

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.

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 peace-makers 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

social protest.

One of the ways he is effective in meeting this goal is by offering an excellent analysis of the thinking of two French scholars and their influence upon Merton's presentation at the retreat. Ping Ferry, Merton's long-time friend and a retreat participant, had introduced Merton to the writings of Jacques Ellul. Merton's reading of Ellul's *The Technological Society* and his conversations with Ferry on the topic prior to the retreat were instrumental in shaping Merton's reflections upon the effects of technology upon human freedom and the dangers of war in a highly technical age. In addition to Ellul, Merton's reading of Louis Massignon, a Catholic priest in the Melkite tradition and a scholar of Islam, factored significantly in Merton's opening presentation from a "monastic desert viewpoint." Oyer delves deeply into the lives and works of Ellul and Massignon and shows how Merton's "harmonizing" (86) of the thinking of each scholar provided the basis of his opening remarks. Merton concluded that spiritual roots of protest required detachment from both technological excess and privilege in order to stand with the underprivileged (93).

In his remarks, Merton stressed these ideas along with the point that a truly monastic and Christian position in protest is a compassionate identification with those in despair; and the act of standing with those who suffer injustice is the important thing. He stressed the Christian priority of "participation rather than efficacy" (112). In identifying with the oppressed, the rejected, the suffering ones, there is the discovery of God and of our own human inadequacies. The question of human efficacy in matters of social change garnered lively responses from the participants, as did the concern about the dangers of technology as a "cultural force" (104) which Merton and Ferry raised together on the opening day of the retreat.

Oyer helps the reader to begin to consider the applications of Merton's questions and comments to current protest efforts by including an epilogue that summarizes conversations he had with a select group of contemporary peacemakers. In his interviews with them, they responded to some of the same questions that were posed by Merton at the retreat. This part of the book might serve to inspire others to take up the questions and respond in light of their own experiences. In any case, with this additional text, Oyer suggests that the focus of the retreat and the questions posed by Merton are still useful for us today.

While the epilogue was an interesting way of bringing the questions of the retreat to bear on contemporary experiences, it would have been interesting to read how Oyer might imagine the conversation with Merton at Gethsemani if it were happening today. Who would be invited? What questions would be chosen to guide the discussion? Which participants would have been asked

to comment? Would Merton's remarks be any different given contemporary events and changes that have occurred over the fifty years since 1964?

Of particular interest would be what Merton would have to say about technology today since social media have helped to give voice to so many and have helped to make possible the organization of so much of what has been happening worldwide in protests involving thousands of young people. Merton stressed the importance of participation with those who despair and that the act of standing with the oppressed must be viewed as the most significant indicator of one's Christian motivation to bring about change. It appears that technology has made it possible for many people to "stand" alongside the oppressed, not only in a traditional sense of joining in a public protest but in voicing opinions through Twitter, Facebook and the like. The exchange of ideas and the voicing of one's commitment to the LGBT community, for example, are viewed by some as being instrumental in recent changes in federal laws regarding the fundamental right to marry for members of this community.

This raises the question of how access to technology could be seen as a means of broadening the definition of activism. In 1964, the primary mode of anti-war protests or civil rights activism would have been limited to public gatherings in town squares, a march in Washington, or some form of civil disobedience. While many of these events would have been intended as non-violent protests, clearly there was the possibility of violence and risk to those who engaged in these forms of resistance. "Liking" a cause on Facebook or expressing one's opinions in a post does not put one in harm's way, but it would seem that at some level these activities constitute a form of social discourse that could effect change in opinions or raise consciousness about the kinds of injustice that demand a response today. Would the members of a similar meeting of minds today acknowledge that technology has made it possible to expand the notion of what constitutes activism and has made it possible for many more people to protest in some form or another against violence and social injustice?

In addition to rethinking the role of technology, a contemporary meeting of activists might have a different sort of discussion regarding the spiritual roots of protest. Members of various Christian traditions, both Protestant and Catholic, attended the meeting in 1964. Current discussions would hopefully include the necessity for interfaith dialogue as well as the need for finding common ground among various Christian groups. Perhaps the discussion might even deal with the question of whether or not a person grounded in faith can effectively join hands in protest with one whose protest is not rooted in a spiritual commitment. Are there ethical or moral roots of protest that are broader and less easily defined today? Is it possible to find common ground

between people of faith and those who do not claim to have spiritual roots? These questions, and undoubtedly others, could form the basis for lively conversation among activists today.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the retreat, a meeting was held at Bellarmine University in 2014 with three remaining original participants and others currently involved and interested in the ongoing work for peace and justice. As with the 1964 meeting, this event focused upon the spiritual underpinnings of social action by raising again the question that Merton posed to the original group: by what right do we protest? The question requires one to focus upon the importance of the prophetic nature of resistance: that the spiritual roots for Christians, at least, demand that our resistance be loving and non-violent. Engaging in protest with a more socially and religiously diverse world community may bring new challenges and opportunities. In any case, the meeting at Bellarmine indicates that the retreat with Merton in 1964 is a significant reference point for social activists and a springboard for continuing dialogue.

Oyer's book reminds us in a new way of the importance of spiritual roots when protesting social injustice. For those who wish to protest without carefully examining their own motives or goals, the retreat serves as a reminder that the spiritual or moral roots of one's protest should be examined. Would the witness of contemporary activists be more faithful and prophetic if people who envision a better world paused to examine their right to protest and their motives? And, would more people of faith, after examining their spiritual roots, take up the cross of protest and stand with the disenfranchised, the suffering and those in despair? Oyer invites us to participate in the conversations that took place at Gethsemani with Merton. More importantly, his inquiry into this historic event has resulted in a text that encourages similar discussions as a foundation for the current witness to peace and justice.

Deborah Belcastro

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Gordon Oyer gives a "who, what, when and why" of the November 17-19, 1964 retreat that anticipated and in some ways catapulted many of its participants into active resistance to growing United States military engagement in Southeast Asia. Oyer blends what might appear as disconnected, Thomas Merton's withdrawal to his hermitage for greater silence, solitude and stillness, and his resolve to write on social issues despite a ban on publication of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.¹

Meticulously researched and well-written, the book's concluding

1. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).