

Interview with Paul Mayer

The Radical Christian and the American

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During the past two years, a new phenomenon has risen to the top of the American peace movement: the radical Christian.

Although to many people "radical Christian" would seem to be a contradiction in terms, it cannot be denied that some of the recent attacks on draft boards by priests, nuns, ministers, rabbis and religious lay people have been carried out with a fearless dedication not often found in the New Left.

On February 8 of this year, six religious peace activists were arraigned in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on charges that they conspired to blow up the White House heating system and kidnap Henry Kissinger, a Presidential advisor.

As well as these six defendants, seven other activists, mostly Catholic priests and nuns, were named as co-conspirators. In all, they are: Dr. Eqbal Ahmed, Father Phillip Berrigan, Sister Elizabeth McAlister, Father Neil McLaughlin, Anthony Scoblick, and Father Joseph Wenderoth, defendants; and Father Daniel Berrigan, Sister Beverly Bell, Sister Jogues Egan, Marjorie Schuman, Father Paul Mayer, Thomas Davidson, and William Davidson, co-conspirators.

The contention of the Harrisburg conspirators has been that the charges against them are trumped up, and that they have in principle and in fact rejected any tactics which would involve violence on another human being, since the bond that unites them is opposition to the killing carried on by the U.S. in Southeast Asia.

Although the case against these people is, to say the least, shaky, the government acts as if it intends to carry out their prosecution, although no trial date has yet been set (speculation has it that the trial will probably happen this autumn). Due to the nebulous nature of conspiracy charges, the Harrisburg conspirators, may go to prison.

Here is an interview with Father Paul Mayer, a Harrisburg co-conspirator, which was conducted last week when he was in L.A. as part of a speaking tour:

FREEP: So how did a nice Jewish boy end up a Benedictine priest?

PAUL MAYER: My family came over from Nazi Germany as refugees, and I grew up in Manhattan. When I was 16 I became a Catholic, and that's how it all started.

One thing led to another?

Right. Then I spent 18 years in a Benedictine monastery, and then I worked for a while in Latin America and came back. I've always been involved in the peace movement and civil rights and so on.

Since I've been friends with Dan and Phil Berrigan — when I was in Latin America the Catonsville thing had just happened — they invited me to sort of co-ordinate things for their defense fund.

You're 39 now, and married?

Yeah. We have one son, and live in

New Jersey. This morning we read the statement of the 13 people named in the indictment. When newsmen ask questions like "How did you get into this?" I can only say I don't know. You'll have to ask Mitchell and Hoover.

People always ask what the meaning of the indictment is. I see it as a further attempt to stifle dissent.

It also shows that the government is now ready to move from mere "extreme" groups, such as the Panthers and Weatherpeople to more moderate and nonviolent peace people. Dissent is no longer to be tolerated in any form, especially by people who by their involvement are determined to keep this war on the front, rather than on the back pages of the newspaper.

That's what the Administration is trying to do, to turn this into a forgotten war, and to deceive the people into thinking the war is being wound down, whereas in reality it is being increasingly wound up.

Although troops are being withdrawn, they are being replaced by B-52's and long-range artillery, so the war's becoming a technological war, rather than a ground war.

Less Americans, and many more Indochinese, are being killed right now. Just in the period between February of '69 and August of '70, we've dropped as many tons of bombs as we did in all

the previous four years, and they call that de-escalation.

I think the indictments are an attempt to scare people off, or to frighten us off, and from there to scare off people in general. People are a lot more nervous these days. There's no question about that.

Do you think that Hoover and Mitchell have anything else to gain by these indictments other than just to scare people off?

Well, I suppose they consider us a dangerous element. This whole movement, through the draft board actions and through the underground with the Berrigans and others has struck a tremendous blow at the *machismo* of the FBI. It's such a blow to their ego that they can't live with it. *Do you think that the power structure has been given the creeps by the fact that for the first time in recent years religious people have come out and done these completely fearless types of actions?*

I think it's very unsettling to them because the Catholic Church, perhaps

more than any other church, has always given its unquestioning support to the government, and has always been rather hawkish in its attitude, on the level of the Cardinal Spellman syndrome.

Consider that now priests and nuns are involved in the peace movement, what with the high percentage of Catholics in the FBI.

It's a well-known fact that Hoover has a preference for Catholics; quite a number of graduates from Catholic colleges and quite a number of ex-seminarians join the FBI. The FBI values that type of discipline and willingness to submit to authority that comes with that type of formation.

