

# Spiritual Testing in the Nuclear West

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To what purpose is this waste?  
(Matthew 26:8)

What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.  
(Matthew 19:6)

Yucca Mountain, Nevada, is a six-mile long, flat-topped volcanic ridge rising 1,200 feet above the surrounding desert about eighty miles northwest of Las Vegas. The U.S. Department of Energy plans to turn Yucca Mountain into the nation's first high-level nuclear waste repository if an Environmental Impact Study finds the site safe ("Why Does"). If the site is deemed suitable, Yucca Mountain will become the permanent storage facility of 77,000 tons of hazardous radioactive materials, which will need to be contained for at least 10,000 years, almost twice as long as human recorded history and twice as long as the Egyptian pyramids have been standing ("Why Does").<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For current information on the status of the proposed repository, check the

Yucca Mountain is located in Nellis Air Force Base, which was created in 1941 and is a 5,470-square-mile tract of land, bigger than Connecticut (Solnit 5). Within Nellis and adjacent to Yucca Mountain lies the Nevada Test Site, an area larger than Rhode Island (5) created in 1951 for testing atomic weapons. In the dozen years between 1951 and 1963—the year of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which forbids atmospheric testing—126 nuclear tests were conducted there above ground (Meloy 181), releasing cancer-causing radioactive fallout downwind of the explosions, principally in an area of Utah that a classified government report characterized as inhabited by “a low-use segment of the population” (180). After 1963 the tests moved underground, where they contaminated local groundwater (“Human”). There have been additional if occasional disasters. In 1986, for example, during the “Mighty Oak” test, a rock at the test location caved in, causing the explosion to vent, leaking radioactivity into the atmosphere 2000 times greater than the Three Mile Island disaster (“Human”). Between 1951 and 1992—the year that President Bush signed a nuclear testing moratorium (Solnit 372), subsequently extended by President Clinton—it is estimated that at least 953 atomic bombs were detonated at the Nevada Test Site (389–90). Today, underground “subcritical” nuclear testing continues in compliance with the U.N. Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, a treaty that has yet to be ratified by the U.S. Senate.<sup>2</sup> The most recent nuclear test—dubbed “Oboe 1”—occurred on the first of October 1999, ironically on Nevada’s “Nevada is Not a Waste-land Day” (“Nuclear”).

Although I am opposed to both the nuclear waste dump and continued nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site, it is not my purpose here to debate these issues, but, rather, to study the literature of nuclear testing and nuclear waste.<sup>3</sup> In examining the work of contemporary writers Terry Tempest Williams, Rebecca Solnit, and Frank Bergon, I’ve been struck by the degree to which nuclear activity is re-

<sup>2</sup>A “subcritical experiment” refers to a nuclear test in which no critical mass is formed, thus preventing a nuclear chain reaction or explosion (“Nuclear”).

<sup>3</sup>While this essay focuses exclusively on literature of the Nevada Test Site, its findings may apply to nuclear writing generally. For collections of literature that responds to the nuclear age, see Bradley and Schley. For a compilation of nuclear quotes, including a section on “A Religious View,” see Bollen.

sponded to in theological terms. In their works, nuclear testing and radioactive waste in the American West precipitate a crisis of faith that engenders new, confrontational modes of spirituality. Good citizens, accustomed to obeying their godlike government, now find themselves calling upon a higher power to oppose their government's infernal plans, therein pitting spiritual energy against nuclear energy. Radioactivity, in addition to being depicted as a health risk, as environmentally destructive and dangerous, is presented as evil. Thus, intriguingly, nuclear issues in the hands of these writers become more than technological, political, economic, and social issues; they are fundamentally and finally questions of faith.

