

Oyer's painstaking scholarship provides a source of historically and intellectually rich perspectives on the whole question of resisting the "powers and principalities" (147-48), especially given the immense and often frustrating challenge of peacemaking. While it may seem a futile and Sisyphean task, it is both urgent and necessary, rooted in our Christian identification with the oppressed and powerless, as the Gethsemani peacemakers agreed. In saying "No" to war and to the arms race, both Merton and the other retreat participants embraced Christ's principle of non-violence as the best way to bring about God's Kingdom. Ultimately, it is in this "No," in Jesus' command to Peter to "Put down your sword," and in his call for all of us to, instead, love one another, including our "enemies," that the spiritual roots of protest can be found.

Patricia Schnapp, RSM

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Aside from enhancing the historical record, perhaps the most one can hope in writing on a lesser-known event fifty years past is that readers might draw implications for their own lives and times. In this case, as Pope Francis recently mentioned to Bolivian activists, our own times badly need "real change, structural change, [because] the system is now intolerable."<sup>1</sup> Since Francis also suggested community activists rather than power elites must drive this change, one hopes in particular that writing a book about fifty-year-old views on "spiritual roots of protest" might reintroduce ideas still relevant for today's peace advocates. The reflections shared in these four reviews, therefore, prove very gratifying.

Considered today, the Gethsemani retreat's "new" approach to preparing for protest – one of gathering across boundaries to prioritize reflection rather than calculated strategizing – might seem outdated, inspiring, or some mix of both. Responses to the book sometimes imply that the retreat's absence of explicit protest strategies disappoints younger and action-focused peace advocates. And despite Thomas Merton's prescient critique of "privilege" and the event's groundbreaking Catholic/Protestant, lay/clerical mix, a gathering of fourteen white men can invite skepticism in a time when inclusive representation is taken for granted.

But in their reviews, these four writers choose to accompany those fourteen in probing deeply to pursue spiritual roots and remain open to gaining insight from the retreat dialogue. In doing so, they demonstrate that many questions asked then still remain worthy of exploration. Wil-

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1. Paul Valley, "The Pope's Priorities in America," *The New York Times* (16 Sept. 2015) ([http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/the-popes-priorities-in-america.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/the-popes-priorities-in-america.html?_r=0) [accessed 16 Sept. 2015]).

liam Apel, Patricia Schnapp and Deborah Belcastro all, for example, note the value of Thomas Merton's opening question that asks "By what right?" we protest. It forces one to step back and scrutinize presumptions often ignored when pragmatic strategizing takes priority. It also offers an example of what Pope Francis named in his congressional address as Merton's ability to "challenge the certitudes"<sup>2</sup> we often hold, regardless of political alignment. Schnapp insightfully connects this question to its use 500 years ago in confronting colonial conquest of the Americas – a dynamic with horrific consequences we still inadequately acknowledge. For Apel, the retreat's objective resonated with his need as a young man to face the "spiritual reasons" for his activism beyond simply wanting to be a "prophetic seminarian." He suggests that John Howard Yoder's answer – "the words and work of Jesus" – set them on the "proper path" to consider "By what right?"

Apel also suggests that Yoder's presentation more than others helped the retreatants strengthen their spiritual roots of protest.<sup>3</sup> This may be the case. Yoder often came up in their later reflections. The later acts of civil disobedience by participants that Schnapp notes, coupled with Yoder's impact, suggest that core points from his comments – mimicking Jesus' nonviolent resistance to his era's religious and political structures and viewing Jesus' followers as an embodied alternative to those structures – offered inspiration, rationale and blessing for acts of civil disobedience to come. Perhaps revisiting Yoder's presentation may help address Schnapp's essential question of whether today "discouragement has allowed us to succumb to the militarism that seems to be part of the American ethos." Apel also highlighted how the participants demonstrated "an openness and strong desire to be fully present for each other" that minimized "self-centered egotism and rigid commitment to ideology."

