . . . when the time has come for us to meet together on the other side; the time for the cyanide.<sup>72</sup>

Here Ellsberg thematized what Margaret Miles names the “old asceticism” in its contemporary camouflage. By the 1980s many of the original nuclear socialization practices had disappeared (due, in part, to previous antinuclear movements), including compulsory civil defense drills. Ellsberg—himself a former Cold Warrior who, prior to working on the Pentagon Papers, played a key role in the Kennedy administration in developing the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), the U.S. government’s roster of nuclear weapons targets—draws our attention to the fundamental dynamics of the social ritual of consent and allegiance that had remained the same. From his experienced perspective, citizen active acceptance or passive neutrality in the face of this modernization of nuclear arsenals might lead—in an analogy to the events at Jonestown but at an almost infinite magnification—to whole populations undergoing the greatest ritualized “old ascetical” punishment: nuclear extermination.

Asceticism often implies sacrifice. The sacrifice dictated by the post-World War Two nuclear asceticism was the sacrifice of the “pre-nuclear self”—the self not subject to the threat of omnicide. The “pre-Hiroshima” self had to be abandoned and reconstructed to “love the bomb” (as the subtitle to Stanley Kubrick’s movie *Doctor Strangelove* suggested) or, failing that, to passively accept its existence. One sacrificed security for the promise of security. One was prepared to sacrifice oneself, one’s family, and one’s world to maintain oneself, one’s family, and one’s world.

Nevada Desert Experience, as we shall see, gradually evolved a response to this “old asceticism” with a different kind of “self-forming” ascetical spirituality. Traditional Christian spirituality has been characterized for over 1,500 years by many forms of asceticism, often through

forms of self-denial, regulation, and resistance to appetites and desires. The desert fathers and mothers, who abandoned the urban centers in the fourth century C.E., engaged in strenuous practices to loosen the grip of the socialized imperial self and to reframe Christian discipleship in the midst of the challenges of the dominant Roman vision of self and society.

Analogously, the Nevada Desert Experience in the twentieth century gradually developed an asceticism in response to the social dilemmas of *its* time. Key aspects of the Nevada Desert Experience's activity—fasting, personal and corporate prayer, silence and solitude in the desert, and the willingness of many to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience and thus to risk days, weeks, and months in jail—can fruitfully be interpreted as contemporary forms of ascetical practice. This is true enough in a narrow understanding of asceticism as acts of self-denial or self-sacrifice. But this is especially the case where asceticism is seen less as an end in itself (and thus given to forms of extreme eccentric behavior or even masochism) and more as a decentering and recentering “self-forming activity.”

The Nevada Desert Experience eventually invited participants to take part in a set of practices that, situated at a tangible node of the nuclear weapons system, ritualistically encounter the fact of an all-pervasive nuclearism and create space for challenging, decentering and reconstituting the socially constructed “nuclear self.” But this would slowly evolve. In the beginning such a process was not particularly evident. There was, rather, a very basic impulse: to travel to the test site to pray for peace as a “Lenten desert experience.”