Terry Tempest Williams's memoir *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991) is a profoundly moving record of Williams's thoughts as she copes with her mother Diane Tempest's extended illness and eventual death from cancer. During this difficult time, Diane draws strength from her faith in God and her Mormon family and friends. Told by a relative that cancer "is one of the most spiritual experiences you will ever encounter" (282), Diane affirms her faith when she tells her children that during surgery she "felt the arms of God around [her]" (282). At the moment of her passing, Diane's eyes radiate "total joy—a fullness that transcends words," and Williams feels her mother's "spirit rising through the top of her head" (231). The spiritual richness and meaning that Williams finds in Diane's death undergoes a sea change when she discovers the basis of a recurring dream she has had of a "flash of light in the desert" (282). Her father explains that in 1957, when Williams was just a toddler, the whole family witnessed the "eerie pink glow" of an atomic explosion as they sat in their car just north of Las Vegas (283). To Williams's dumbfounded stare, her father replies, "I thought you knew that. . . . It was a common occurrence in the fifties" (283). Thus begins Williams's education in the history of U.S. atomic testing, specifically the radioactive fallout that blanketed the "downwinders" in Utah, where her family has lived for generations. Williams recalls, "It was at this moment that I realized the deceit I

had been living under. Children growing up in the American Southwest, drinking contaminated milk from contaminated cows, even from the contaminated breasts of their mothers, my mother” (283).

In light of the history of U.S. atomic testing, her mother’s strong faith appears to Williams to be “blind obedience” (286) and her “common, heroic death” an unnecessary tragedy—“Sheep. Dead sheep,” she sighs (285–86). For herself, Williams resolves, “as a Mormon woman of the fifth generation of Latter-day Saints, I must question everything, even if it means losing my faith, even if it means becoming a member of a border tribe among my own people. Tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives” (286). Williams’s new determination to question authority had been prefigured by her grandmother Mimi, who also died of cancer and who while hospitalized confided to Williams that “When I looked into the water closet and saw what my body had expelled, the first thought that came into my mind was ‘Finally, I am rid of the orthodoxy.’ My advice to you, dear, is do it consciously” (246). Williams does. The discovery that the cancer that killed seven women in her family was probably caused by exposure to radioactive fallout precipitates a crisis of faith. Rather than leaning on religion to support her in her grief, Williams is horrified that her religion did nothing to oppose the nuclear testing that caused those deaths. Mormonism, here, seems to be complicit in countenancing nuclear testing. By the end of the book, Williams finds spiritual sustenance by joining with other women in acts of civil disobedience, chanting Sho-shone songs, inhaling the smell of sage, recognizing herself as part of the earth, and taking responsibility for its care. Her dream-vision musters the power of women—including their witchery—to oppose nuclear testing. She abandons the form of Mormonism that is transcendent, patriarchal, and patriotic, gravitating instead to a syncretic spirituality that is earth-based, activist, and woman-centered. Rather than leaving the Mormon church and culture, however, Williams identifies with the early days of the church when, as she says, “authority was found within the individual, not outside” (196). She seems to see herself not as a heretic but as a reformer, perhaps even a prophet. When she was a girl, Williams was taught not to “make waves”

or “rock the boat” (285–86). By the end of *Refuge*, however, Williams is arrested for civil disobedience. The arresting officers release the women protesters in the desert outside of Tonopah, Nevada. In *Refuge*’s concluding paragraph, Williams recalls, “The officials thought it was a cruel joke to leave us stranded in the desert with no way to get home. What they didn’t realize was that we were home, soul-centered and strong, women who recognized the sweet smell of sage as fuel for our spirits” (290).

Like *Refuge*, Rebecca Solnit’s *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (1994) recounts Solnit’s personal experience as a protester at the Nevada Test Site, concluding with a tribute to the Nevada desert as home. Trained in art history and committed to environmental activism, Solnit is fascinated by “how the way we picture landscape affects how we treat it” and “how what we believe blinds us to what is going on,” specifically how “the nuclear war that was supposed to be our future and the Indian wars of our past are being waged simultaneously, without attracting much attention from those not directly affected” (xi). Her study centers on two iconic places in the American West, Yosemite National Park: the American Eden; and the Nevada Test Site: America’s Armageddon. In both places—Solnit calls them “war zones”—Native American land claims and life ways are being disregarded as the United States acts out its fantasies of the beginning and the end of the world. Solnit posits what she refers to as “lines of convergence” that run through places, investing them with cultural significance. In the case of the Nevada Test Site, these lines of convergence include “the history of nuclear physics, the Arms Race, anti-Communism, civil disobedience, Native American landrights struggles, the environmental movement, and the mysticism and fanaticism deserts seem to inspire in Judeo-Christians,” all coming together to make not physical geography, but “cultural geography” (23–24). *Savage Dreams* traces each of these lines back to its sources, thus enriching our understanding of their intricate intersection at the Test Site.

