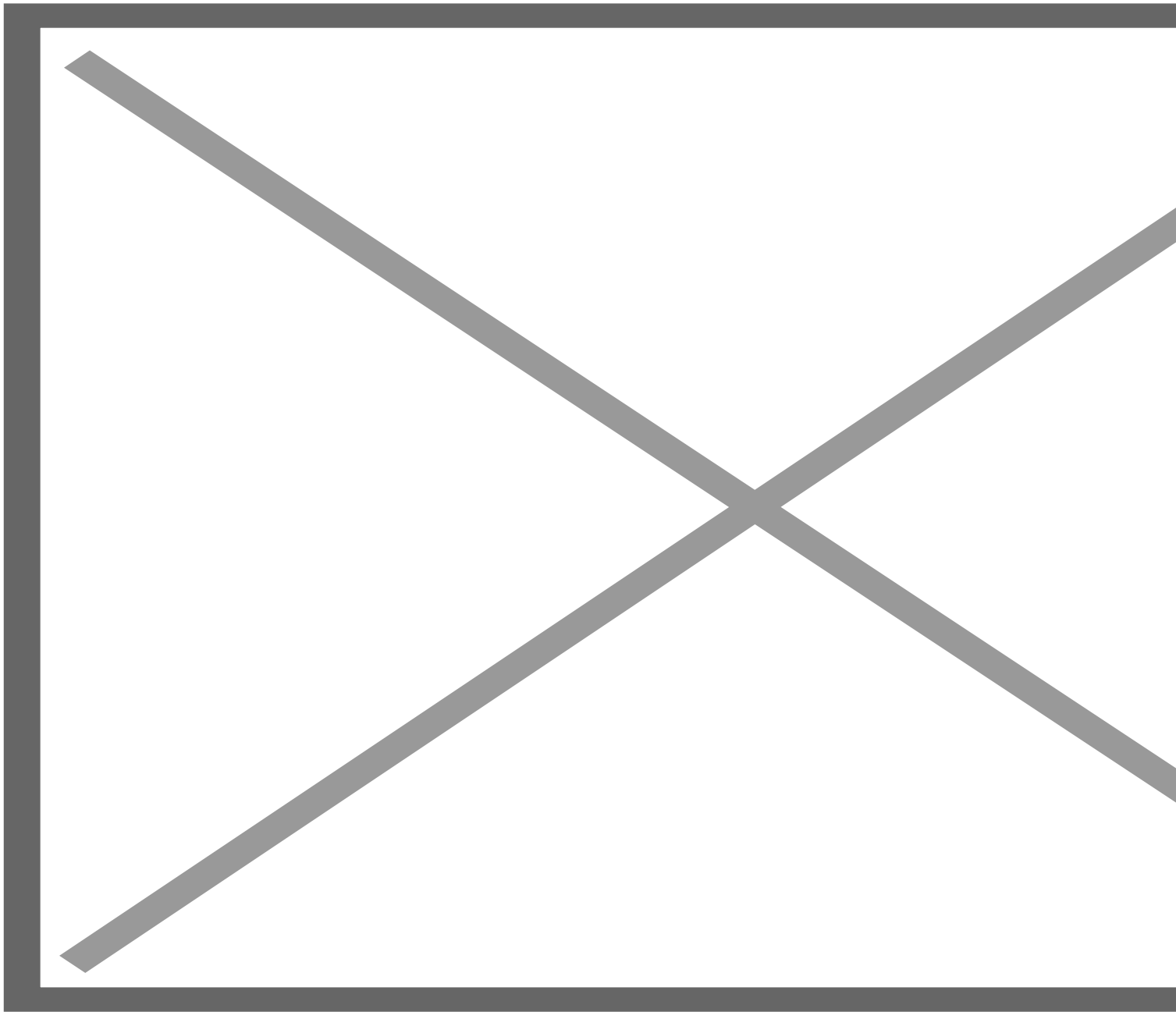


Daniel Berrigan and the religion of war

The radical Catholic peace activist believed war is a religion that only a rival liturgy can resist.

by [Mac Loftin](#)

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In his opening speech as the new “Secretary of War” back in September 2025, Pete Hegseth famously promised an end to “stupid rules of engagement.” True to his word, under his leadership the US military has not only committed crimes like blowing up civilian boats in the Caribbean and kidnapping the head of state of Venezuela but bragged about it in social media-ready snuff films.

