

Merton's call for living in obedience to God, Source and Giver of life, infused a spiritual dimension to the civil rights, ecumenical and peace movements of his day, as well as ours. We face challenges perhaps more threatening than those faced by the fourteen retreatants. Rebecca Tarbotton, Executive Director of the Rainforest Action Network (1973-2012) observes, "We need to remember that the work of our time is bigger than climate change. We need to be setting our sights higher and deeper. What we're really talking about, if we're honest with ourselves, is transforming everything about the way we live on this planet."¹²

At the start of the retreat, Merton called for "*metanoia*, total personal renewal" (245) rooted in a deep spirituality. This endures as a source of hope and stimulus for constructive, nonviolent responses to the challenges of today. With Merton and his friends on retreat, we embrace that "Creative Force who bids reverence for mysteries that sustain all of life" (231).

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Gordon Oyer didn't intend to write a book. His reading of fellow Mennonite John Howard Yoder's peace literature, however, led him to the peace writings of Thomas Merton and a Merton biography. He became intrigued by the reference to a gathering of fourteen peace activists held in 1964 at Gethsemani at which Yoder himself was a participant. Curiosity led Oyer to start intensive research, which eventually culminated in his meticulously documented book *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*. Using the resources of journals, notes from participants, the archives of several universities (most importantly the Bellarmine Thomas Merton Center), and personal interviews, Oyer has compiled a remarkably detailed account of this significant retreat, which proved to be an energizing and enduring stimulus for the ecumenical group as well as a fruitful exchange of reflections on social protest.

The gathering itself had been in the works for almost two years, spearheaded, interestingly, by laymen John Heidbrink of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Paul Peachey of the Church Peace Mission. Presenters at this two-and-a-half-day conference were: Merton himself, who gave the first talk; Dan Berrigan, Merton's friend and confidant; A. J. Muste, the eldest guest and the one with the most prominent pacifist credentials; and

creation of Magnolia Grove Monastery in Batesville, Mississippi, a community center for mindfulness in the tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (http://magnoliagrovermonastery.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=71&Itemid=56).

12. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014) vii.

Mennonite John Howard Yoder. Other participants included John Oliver Nelson, Phil Berrigan, Jim Forest, Tony Walsh, Robert Cunnane, Charlie Ring, Tom Cornell, Elbert Jean, Wilbur (Ping) Ferry and John Peter Grady.

The political backdrop of the time (1964) included the Civil Rights Movement, the nuclear threat and the saber-rattling in Washington as U.S. military support for South Vietnam increased. Among other peace concerns, what this diverse group at Gethsemani had in common was a desire to explore the potential for nonviolent social change. Shortly before the gathering, in fact, Merton had asked Dan Berrigan to prepare a discussion on the “spiritual roots of protest,” a phrase the host used as the title of his outline for the event.

Merton, recently acquainted with Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Society*, drew heavily on it in the retreat’s opening talk, asserting that “Technology makes war almost inevitable” since it requires that “what is possible becomes necessary” (239). There is a branch of scientism, Merton suggests in this comment, that recognizes no moral restraints on technology, thinking whatever is possible should be done. Stressing Ellul’s concerns about the dark side of technology, especially in the nuclear age, Merton expanded on what became a much discussed topic among the fourteen, noting that Louis Massignon had named contemporary technology an “idolatry” seeking to replace God.

Another topic Merton explored was what he called “the monastic protest” (244). The early desert fathers, he claimed, became hermits as a way of saying NO to the decadent society of their times. Applying this notion to himself, Merton said he wanted his own life as a monk similarly to be, as he had written in the 1963 preface to the Japanese edition of *Seven Story Mountain*, “a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race.”¹ Because of the imposition of Western technology and the colonial penetration of so much of the world, he believed protest had to be rooted in identification with the oppressed and subjugated. This identification would require embracing suffering and a refusal of privilege. A detachment from privilege, he said, allows one to share in the “suffering and struggle of others” (81).

Drawing on ideas of Massignon and Charles de Foucauld, Merton added that one must also reverence the “presence of the word,” be attuned to “the sacred in others” (84), and thus avoid a presumptuous sort of spiritual arrogance that could accompany protesting an injustice. Raising the question “by what right” protesters assume to judge and oppose, Merton

1. Thomas Merton, “*Honorable Reader*”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 65.

drew on the medieval legal term “*quo warranto*” (100), used centuries earlier by Dominican Antonio de Montesinos in protesting the brutal subjugation by Spain of the indigenous people of Hispaniola.² This question was frequently raised in the course of the retreat. As Oyer makes clear in his book, Merton was concerned that the *roots* – clearly an important word and concept for him – of “religious dissent” be deeply planted in God’s Word, and not just in one’s personal convictions.

