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Eqbal Ahmad:
ODD MAN OUT

By Betty Medsger

Washington Post Staff Writer

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HARRISBURG, Pa.—"What do the Berrigans mean by nonviolence? What are its limits for them?"

There was a long pause between the questions as Eqbal Ahmad rhetorically asked what he has often put to the Rev. Daniel Berrigan. And, as when he and Father Berrigan mixed politics with wine and Persian and Urdu poetry on many a late night before the Jesuit priest went to prison in 1970, there was no answer to the questions. "I do not quite understand what they say," said Ahmad.

As a professor at Cornell University, he was a close friend of Daniel Berrigan, a leading advocate of nonviolence. They met at Cornell in 1967 at an anti-war rally. Ahmad had already been there two years on the faculty of Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations; Father Berrigan had just come as part of the university's United Religious Work.

Now Ahmad, 41, is on trial with his friend's brother, the Rev. Philip Berrigan, and five others, all of whom espouse nonviolence as an ideology, as a way of life. They are charged with conspiracy to kidnap presidential adviser Henry Kissinger, to bomb heating systems under government buildings in Washington and to raid federal offices. Among the seven defendants, Ahmad stands out. A Moslem, he is the only non-Catholic among the defendants. He is a foreigner, a West Pakistani. He is a scholar who writes in four languages—Arabic, Urdu, French and English. And he is the only person in the group who does not accept nonviolence as an ideology.

His uniqueness with respect to the other defendants has been pointed out by at least six prospective jurors, who, during the 10 days of jury selection, indicated they did not think a resident alien, which is what Ahmad has been for 15 years, had the same right as an

American citizen to protest U.S. policy.

The Myth of Gandhi

ALTHOUGH HE REJECTS his fellow defendants' apparent belief in total nonviolence he says, "I think they are right about nonviolence as a political tactic in the United States right now, but I can't see it as an ideology."

The eyes of Eqbal Ahmad, a student of revolutionary movements who earned a doctorate from Princeton University and who is on the staff of the Adlai Stevenson Institute for International Affairs in Chicago, have seen things that he said made nonviolence and unacceptable permanent philosophy for him. At age 4, he said, he watched his father's assassination, his body being chopped to pieces with knives. He said that among the participants in the slaying, which grew out of a land dispute, were a brother and a nephew of his father's. "I watched his foot drop off," said Ahmad. And in 1947, he added, he watched his 3½-year-old niece being nailed to a wall.

Ahmad's serious questioning of—if not contempt for—nonviolence as an ideology goes back to the man whom Western advocates of nonviolence, including many in the Catholic left, have

emulated as if he were a saint: Mohandas K. Gandhi.

As violence continually broke out in the provinces near where the then 12-year-old Ahmad and his family lived in Bihar, Gandhi picked six boys—three Moslems and three Hindus—to travel with him around the provinces as a symbol of unity. Ahmad was one of the six.

"The myth of him is so much more than the reality," said Ahmad with eyes agitated, apparently by memories of atrocities he saw then. "The riots in our area may not have happened if Gandhi had not dramatized and published the riots in East Bengal . . . Every day we read about his lectures and said, 'My God, what is going to happen to us . . .'"

"I saw Gandhi, and I think I still do, as essentially a political person. Non-violence was a tactic for him, not an ideal, as he had people believe." Non-violence is a tactic for Ahmad, too. But he admits that, he remarked, while Gandhi tried to say it was an ideology.

"There was always something hypocritical about Gandhi. . . He was a racist . . . He did not side with the blacks in South Africa . . . He wanted power, and nonviolence was the route that led to the power."

Pacifism's Violence

THE REASON for Gandhi's glorification in the West, said Ahmad, is that people like the Berrigans are desperate for a symbol from the past. Out of the ideological pacifism of Pakistan and India, said Ahmad, has sprung more violence than any other culture in the world has experienced.