Unlike Williams, who identifies herself as a fifth-generation Mormon and who reveals the evolution of her own religious beliefs, Solnit, who is descended from Polish Jews (107), does not share her

personal religious beliefs and does not undergo a crisis of faith in the narrative. (Having grown up in an activist family in San Francisco, Solnit presumably never had a faith in government to lose.) Rather, she seems most interested in studying the beliefs of others, in particular the contrast between Native American and Judeo-Christian worldviews. For the Shoshone people, explains Solnit, “nuclear testing, along with many other military and industrial assaults on the environment, violates their religious beliefs” (30). The Nevada Test Site is situated in the Southwestern corner of a 43,000-square-mile territory that the U.S. government officially recognized as Shoshone lands in the Ruby Valley Treaty of 1863. Having never relinquished their claim to the land, the Western Shoshone people are involved in lawsuits to force the U.S. Government to honor its treaty. For them, according to Solnit, the desert

[is] not a land of austerity and absence, but an abundance for those who were careful, attentive, and reverent. . . . Their spirituality emphasizes a Creation and creators who are not profoundly separate from the world and its people, but part of a continuum, and in which the earth itself is full of spiritual power. (65)

She quotes Shoshone elder and activist Corbin Harney, who says, “The stones are alive here, everything’s alive here. But the bombs are killing them. We are killing our mother today” (Solnit 157). In the indigenous view, then, nuclear testing is wrong and is evil in that it kills the living and sacred earth.

In contrast to the native perspective, which sees the desert as alive, abundant, and infused with spiritual power, religions of the Near East—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—have traditionally regarded the desert as a land of profound emptiness, free from the distractions of this world, and therefore the best place to hear the voice of a transcendent, immaterial God. There, in “solitude, emptiness, and silence” (62), those in pursuit of spiritual knowledge have most often received revelations. Solnit reviews the experience of scientist Freeman Dyson, who, in his eagerness to develop Orion, an atom-bomb-powered space-

ship for exploration of the solar system, published an influential article defending nuclear testing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1960. Dyson's autobiography, excerpted in *Savage Dreams*, recalls how he visited Jackass Flat at the Nevada Test Site, where the tests were to be conducted:

Only once in my life have I experienced absolute silence. That was Jackass Flat under the midday sun. . . . It is a soul-shattering silence. You hold your breath and hear absolutely nothing. No rustling of leaves in the wind, no rumbling of distant traffic, no chatter of birds or insects or children. You are alone with God in that silence. There in the white flat silence I began for the first time to feel a slight sense of shame for what we were proposing to do. Did we really intend to invade this silence with our trucks and bulldozers, and after a few years leave it a radioactive junkyard? The first shadow of a doubt about the rightness of Orion came into my mind with that silence. (Solnit 67)

In this passage, the almost palpable presence of God in the desert causes Dyson to regard nuclear testing not in the customary terms of scientific knowledge and national defense, but in terms of morality. Although Dyson chooses to disregard his intuition (later in his life he reversed his position and spoke out against nuclear testing), Solnit honors it, referring to her own protest at the Test Site as "an act of faith" (43). She describes nuclear protest activities as a "ceremony" (69), an "annual Lenten vigil . . . bringing together Quakers and other religious denominations with . . . Franciscans, . . . nonreligious activists (and pagans)" (15). Native Americans, particularly the Shoshone, participate in the ceremony, which Solnit remembers as "a conversation between the participants and their gods" (69).

