Review Symposium

A review symposium brings author and reviewers into conversation. Prior to this publication, Gordon Oyer and the reviewers, William Apel, Deborah Belcastro, Paul Dekar and Patricia Schnapp, corresponded. What follows is the outcome of this exchange.

OYER, Gordon, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), pp. xxii + 275. ISBN 978-1-62032-377-9 (paper) $33.00.

Gordon Oyer's *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* is a story well told. As in any good story, the narrator has to pay close attention to both the story's content and context. And most importantly, a good story must be told in an engaging way that invites the listener (reader) into the story. Oyer has met all these qualification and has done it with the trained eye of a historian and the compassionate heart of a peacemaker. His telling of the story of the gathering of thirteen peace activists with Thomas Merton at Gethsemani in November of 1964 is therefore something not to be missed.

Indeed, I find Oyer's account so inviting and so compelling that at times I feel like I'm present at the peace retreat itself. The author's work serves to remind me how central the call to peacemaking is to the gospel life I have tried to live. Because of this, I want to begin by telling a part of my story that relates to *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*. Then, I will make two major observations about Oyer's book – a volume which is by any measure an outstanding contribution to Merton studies and to peace studies more generally. Finally, I will end by discussing something that happened at Gethsemani in the spring of 1964 that had a lasting effect upon Merton and helped shape the person he was at the time of the peace retreat. This event, not mentioned by Oyer, needs to be added to his otherwise exhaustive account of the peace retreat.

First, my story. In the late 1960s, several years after the Gethsemani peace gathering, I began my studies as a seminarian in the Chicago area. During my first semester, we invited a small cadre of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) to stay temporarily in our dormitory. In the first chapter of his book Oyer identifies the SDS as a part of the "New Left" (6). Our small band of SDS were about to engage in a series of protests and acts of civil disobedience in downtown Chicago. In the meantime, we wanted to provide a "safe harbor" for them away from potential police brutality and FBI surveillance. They planned to demonstrate against a number of social injustices, including the war in Vietnam, which I too actively opposed.

As we prepared to greet the SDS students, a taxi-cab appeared in front of the seminary and a fashionably dressed young woman exited the cab. About two hours later, I saw this same young woman in tattered revolutionary garb as she was about to join her SDS comrades in their political protests. I don't know what motivated her actions, and what her reason for revolution was, but at the time I couldn't help but think she was only playing at revolution. After all, I thought to myself, who is it that takes a taxi-cab to the revolution? But then I had to ask myself about my own reasons for protest. I knew in some vague way that it had to do with my faith commitment to do justice and oppose war. And I now realize that I could not have identified with any certainty the spiritual reasons or the roots for my desire to protest! I just wanted to be a prophetic seminarian.

According to Gordon Oyer, on the first day of the Gethsemani peace retreat in 1964, Merton asked his fellow retreatants: "*quo warranto*?" (100-101). By what right do you as Christians protest? What are your spiritual roots for protest – from whence comes your mandate and authority to challenge any form of injustice? That was my question, if I had known how to articulate it. It was an ongoing question for the retreatants (228-31) – and for me as well. It is something I've asked many times. Now, thanks to Oyer, this question comes before me once again – as I'm sure it does for many others as they read *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*.

My first major observation about Oyer's work builds upon the question Merton raised on the first day of the retreat: what then is the "warrant" for our Christian protest? The answer to this question, from my perspective, was set on its proper path by the presentation of John Howard Yoder on the second day of the retreat. He pressed the question forward until his answer could not be ignored. In the end, the answer was quite simple for Yoder and his Mennonite tradition. The answer was to be found in following Jesus.

This direct and uncomplicated assertion of Yoder is discussed by Oyer in chapter five, under the title of "Day Two – Christ and the Church in Protest." In the morning session, Daniel Berrigan, SJ, the well-known activist Catholic priest, spoke of the church as a church of protest which found its mandate for action in the risen Christ and the new life it brought to the world. He envisioned the dawning of a new age of consciousness in which the cultures of this world would be transformed here and now.

As Oyer notes, in addition to the reality of the living Christ, the work of Teilhard de Chardin also contributed to Berrigan's optimism, albeit a distinct kind of optimism derived from discovering hope out of despair (124-25). But in the afternoon session, John Howard Yoder's talk was not quite so optimistic. In a response to Berrigan, he wondered if the general tendency in Catholic thought to picture culture as being transformed by Christian witness was theologically accurate. As a Mennonite from the peace church traditions of the radical Protestant Reformation, Yoder was more skeptical about any transformation of culture due to a Christian presence. Yoder's emphasis on the incarnate Christ rather than a risen Christ presented a different assessment of the Christian's relationship to culture. For him, most societies contained "the powers and principalities" which the incarnate Christ (in all his humanity) acted and taught against – the cultures of domination in which Jesus lived and we live. Yoder saw the church as being an alternative society within cultures of domination. The alternative society as church was to be nonviolent and peaceful rather than oppressive and given over to violence (151).