To me, both of Apel's insights also invite awareness of their shadow sides. Granting significance to Yoder's retreat comments must be counter-balanced with his abusive treatment of female acquaintances that began a decade later and only recently came to full light. It does not invalidate his contribution in 1964, but it cautions against uncritically idolizing persons with wisdom and intellect while benefiting from their insight. It also reminds that even as we remain obedient to God's word in some realms we may fail in others. Similarly, though dynamics at this cloistered retreat fostered mutual respect, some<sup>4</sup> have testified how contention can also

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2. Transcript of papal address to Congress (see pages 16-23 above in this volume).

3. John Dear expresses similar views in *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker: Meditations on Merton, Peacemaking, and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015) 73-74.

4. See for example Jim Forest, "Some Thoughts on Resistance," *WIN* (January 15,

emerge among peace advocates in the heat of their engagement. Apel's observation about the "spiritual bond" that was formed and strengthened at Gethsemani suggests great value in periodic retreats with others of similar commitments. The practice can help repair strained friendships and recover support sometimes lost in the intense maze of tactics and strategies required of advocates for change. Recognizing these shadows reinforces the need to cultivate humility and self-awareness when advocating for peace and justice.

To cultivate humility and self-awareness, Merton famously relied on the discipline of contemplation. Though he prepared for the retreat contemplatively and provided his guests a highly contemplative environment, the surviving record suggests that contemplation was not central to their discussions that week. As Merton later told his novices, at such a gathering, "you don't fool around with a half-hour conference and then go meditate. You really work" (187). But in his review, Paul Dekar helpfully uses his reading of the retreat as a springboard to draw on both Merton's larger body of writing and comments of others to reflect on the discipline of contemplation as it relates to action. His quotations of non-Christians illustrates the potential to draw from beyond Christianity in pursuit of spiritual roots – as Merton himself often did (including use of Louis Massignon's essays on Islam for the retreat).

Dekar's reliance on a broad faith spectrum also suggests that responding to Deborah Belcastro's inquiry about "who would be invited" if the retreat occurred today surely requires naming non-Christian guests. We would also invite representatives of movements such as climate change advocacy, Occupy, Idle No More, Black Lives Matter and others besides core peace advocates. Climate change now rivals nuclear conflict as perhaps the greatest existential threat humanity has encountered. But as Dekar's citation of Rebecca Tarbotton reminds – and Merton would heartily endorse – in confronting that enormous challenge we cannot single-mindedly sacrifice the integrity of unique persons and species and ecosystems for the sake of "humanity." Our work requires "transforming everything about the way we live on the planet," including relationships to each other.

An expansive, ecologically-driven urgency to "transform everything" may also help inform Belcastro's search for "ethical and moral roots of protest that are broader and less easily defined today," roots that might nourish all regardless of faith (or non-faith) convictions. Merton's response to retreat organizer John Heidbrink's concerns about collaborating with the secular peace movement may apply here: "[We need to] get with

them and stop emphasizing we are different. . . . We are all concerned with man living and surviving . . . The word of God reaches us somewhere in the middle of all that” (41).

This touches on Schnapp’s question about “the state of the Peace Movement today,” an era when post-9/11 fear continues to stifle voices that oppose U.S. military investment. In 1964 A. J. Muste lamented how civil rights activism siphoned energy from efforts to curtail nuclear arms and promote international peace – we might now hear similar concerns regarding environmental activism. Perhaps, however, today’s dynamics reflect a broadened paradigm that seeks peace not just among nations but also with our planet, in all its complex interdependence, a movement of interconnected limbs that envisions shalom as harmony with all of creation, not just among technologically empowered humans.