Still, for Hegseth, not *all* rules are stupid. His tenure at the War Department is also marked by an obsession with military jargon, fitness standards, and grooming regulations, as he cracks down on the “fat generals” and hirsute soldiers dragging down the warfighter spirit. It’s a strange dance: as the killing becomes more lawless, the rituals and ceremonies become more stringent.

Shocking as it may sound, Hegseth might know what he’s doing. Justifications of war rely on a moral distinction between killing in war and killing outside of war. “Thou shalt not kill,” sure, but war is different. How do we recognize war? Someone kills someone else. How do we determine whether this killing is “in war” or not? This is where the rituals of military life come in.

The uniforms, the hierarchies, all the ceremonies and symbols that bind squads within companies within divisions, the rules governing everything from combat to making one’s bed and cutting one’s hair, the formal declarations of war that bind a given zone of violence to the civilian government—all of these rituals work together to set off military violence as its own distinct sphere of activity. Their presence or absence, or the felicity or infelicity of their performance, are what allow us to recognize if a given act has taken place “in war.” Ritual is thus essential to war. It is what makes war *war*.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote that the denigration of certain rituals within a religious system tends to be compensated for by the intensification of other rituals; thus those Protestants who have most de-ritualized the eucharist have developed highly ritualized practices of reading the Bible. If ritual is the essence of war, if it is what sets war apart from mere killing, then we should not be surprised that the intensification of some rituals compensates for the shedding of others. By discarding rules of engagement and loudly boasting about war crimes that previous administrations would have moved heaven and earth to hide, Hegseth is excising important rituals of credal confession and secrecy while using intensifying others: increasingly arcane jargon, stricter rules around appearance, and greater emphasis on spectacle and ceremony.

All of this means that to be anti-war requires more than merely being anti-killing. There is a complicated system of acts and ideas, a system of rituals, beliefs, rules, liturgies, vestments, texts, creeds, and confessions—in other words, a religious system—that works to make killing in war something other than killing. This religious aspect of war is essential to war as such, it is what makes it so that sometimes you can point a gun at another person and pull the trigger and not commit murder. Opposition to war, therefore, has to strike at this religious aspect if war is to be stripped of its special moral status.

Such was the approach of the Catholic anti-war resister Daniel Berrigan, best known as one of a group of nine peace activists who burned draft cards in Catonsville, Maryland, to protest the Vietnam War. Believing the peace movement required different tactics than the civil rights movement, four of the nine refused to go to jail. Berrigan was on the lam for months before being caught by the FBI at the Block Island home of Episcopal theologian William Stringfellow.

Berrigan is most often remembered as a flamboyantly theatrical activist. The Catonsville action of 1968 involved burning the draft cards in homemade napalm, with Berrigan giving a speech directly connecting the burning cards to the children burned with napalm in Vietnam. In 1980, Berrigan and seven others broke into a General Electric factory, damaged nuclear missile reentry vehicles, and poured their own blood into file cabinets. Berrigan lived until 2016, but these two actions—that of the “Catonsville Nine” and the “Plowshares

Eight”—remained for him the center of his life.

Berrigan’s fixation on these two actions has been criticized for excessive grandiosity. As a [recent essay](#) puts it, he “continued referencing Catonsville in his work” decades after the action “as if it were as consequential as the bombing of Hiroshima.” But his self-mythologizing insistence that burning those draft cards was a world-historical event can teach us something, if we bear with him.