Ironically, even as nuclear protesters tend to respond to nuclear testing in theological terms and to model their protest activities on religious ceremony, the U.S. government, according to Solnit, *also* envisions nuclear testing in religious terms. She points out that J. Robert Oppenheimer named the first atomic explosion at Los Alamos, New Mexico, the "Trinity" test, uncannily grasping "the mythical mean-

ing the bomb would acquire" (375-76). Indeed, Solnit observes that it seems somehow fitting to speak of "the bomb" in the singular, "as though it were a deity rather than a variety of weapon" (46). In Solnit's view, the Nevada Test Site is America's Armageddon, where U.S. physicists and bureaucrats have been "rehearsing the end of the world . . . over and over again" (5). But, rather than believing that the bomb will end all life, some Americans, according to Solnit, have tended to think of it as ushering in a new beginning, opening a new frontier, erasing history, and giving humankind a chance to start all over again. In this view, like the deluge that "washed Noah's world of all its excesses and crimes," the bomb appears as "a giant eraser sweeping clean the blackboard of the continent" and creating "the blankest slate on which a new history can be inscribed" (376). Instead of viewing the bomb as evil, then, popular imagination has tended to envision it as "the great fulcrum of redemption" (377).

Frank Bergon shares Solnit's interest in "the mythical meaning" of radioactivity (376). His humorous novel of ideas *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S* (1993) focuses on the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository controversy, and its characters represent a wide spectrum of different positions in that debate. For example, Joan Yerkes is the optimistic spokesperson for the Department of Energy (DOE) who believes that "the peacefulness and greatness of modern civilization rest on nuclear arms and nuclear power" and that all technological problems such as radioactive waste are solvable (53). Scientist Max Frishenheimer appears as the DOE's "institutional heretic" (113), mouthing hollow warnings that the proposed dump site lies on an active earthquake fault, compounded by an unstable groundwater table. June Mosho and her nephew Dale are Western Shoshone Indians for whom the land is sacred and who regard the proposed dump as a genocidal act. In addition to their involvement in a lawsuit over the Ruby Valley Treaty, they hold peyote ceremonies, hoping to conjure up powerful forces to oppose the government. Then, there is Straightgut Leo, a paranoid "Atomic Vet" who suffers from radiation poisoning as a result of his years in the U.S. military, during which time the government exposed soldiers to atomic explosions to observe the effect of radiation on their bodies. Other

characters include Amy Chavez, a U.S. Bureau of Land Management employee who intends to prove that the government illegally killed wild horses on the Test Site in its plot to remove obstacles to atomic testing; Pete Ylarregui, a former truck driver of hazardous materials who is confident that radioactive waste is nothing to worry about and that people fear it only because they don't understand it; a picket line of Test Site protesters, one of whom wields a sign that reads, "NUKE WASTE IS THE DEVIL'S SHIT" (117); and Nathan Spock, the provocative talk-show host of "Nevada People," whose own political stance is dubious, but who stirs up controversy for the sake of entertainment and high ratings. Solnit's idea of lines of convergence here becomes personified in a large cast of characters who converge and converse, thereby educating the reader on the complexities of the Yucca Mountain issue.

If the subject of *Temptations* is topical and timely, its central narrative calls into question the very idea of timeliness, pitting it against an ideal of timelessness. The story chronicles the fate of a modern-day Trappist hermitage set near the Nevada Test Site. The Hermitage of Solitude in the Desert was founded by Father Edward St. John Arrizabalaga, known affectionately as St. Ed, who is writing a book called *The Death of Time*, and who thinks of himself as a medieval visionary in the age of post-modernism, dedicated to the monastic mission to lead a contemplative life and, with his fellow hermit Brother S, "to become strangers to the business of the world" (3). When asked by talk-show host Spock "What spiritual awareness can your contemplative life bring to our understanding of nuclear waste?" (24), St. Ed dismisses the question by replying, "It's spiritual energy that interests me, not nuclear energy" (23, 24). He resists becoming just another activist, "marching with placards and trendy songs at the drop of every new cause" (24). "Over the years he'd grown numb to endless reports about nuclear tests, nuclear energy, nuclear waste, nuclear this, nuclear that. . . . It required too much energy to imagine, day in and day out, what was supposed to be at stake" (65). "He wanted the hermitage to stand as a silent witness to a spiritual life greater than any nuclear concern. He wanted faith in the Cloud of Unknowing [the title of a mystical text written by an unknown English

monk in the 14th century] to overwhelm faith in the mushroom cloud" (24).