Yoder's Jesus was the suffering servant who sought to elevate his disciples to the moral heights of the Sermon on the Mount. This Jesus was a Jesus who told his disciples (then and now) they must take up the cross and follow him. In his careful research of notes taken by Jim Forest, Daniel Berrigan and Yoder at the retreat, Oyer does an excellent job of representing the theological views of those who made presentations. In this regard, he brings us right to the heart of Yoder's religious perspective with a single quotation carefully chosen:

> In the view of "the peace churches," an antiwar protest is not the specialty of a vowed elite with special disciplines [Trappists, other monastics?], nor an emigrant elite in the desert [the desert fathers and mothers?], nor an exceptional ad hoc response to a sense of unique urgency [the Gethsemani peace retreat?] but rather it is what is expected . . . of all people committed to simply "following" after the words and work of Jesus. (153)

Yoder minces no words in his prophetic outlook; he claims it is the responsibility of all Christians, everywhere, and in all circumstances, to follow Jesus in word and deed.

Our author points out that Yoder was able to find some common prophetic ground with some in the monastic tradition in Catholic history. He finds kinship with the fourth-century monks who went into the desert in protest against a church which had accommodated itself to the late Roman world. In their prophetic protest, Yoder is one in the spirit with them. In all truth, he felt more affinity with these monastic desert dwellers than he ever did with the major Protestant reformers and their churches. Yoder noted that these so-called reformers merely substituted their form of Christian state and control for the earlier forms established by the Catholic Church in medieval Christendom.

For the sake of full disclosure, I must confess that Yoder's theology and ecclesiology is close to mine. The BPFNA (Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America), a peace group with which I have identified for decades, is Anabaptist in its disposition and shares in the biblical perspective of most traditional peace churches. However, I would nonetheless submit that it was Yoder's presentation, more than any others, that turned the Gethsemani peace retreat toward an ever-deepening exploration of the spiritual roots of protest.

My second major observation in relation to *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* celebrates the fact that Oyer did not conclude his book at the close of the third and final day of the retreat. Instead, he ends with a final chapter (chapter seven) which is a debriefing of sorts and shares in the memories of various participants. The chapter is entitled "Impressions that Remain" and proves to be one of the best chapters of the book. Since my normal pattern of behavior (unfortunately) is to hustle out of retreats as soon as possible, I appreciated being slowed down by the author. This gave me a chance to reflect on all that happened during these three historic days.

One participant's memories were especially meaningful to me. Robert Cunnane, one of five retreatants still alive, was a thirty-two-year-old activist priest at the time of the retreat. Oyer interviewed Cunnane some forty-eight years after the event. During the course of the interview, Cunnane observed: "What struck me most [at the retreat] was that the people seemed like people you could trust almost immediately just by their attitude and their bearing" (199). Men like the Berrigan brothers, Jim Forest, Tom Cornell, John Howard Yoder, A. J. Muste and Thomas Merton had an openness and strong desire to be fully present for each other. These attitudes removed any self-centered egotism and rigid commitment to ideology that otherwise might have been a problem. Had women of peace been permitted to attend – women like Dorothy Day and Sr. Mary Luke Tobin – the same "attitude and bearing" would have been evident in their spirit. If Martin Luther King, Jr. had attended, as was hoped, he too would have projected the same spiritual qualities. This is how it is with people of peace! They find a unity in their common commitment to live a life characterized by peace and peacemaking. In Merton's language, they were all willing to be "signs of peace" and to be active witnesses for peace even though as Merton indicated the way of peace was "arduous" and often times an "unthanked pioneering."[1]

The Gethsemani retreat had ended in a spiritual bond – something that happens when peacemakers get together. Friendships are formed and individuals are energized for the work ahead of them. Cunnane told Oyer in his interview that at the meeting "I was charging myself – meeting all these people gave me strength . . . My friendship with Jim Forest began here, as well as with Tom Cornell. I read John Yoder's book on the Jubilee Year shortly after" (199). In a section of chapter seven called "Lingering Themes," Oyer concluded, "their work together that week modeled, and in some cases created, a powerful salve for easing the burden of isolated marginality – what Daniel Berrigan would characterize as 'friendship'" (205). This issue of friendship leads directly to my last point.

I think Oyer makes a very important observation when he notes that Merton often relied upon previous readings and experiences in preparation for events like the peace retreat (53-54). With his rigorous monastic schedule and writing deadlines, Merton seldom had much time for anything else. Thank goodness, he was very proficient at drawing upon past events and readings for future events. On his mystical side, Merton was open to learning from past activities, "knowing" that by the grace of God all things somehow fit together. The secret was discovering how this was so. Through his research, Oyer was able to identify how Merton would fit things together. A case in point is Oyer's work on the friendship of Merton and Louis Massignon and how Merton applied what he learned from his friend's writings in creative and redemptive ways to his work on issues of peace and justice (81-94).