"The reasons are understandable . . . when a pacifist society fails to gear up for societal conflict, look at the results. In a typical Indian community, everybody stresses harmony. They are hush-hush when a dispute arises . . . It's a castrating society. Disputes are repressed and suppressed. Then boom—an eruption; they are incapable of controlled selective violence.

"Villages break out every 10 or 15 years. Children are killed en masse, women are raped. It becomes a free for all . . . The results are multiplied violence of an uncontrolled nature."

"The pacifism itself becomes self-righteousness and repression," Ahmad said, repeating an analysis he probably has often given Daniel Berrigan. His discussions of nonviolence with Daniel Berrigan, said Ahmad, have stopped "at one impasse: Where do you stop the nonviolence? We don't conclude; we read poetry and fix a new drink."

Ahmad said he saw the early war protests of the Catholic left—such as the raids at Catonsville in 1968—as very effective, as events with political impact, as vehicles of drawing attention to the war in Vietnam. But as for the actions that numerous persons in the Catholic peace movement have taken public responsibility for since then, Ahmad said they have been a means for "personal salvation," not political moves. "And I don't believe in personal salvation." He defined such actions as the attempted raids in Camden, N.J., in August, 1971, in which 28 persons were arrested, as "personal salvation" gestures for the individual participants and not strong symbols of a continuing war.

A further reason for his disdain of such actions, he said, is that he thinks they are "an activist expression of American individualism and obsession with heroism . . . I believe that what is politically wrong, like these actions, cannot be morally right." He said that whether such actions were appropriate was under heavy intramural questioning during the time that the government maintains the most grandiose of all actions—the alleged kidnap-bomb-raid plot—was being hatched by the defendants in this case.

"By 1969 it was evident that we needed to expand and not continue the ritualistic dance around draft boards," said Ahmad. "We had decided nothing doing as far as new actions go. We were about to get active in coffee houses on military bases . . . I was urging the priests to go back to their parishes, to preach sermons that would change many people."

Back to Pakistan

AFTER KNOCKING the political strategy of the people with whom he has been identified closely since in-

dictments in the case a year ago, he concludes:

"I have a great deal of respect for them—more respect than for any other political group in this country. In 1969 I was very disappointed in the New Left. People were saying we have to change all of American society, not just Vietnam policy. They were going into the personalist thing. Some were joining Gay Lib and Women's Lib. There was a hell of a lot of ad lib when the government was turning the war into a forgotten war.

"But these people, these Catholics, never forgot the war . . . It was imperative that if I was interested in stopping the war I had to work with them. Not to mention the fact that I have a lot of affection for them."

Now Ahmad dreams of an acquittal here and of flying thereafter to London with his wife, Julie, and their seven-week-old daughter, Dohra. Pakistan would be their ultimate destination.

Of all Western countries, the United States is the only one in which Ahmad says he would want to live. "What other place is so socially egalitarian? I like Americans . . . They have a sense of the absurd." But he wants to return to Pakistan, having been here 15 years. Were it not for the indictment, "I would've left Dec. 17—the day the Pakistan military regime gave way to Bhutto's government."

He has been as vocal an opponent of the military control of his own country as he has been of U.S. policies in Vietnam. Because of his opposition to military control, said Ahmad, he would have been in danger of imprisonment had he returned to Pakistan earlier. Now the threat of imprisonment has been removed. He says a cabinet post in the Pakistan government possibly would be available to him if he wanted it, but that he is too uncertain about the future of the Bhutto government to commit himself to government servitude.

Such a life might also cramp his style as observer of revolutions. So does life in Harrisburg. Ahmad mockingly staggered into a hotel lobby here one evening last week after a long day in court and, gently laughing at himself, told reporters, "It's very tiring being a revolutionary in a nonrevolutionary setting."



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The Harrisburg defendants minus the imprisoned Rev. Philip Berrigan, pose outside the courtroom. From the left, the Revs. Joseph Wenderoth and Neil

McLaughlin, John Glick, Sister Elizabeth McAlister, Ahmad and Mary and Anthony Scoblick. Glick will be tried separately later.