Despite his original design to withdraw from worldly concerns in order to meditate on eternal truths, St. Ed is catapulted into action when his bishop orders him to abandon the hermitage so that the Department of Energy can situate a nuclear waste dump nearby. While Brother S favors relocating to a place where the affairs of the world will not intrude upon their meditations, St. Ed rallies to defend his home. He decides to recruit new postulants to the hermitage so that their swelling ranks and spiritual energy can more effectively oppose the "satanic" Department of Energy (195). Calling his new monastery *The Hermitage of Transfiguration in the Desert*, St. Ed opens up membership to women and imagines that, in the tradition of the medieval Black Monks and White Monks, he will found a new order of Blue Monks who will be "monks for the new millennium" (88).

In an effort to get to know his enemy and to get the government off his back, St. Ed drives to the DOE headquarters to meet with Gilbert Davis, supervisor of the Nuclear Waste Repository project and "an ordained Episcopal priest with degrees in civil engineering and systems management" (108). After talking with Gil and his assistants for a while, St. Ed begins to feel that these "scientific high priests and bureaucratic curia" formed "an inquisition committed to . . . his conversion" (110). Their belief in the necessity and safety of the proposed nuclear waste dump is unshakable. They are full of optimism and hope, and St. Ed's skepticism offends "their deepest beliefs" (113). "[W]hat we really have here," St. Ed concludes, "is a conflict of faiths" (114). "That's exactly right," Gil replies, "It's a problem of faith. We have to have faith in the consensus of science" (114). St. Ed leaves the interview feeling devastated, alienated from his own times, from a people who accept "madness as logical" (234), from an era in which the deluded public hold "a faith in unseen priests in white lab coats behind the walls of research facilities and test sites who would control the fire of their inventions. That was the religion of the times he could not abide," yet as the old fighters of heresy in the past ruefully learned, "you can't fight an idea without being consumed by the idea yourself"

(138). He returns to his hermitage, “lost without a faith in the faith of his times” (138).

By the end of the narrative, despite the fervent efforts of St. Ed and his enlarged order of Blue Monks, it is clear that the Nuclear Waste Dump will be built, and they will be evicted. Depressed by his failure to “bring spiritual reform to the slack soul of the nuclear age” (300), St. Ed contemplates joining the American mainstream, but his postulants refuse to give up the dream of spiritual community, and, in a final transfiguration, they inspire St. Ed to found a new hermitage, “a spiritual power plant on the desert, generating spiritual energy to counter the wasted nuclear energy streaming past them in trucks. . . . They could become radiation monks, signs and symbols of an alternative to radioactive death” (304). Whereas in the beginning St. Ed had chosen the life of a hermit, divorced from involvement in the world, he ends with the revelation that

there is only one world. Not a profane world over here and a sacred world over there. One world. A world of many levels and depths. A world to be transfigured or degraded. Our choice is simple: to have faith in the mushroom cloud or in the Cloud of Unknowing. The business of the world is our business. We will choose the Cloud of Unknowing—in this world. (305)