So the FBI Catholics and the peace movement Catholics are fighting in their own element?

Yes. And these things have escalated. If these actions by Catholics had stopped with the Catonsville 9 it perhaps would have been all right. But these kinds of indictments have been increasing all along: The Milwaukee 14, New York 8, Chicago 15, Boston 8, DC 9, Flower City Conspiracy; just before Christmas a group calling itself the Hoover Vacuum Conspiracy hit two draft boards in New Jersey and left their statement under the Christmas tree. That was right after Hoover's statement before the Congressional Committee at which he accused the Berrigans of this conspiracy.

Has your group been tagged the Harrisburg 13 or the Harrisburg 6?

We really haven't taken any name; we've been given all kinds of names. *What's the breakdown of the conspirators as far as how many are priests and nuns?*

All but four are priests and nuns. *Are all of the conspirators people who are close to the church?*

There is one Jewish Quaker and Tom Davidson is the son of an Episcopal minister. It is a heavily Catholic group.

In the past two years or so there has been a marked upsurge of militancy among rank-and-file priests and nuns. I know you don't consider these recent antidraft board actions by priests and nuns as speaking for Catholics in particular as much as the peace movement as a whole

That's right.

... but would you comment on your impression of what's happening among the Church people?

Well, I think that since our Church

peace movement

structure seems to be very authoritarian, people like ourselves have a much keener sense of what oppression is like and how unjust oppressive structures can be. But I think also that we agonize over the silence of our Church in what each day becomes more manifestly an immoral, illegal and totally bankrupt war.

Of course, I don't think these people have just zeroed in on a single issue; the church has also been slow to speak out against segregation and racism in its various forms, and also, except for some instances, to identify with poor people and their struggle and suffering.

I think it's this type of sensitivity that's developing among the clergy. Also, you can't abstract from the fact that as people read their own tradition with greater seriousness and in greater depth, they begin to see the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament

writings as rather radical statements which imply the need to confront Caesar in all his various forms.

I think this comes out of the realization that originally and ideally the Church and the Christian community is called to be a living counter-cultural force — kind of a living question mark — always confronting the establishment and always questioning the status quo, and always offering new alternatives and new ways of being a person.

The Church has become, let us say, the creature rather than the creator of culture; in many ways it has become an



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extension of the destructive structures, so in many ways it becomes difficult to distinguish the Church from Dunn and Bradstreet, Wall Street, Madison Avenue, Columbia University or the Pentagon.

It would be very difficult for a Catholic to imagine a First-Century

Bishop celebrating the Eucharist in Caesar's court; but apparently neither Billy Graham nor Cardinal Cook have any difficulty in having Sunday morning services at the White House.

It's these type of contrasts that make people more and more conscious. Also, many people enter into these religious vocations and states of life out of a certain sense of dedication.

They have embraced these ideals of poverty, obedience and even celibacy as a way to free themselves for greater service to the community, and one day they wake up and see that the opposite has happened. Then the realization comes that perhaps something *can* still be done about it.

Do you think that if the Catholic Church and its structure were to catch up with modern times and sensitize itself to the needs of people that many of the priests and nuns who dropped out would be willing to go back to serve?

That might be so. I think that many of them see being a Christian as another way of being a man or woman, and that one is more authentically a Christian precisely in inserting oneself into the mainstream of history and grappling with the issues of life and death, which Jesus did, and suggested to us as a life style.

But at the same time, I think it's clear, when you consider the size of the Catholic community and its influence that it could be a tremendous force for good and social reform, and if it were to truly open itself to that, I think many people would be willing to identify more closely with it.

Of the priests and nuns who have stayed with the Church, in spite of the questions they must have, do you think there is much of a feeling which would lead to them taking a militant stand within the Church?

I would never say "much" because among both those who stay and those who leave it's really only a minority who would go close to the edge of

risk. But that minority is very, very important.

What happens between those who stay within the institution and those who don't becomes increasingly less important. When you really come down to the concrete issues and questions, the difference between myself, for example, as a married priest, and some of the priests within the institution with whom I work, as concerns our lifestyle, our involvements, even our understanding of Church authority, are negligible.

Such priests have no problem accepting me and my point of view any

more than I would go around trying to encourage them to leave the institution. That's a secondary question. The big question is how you invest your life.