One influence upon Merton that Oyer seems to have missed is an event at Gethsemani that happened less than half-a-year before the peace retreat. On May 16, 1964, survivors of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima visited Merton. They were on a worldwide pilgrimage for peace and for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Eight Hibakusha (blast-affected people) met with Merton in the Abbey's guest area just as the peace activists were to do. They then walked with Merton up to his hermitage, again, as the peace retreatants did. Merton wrote about the visit of the Hibakusha in his journal on May 17, Whitsunday: "It was moving and good to have them [the Hibakusha] there. People signed and marked by the cruelty of the age, signs on their flesh because of the *thoughts* in the minds of other men."[2]

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[1] Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 126 [January 13, 1961 letter to Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy]; subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text; for further information see William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) xvii-xxi.

While with his guests in the hermitage, Merton gave a brief talk and read his poem "Paper Cranes" (*DWL* 105). One of the survivors, Hiromu Morshita, told me in an interview at Hiroshima in 2013 that he was profoundly touched by Merton's gracious hospitality and compassion. Morishita said his host showed a genuine interest in the Hibakusha as individual persons and did not treat them as a faceless group or patronize them in any way. He said that it was clear that Merton knew what it meant to suffer; he not only had empathy for their suffering but seemed to enter into it. Morishita said Merton must have been "a Buddha."[3]

The experience of the Hibakusha had a lasting effect upon Merton. Men and women "signed by the cruelty of the age" had been in his hermitage. He had touched the wounds. He was humbled and more committed than ever in his call for the abolition of war and the elimination of nuclear weapons. Given all this, it is hard to image that Merton's first-hand experience of those brutalized by the Bomb was not deep within his consciousness when he convened the Gethsemani peace retreat. Later, on August 3, 1965, in a letter to his friend Hiromu Morishita, Merton talked about the terrible disregard for human life displayed by those in power. "The great problem," Merton wrote to Morishita, "is that those in power do not think in terms of human beings and living persons, but in terms of political abstractions which tend to become more and more unrelated to human reality" (*HGL* 460). The peace retreatants would have immediately recognized this concern.

Oyer in his last chapter reflects upon what might be called the "big-picture view" that came out of the peace retreat. He writes, "Theirs was not merely a quest for particular political ends." It was much more than that. "They were players in the ongoing pilgrimage of humanity to assume its intended place of shalom and harmony within the universe. Their resistance to the seductive pull of technological efficiency and its stifling of human freedom, as well as their calls for peace, would represent an extension of the grand biblical narrative itself" (207).

This is the mega-story yet to be realized. Oyer's work enables us to see this grand vision through the eyes of the Gethsemani peace activists. They believed in God's continuing work of transformation and redemption. The Christian's task is to actively join in this grand God-initiated march toward peace. This is our hope, even if at times it seems to be a hope against hope. But fortunately, the responsibility to fulfill some design for a new world of peace is not in our hands. As those gathered at Gethsemani understood full well, following Jesus in the way of peace does not call us to victory or success; it only calls us to faithfulness. It is in this reality that the spiritual roots of protest are firmly planted.

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[2] Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 104; subsequent references will be cited as "*DWL*" parenthetically in the text.

[3] William Apel, "Hiroshima Notes: The Friendship of Thomas Merton and Hiromu Morishita," *The Merton Journal* 22.1 (Eastertide 2015) 14.

William Apel

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With the increasing number of organized protests throughout the world, it is difficult to imagine a more timely and appropriate focus of Merton research than Gordon Oyer's new book. Thousands of people have united to confront autocratic and ineffective governments in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. They are seeking an end to injustice and changes in social structures in order to give voice to people who have been denied basic freedoms. In the U.S. the Black Lives Matter movement has brought renewed awareness of the ongoing racial divide in this country and patterns of discrimination against people of color. The Occupy movements in this country protest against social and economic inequality here and around the world. These and other demonstrations of resistance are manifestations of the commitment by people across the globe to bring a united voice of opposition to forces that threaten human life and dignity.

Gordon Oyer's work offers an opportunity to reflect upon these events with a focus upon what motivates or inspires people to engage in social protest. Using his expertise as a historian and inspired by his own commitment to social action, Oyer provides the first written account of a retreat for peacemakers hosted by Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in November 1964. His detailed narrative allows the reader to understand how this unusual meeting of fourteen activists came to be and provides an in-depth discussion of their ideas and motives and the conversations that took place as they explored the spiritual roots of resistance to social ills. While the world today is very different than it was in 1964, Oyer's thorough investigation and skillful narration of the ideas that were shared during the three-day retreat allow Merton and the other participants to speak again to people of faith who are seeking to bring spiritual integrity to the protest against violence and injustice.

As a Mennonite steeped in the Christian values of responsible action for peace, Oyer writes as one who is genuinely interested in reflecting upon the place of protest in a person's life of faith. It is this stance as a writer that adds to the quality of the text and makes the work timely and significant. Oyer believes that actions today for peace through "resistance and protest" must be "nourished by deep roots of spiritual integrity" (xvii). Oyer's purpose, as was Merton's, is to bring about a focus of ideas upon the role of faith in