The language of these three literary treatments of nuclear testing and nuclear waste is distinctly theological. From Williams: “bear testimony,” “sheep,” “faith,” “blind obedience,” “religion,” “death,” “winged messengers,” “singing,” “prophets,” “white flames,” “soul-centered.” From Solnit: “apocalypse,” “Armageddon,” “sacred,” “religious beliefs,” “act of faith,” “vigil,” “deity,” “spiritual knowledge,” “God,” “hell,” “nuclear priesthood,” “doctrine,” “pilgrimage,” “redemption.” From Bergon: “monk,” “hermitage,” “spiritual energy,” “witness,” “faith,” “Devil,” “believers,” “greed,” “pride,” “inquisition,” “heretic,” “satanic,” “high priests,” “religion,” “transfiguration,” “prayer,” “the Creator,” “love.” Thus, Williams’s intensely personal memoir, Solnit’s heavily researched documentary, and Bergon’s far-fetched novel make

similar rhetorical moves as they shift discourse about radioactivity from the realm of science, technology, and economics to the realm of morality, spirituality, and myth. They ask readers to question authority, to think about the *meaning* of atomic fission, to ponder the ethics of creating waste that will be deadly for ten thousand years. They probe, in Solnit's words, "the problematic relationship between our power, desire, and limits" (46). And in so doing they suggest that the fundamental issue confronting humankind on the cusp of the new millennium is precisely the problem of faith: Whom will we believe? What will we believe? And what will be the basis of our faith?

Williams resolves to "question everything, even if it means losing my faith" (286). Solnit envisions civil disobedience as "an act of faith," offering its own rewards (46). St. Ed concludes that "We are what we believe. It all comes down to what traditions of faith energize us" (140). Traditions of faith. In addition to exploring questions of individual belief, these works question the relationship between institutionalized religion and nuclear policy. Should organized religions respond to nuclear threat? Should religious leaders also be activists? How does the spectre of radioactivity affect our religious beliefs and practices? Williams criticizes the Mormon church for its uncritical patriotism, for blindly supporting the nuclear testing that caused the deaths of faithful Mormons. Solnit honors the Western Shoshone's battle against the Yucca Mountain project, and she participates in protest activities that take the form of religious ceremonies and sweat lodges. June Mosho in Bergon's novel insists that "We have to fight for the wild horses and the piñons and for all creatures who can't speak or fight for themselves. We have to follow the laws of the Creator before the laws of man" (279). And St. Ed comes to believe that "if we don't stand up to this evil, no one will" and that religion in the nuclear age cannot be separated from earthly affairs (225); spirituality finally must become engaged "in this world" (305). Louis Owens's perceptive tribute to *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S* applies equally well to all three of the literary works examined here. He writes that "Bergon has done an extraordinary job of crafting a powerful story out of personal, spiritual, and ecological crises, and showing us vividly how all three are one."

Radioactivity itself is a matter of belief. How do we know it exists? We can't see, smell, taste, touch, or feel it. In the case of Utah's "downwinders," the effects of radiation may not manifest themselves for decades. How can we know for sure that the cancer that killed the women in Williams's family was caused by radiation? Scientists teach us about the dangers and carcinogenic effects of radiation. So then, when it comes to radiation, do we believe the scientists? What scientists? Scientists of the 1950s assured the public that atomic testing was perfectly safe and absolutely necessary. When it comes to disposal of radioactive waste, scientists themselves are divided. Those like Max Frishenheimer in Bergon's novel argue that there is no safe method of permanently containing nuclear waste, while other scientists assure us that there is. The government tells us that we need nuclear testing to keep the peace, while protesters argue that atomic testing is a rehearsal for war. Industry tells us that prosperity depends upon nuclear power, while others argue that the nuclear power industry blocks research into alternative, viable energy sources such as solar and wind power.

I noted at the outset that I am opposed to continued nuclear testing and to the proposed nuclear waste dump at Yucca Mountain. Why? Upon whose authority do I base my opinions? Is my stance against nuclear testing due to the fact that I came of age during the Vietnam antiwar protests? Is my stance against the Yucca Mountain proposal due to the fact that I live in Nevada? Is my faith in science due to the fact that my father is a physicist? Are my opinions all socially constructed and contingent? What would it take to change them? If we don't know whom to believe, how are we, as a democratic people, to guide policy? Unless *we the people* guide policy, powerful interests will do it for us. Some would say they already have.

As we confront the increasingly complex questions of the twenty-first century, whom will we believe? what will we believe? and what will be the basis of our faith? These may be unanswerable questions, but, like radioactive waste itself, they will not go away.

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