According to canon law, a priest once ordained is always a priest even though he may leave?

Yes. Even though a guy like myself, technically speaking, is excommunicated. But I think these legalistic fine points begin to have as little meaning in the ecclesiastical arena as they do in the secular.

What does excommunication really mean to me as long as there exists a community of people who recognize me as friend, brother, fellow Christian, and priest? I continue to function as a priest in much more of an informal way, in much more of an anonymous way, without the flashing neon light

on my Roman collar.

My ministry is involved in the movement, in a broader sense, although I do teach some courses at New York Theological Seminary in theology trying to relate theology to human, social, and political change. Right now I'm teaching courses in Prison and Trial Literature and the Cultural Revolution and New Life styles in the light of Biblical literature.

I feel that these things are important, and that the entire Judeo-Christian tradition has a great deal of light to throw on them.

Do you think that the priests and nuns who leave and marry are mostly doing so with the intention of relating to the needs of poor and working people?

No. I think that a great majority of them, although they may leave the ecclesiastical structures, feel that they have been prevented from developing as persons, feel that they have been oppressed and alienated, etc.

Unfortunately, all too many of them end up as identifying with the whole bourgeois American way of life, getting a nice job with IBM rather than continuing with the radical vision that is part of the Christian way of life. I sometimes think for some of them it would have been better for them if they'd stayed in the Church.

When I grew in my understanding and left, and when my wife and I were married, we agreed that we'd really try

to explore a new lifestyle and not fall victim to consumerism. We wanted to see if we could live simply and poorly, not in some sort of masochistic way, but as a way of liberating ourselves.

So that's what we're trying to do. We're living in a commune with a group of people who are also groping their way along those lines. I'm glad we made those decisions.

What are your future plans?

Not much. Just trying to remain a human being, which is very difficult these days.

This whole conspiracy thing has thrown my life into a different state. I'm not surprised; if anyone works seriously in the movement they just assume that it's a matter of time before something like this happens.

What's going to be the result of the indictments?

It's very hard to say. Up to this point there have only been the indictments, and the six defendants were arraigned in Harrisburg, February 8.

The Grand Jury is still in session and calling people in. They've already hassled one of the co-conspirators, Sister Jogues, who refused to testify when they forced immunity on her, and she was thrown in jail.

Her case is now on appeal. If she loses her case they might call the other co-conspirators, and we'd all be vulnerable.

The US attorney who runs the Grand Jury, Guy Goodwin, is one of the chief attorneys for the Internal

Securities Division (Note: formerly known as the Un-American Activities Division) and has been going around the country running things like the Seattle Conspiracy trial, and the Arizona arrests. He claims that the government may be coming out with more indictments, but what that means, I don't know.

Recently, in New York, Judge Constance Baker Motley, a black woman, challenged the constitutionality of the immunity clause of the Omnibus Crime Bill on the grounds that the law didn't provide enough protection against self-incrimination. Do you see that as having any bearing on Sister Jogues' case?

What the court did was shrewd. The judge in Harrisburg knew that this case was coming up, and perhaps had some apprehension about it, so he gave her immunity under the old immunity law. *How does the old one work?*

According to the new one, you cannot be prosecuted for your own testimony, but they can prosecute you for the same crime on somebody else's testimony or on other evidence. It just excludes your own evidence.

Now, the old immunity law said that you could not in any case be prosecuted for the crime about which you testified. Also, under the old immunity law, you could not be prosecuted for perjury. Under the present one you can. So under the new one, they have you both coming and going.

Is there anything you'd like to emphasize?

Yes. We'd like to stress that we consider these conspiracy charges of bombing and kidnapping and so on as pseudo-issues.

Our hope is to continue to speak out on the real issues: There is a conspiracy — on the part of the American government against the peoples of Indochina, against the poor and non-white Americans, and against the peoples of the Third World.

And there is a bombing conspiracy — the rate at which the American government has escalated the bombing of Southeast Asia.

And there is a kidnapping conspiracy, represented by the fact that over half the population of North Vietnam is composed of refugees from South Vietnam. And presently we are transporting 200,000 more Vietnamese from their villages to these "strategic hamlets," which is a fancy name for "concentration camps" as part of our "pacification program."

And of course our young men are being kidnapped through the Selective Service program.

These are the issues we want to focus on. We hope that our conspiracy charges will become the base of a really strong unity, which we have to struggle for, among many different types of people.