Burning draft cards and pouring blood on weapons schematics weren’t, for Berrigan, simply dramatic expressions of nonviolent principles, like the performance art tactics of other groups, like the Yippies. His writings articulate a sophisticated critique of war as a religious phenomenon, one requiring an equally religious response. “The war itself,” he writes, “had, in a sense, given away the secrets of war; the war had suggested to us, *sotto voce*, the methods of peace.” The secrets of war, its mysteries, are its rituals and creeds. War is for Berrigan a religion and has to be resisted as such if it is to be resisted effectively.

Scattered across Berrigan’s writings are references to the ancient Greek war god Mars and to war as the cult of Mars. He writes about the “Martian spirit” animating American politics, derides the atomic scientists who labor at “the forge of Mars,” describes those passively submitting to war as caught in the “hands of Mars” or ground under the “wheels of Mars.” He turned to the biblical imagery of false gods at once nonexistent and strangely active to make sense of how war seems to have a life of its own, driving individuals and nations relentlessly towards death, even their own death in nuclear conflagration. “Speaking biblically,” he writes, “the warmakers believed in god, the god of war.” Performing the Martian rites, they “evicted their soul, and the machine moved inThey marched to the common whip, in time with the military, and made a brave and colorful and glorious thing of sanctioned murder.” Mars appears too often in Berrigan’s writings to be mere metaphor. It’s his way of describing the religious nature of war and prescribing a method of resistance.

Berrigan was remarkably ecumenical, finding truth across “the cosmic religious experience of humanity,” but against the religion of Mars he brought all the biblical language of idolatry and the wrath of a jealous God. In his writings Mars is a false god, the Martian religion a false religion, and the biblical stories of smashing idols and driving out rival gods become manuals for antiwar resistance. Often, religious nonviolence takes the form of calm public gatherings like vigils, or it names the motives and organizations behind otherwise nonreligious acts like protests and strikes. But for Berrigan, the acts of resistance themselves have to be ferociously religious if they are to be successful. Acts of nonviolence must be “dramatic events, deliberately orchestrated, arbitrary but intensely traditional, liturgical, illegal.” Like the war it seeks to overthrow, nonviolence must be steeped in blood and smoke and sacrifice.

Berrigan’s vision of peacemaking drew from images of priestly sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: leaping fires, knives and vessels, initiation by night into sacred mysteries, gore-splattered priests flinging blood on altar and people. Catonsville seemed to be, for him, pitched sacrificial combat between priests of God and priests of Mars, something like Elijah squaring off against the prophets of Baal. Humility certainly wasn’t Berrigan’s strong suit. But his insistence that Catonsville was a “biblical act,” something to be told and retold until it became, like a Bible story, “a memory that could not finally suffer brainwashing,” opens up a different way of thinking about how Christians can contribute to the struggle against war.

If war is a religious phenomenon, and if antiwar resistance must strike at this religious aspect, then Christians’ best contribution to the struggle against war isn’t our numbers (not what they used to be) or our moral vocabulary (unconvincing to many and downright off-putting to some) but our technical expertise in things liturgical, ritual, sacrificial. The cult of Mars must be fought with cultic means, and such means are familiar to us.

Of course, things have changed since Berrigan mixed his napalm and let his blood. Violence no longer shocks in the way it used to. Images of My Lai and Abu Ghraib, though not enough to stop the wars, at least spooked past war makers enough to undertake frantic coverups. But today our phones ceaselessly blare videos of burned and mutilated civilians in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran, and our government itself publishes its own atrocities—a My Lai every hour, in the palms of our hands. War seems less a sacrificial altar than a mechanized slaughterhouse. Berrigan’s tactics are as outdated for us as the civil rights movement’s were for him. Still, he can help orient us as we adapt.

“The drama is the ethic,” he wrote. The ethic remains the same—“Christians suffer death rather than inflict it”—but the drama has to be always reworked. The forge of Mars never cools and his priests never sleep. We need new rites, new sacrifices, new ways of asking the question Berrigan never found an answer to: “Is it possible for us to do something other than kill?”