One of our greatest challenges to “transforming everything” in pursuit of shalom, in fact, may center upon how we address our technological empowerment, a force deeply and reflexively interwoven into our lives. Schnapp, Dekar and Belcastro all note technology’s prominent role in retreat conversations. Rather than specific technologies, the 1964 discussion centered on the uncritical mindset with which modern Western society has integrated assumptions about technology into its essence. This is Jacque Ellul’s “technique,” or what Michael Higgins has named “technologism”<sup>5</sup> – an ideological social force with impersonal power over individual lives that takes on a life of its own. Dekar observes technology’s power to alienate and distract, to invite deference toward effectiveness for its own sake rather than meet genuine human need. Belcastro, for her part, poses crucial questions that ask whether fifty years of technological evolution requires us to modify the retreatants’ skepticism. Rather than focus on the more abstract concern of “technologism,” she asks whether specific technological applications of social media offer helpful tools to exchange ideas and to include and “stand with” the marginalized across vast distances. Might such virtual discourse “expand the notion of what constitutes activism” beyond traditional flesh-and-blood engagement, which “put[s] your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels [of an impersonal bureaucratic machine] to make it stop”?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps, to frame her questions in language from the retreat, might social media provide an example of Yoder’s suggestion to “make use of fragments of the system

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5. Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998) 162.

6. Spoken by Mario Savio in Berkeley’s 1964 Free Speech Movement, just two weeks after the Gethsemani retreat (see <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariosaviosproulhallsitin.htm>).

to reconquer portions of the turf and use it for good” (154)?

In response to Belcastro, without doubt, social media has enhanced the effectiveness of locating allies and mobilizing for mass dissent. It has also vastly expanded our potential to connect with and advocate on behalf of the marginalized in many corners of the Earth. Social media offers a tool for nearly instantaneous opinion-polling that can influence legislation and policy decisions. Today’s equivalent of 1960s draft board raids to destroy records seems impossible without technological sophistication – the impact of Wikileaks disclosures continues to reverberate. Therefore, abstaining entirely from social media or current technology as a whole seems futile.

One suspects, however, that aspects of the 1964 critique continue to speak regarding use of today’s social media. Yoder followed his comment on using system “fragments” by suggesting that “the way to do so is to tame it, make it modest, deny its idolatrous pretensions, refuse to obey it” (154). So, temptations to idolize it as our primary source of hope to “transform everything” may lead it to blind more than enlighten. To the degree that social media replaces rather than supplements direct engagement, it surely harms. Unequal access to social media may carry the ambiguities of privilege. Alternatively, it can help neutralize advocates’ messages through co-optation and surveillance. It can exacerbate the echo chamber Merton knew as the “void” of “mass culture.” Virtual engagement cannot substitute for a direct encounter with our “ground of being”; its capacity to connect with (rather than alienate from) the material realities of life in our ecosystem seems limited.

Further, in preparatory notes, Merton doubted whether “a technology of peace” rather than of war could even exist at this point. But he suggested that nonetheless, “We should still ask for it” – for an “alternative *technical complex*” devoted to peace (239). If we concede that technological solutions may be vital to transforming everything, perhaps envisioning Merton’s alternative technical complex may be part of that task, beyond merely adopting fragments of what society currently offers us.

These reviews contain the seeds of many other threads for reflection and discussion. Schnapp’s question of seemingly “fruitless” protest efforts might be further explored, for example. Apel’s treatment of Merton’s visit from eight Hibakusha – Hiroshima survivors – elevates our awareness of another important point along Merton’s path of peace, one that illustrates the value of engaging with the marginalized as a key spiritual root of protest. It undoubtedly played a role in sensitizing Merton to the personal, human impact felt from such impersonal, monolithic acts of destruction. Merton’s retreat notes and recorded comments failed to explicitly refer-

ence this experience, but Apel is surely right that it was seared into his consciousness as the retreat convened.

As a writer, what an incredible gift this symposium has been! I can conjure no adequate words to express my gratitude to *The Merton Annual* editors and these four reviewers for investing their time, intellect and ink in this way, helping further extend the 1964 Gethsemani Abbey conversation into the twenty-first century. I encourage readers to continue that conversation with others around them, and I welcome them to continue it with me.

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