Other ideas flowed from the participants. Although only fragmentary notes from Dan Berrigan’s contributions to the retreat were preserved, a few of them offer some of his thought. He noted that our privileged position has blinded us to the fact that “the lost save the saved,” that the condition of privilege means “we need help the most” (119). These paradoxical statements, typical of Berrigan, suggest the parable of Dives and Lazarus. More than that, however, they remind us of Matthew 25, in which Jesus tells us that our salvation as the “sheep” who are “blessed by the Father” resides precisely in our treatment of “the lost,” or the poor and needy.

Not surprisingly, Berrigan decried the divorce of worship from social action, especially in the Catholic Church, with its wealth of social teaching. He mentioned the example of Franz Jägerstätter, the Austrian Catholic executed by the Nazis for refusing to fight in World War II, as an example of the “Church of Protest” (138), and expressed his hope that the church would become more relevant, more attuned to what he called “the social implications of a true liturgy” (143), one which importantly includes the social gospel. Instead of these “social implications,” Berrigan believed the Catholic Church, not yet greatly affected by the still-ongoing Vatican Council, was too focused on Christ as human and on legal observance. This last judgment may hint at the style of his later protests, for just three years after the meeting, both Berrigans performed bold acts of civil disobedience leading to numerous arrests.

John Howard Yoder, coming from a peace church, saw the warrant for protest as the incarnate Christ himself. For him, war resistance was and should be an expectation for Christians, because “to do otherwise would be wrong” (153). Yoder also claimed we must love the person we protest against, let him make us suffer. Because we are on his side, we get in his way. This provocative statement suggests the image of a peacemaker *blocking* an aggressor from striking and harming someone. This intervention prevents the assailant from doing something wrong and protects him from its consequences, as well as protecting the potential victim from harm, even at the cost of personal suffering for the one who

2. Andrew Wilson, “With What Right and What Justice? The Cry in the New World Was First a Decree of Excommunication,” *First Things* 218 (Dec. 2011) 47-52.

“got in his [the aggressor’s] way” (158). Protest, according to Yoder, means affirmation; we stand against because of what we stand for – “the enemy, the poor, the truth” (158).

Yoder also spoke against equating results with “success” in the efforts at peacemaking. In doing so, he anticipated Merton’s own sentiments, as seen in his 1966 “Letter to a Young Activist.” In it, Merton firmly counsels the activist (Jim Forest): “Do not depend on the hope of results.”³ He elaborates on this warning, which evokes the Hindu maxim “Renounce the fruits of action.”⁴ Toward the end of Merton’s oft-quoted letter, after admitting that he saw in the work of peacemaking nothing but “disappointment, frustration, and confusion,” he added, “The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. . . . But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand” (*HGL* 297).

Despite A. J. Muste’s expressed need to participate in “non-violent direct action,” the book doesn’t mention any discussion of various strategies of such action. Indeed, Oyer believes Merton strongly guided away from that, focusing instead on a deepening of spiritual roots. Given that social protest frequently entails acts of civil disobedience, and that the Berrigans and others were to push the boundaries of this concept a few years later, such a discussion would have been provocative. It’s interesting to note that Merton himself originally distanced himself from the more dramatic acts of civil disobedience which put the Berrigans and others in the headlines (and in jail), believing they were too near acts of violence. Later, however, he praised their integrity and perseverance in opposing an unjust war.⁵ One wonders if he had changed his mind about what was permitted when one protested violence and war.

Muste, the group’s elder and a decades-long activist, expressed hopes for reviving the peace movement in the States, which had flagged after the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty passed in 1963. He challenged our nuclear assumption that if we in the U.S. armed ourselves with nuclear weaponry, “they won’t.” History has proved him correct, as nuclear proliferation is an ongoing concern and threat.

The retreat over, its participants returned “into the world,” where their

3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 294; subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text.

4. Vinoba Bhave, “Talks on the Gita: 18 Conclusion: Renunciation of the Fruit of Actions Leads to the Grace of the Lord,” Gandhian Institutions, n.d. [web: accessed 20 Sept. 2015].

5. See Patricia Schnapp, “Dan Berrigan’s Lyrical Memoir,” *The Merton Journal* 20.2 (Advent 2013) 56.

involvements in a variety of peacemaking and war-resisting activities spawned several tangible results. One was a “Declaration of Conscience,” crafted in part by Muste, who also recruited many prominent leaders – including both Berrigans – to sign it. The Declaration unequivocally opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Another peacemaking event was a major convocation organized by several of Merton’s guests as a way to share some of the key ideas from the Gethsemani retreat. It was titled “Peace on Earth: Moral and Technological Implications: A Consultation of Leaders of Religion.” An ecumenical gathering, it illustrated how, as Muste later wrote, the peacemaking retreat had strengthened the interfaith bond of peace workers. Additionally, not long after the retreat, Jim Forest and Tom Cornell created the Catholic Peace Fellowship, which supported resistance to the Vietnam War.

The impact of the peacemaking retreat at Gethsemani, Oyer notes, took various forms for different participants. Some of them chose radical and creative ways to confront the newly established draft, a result of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution approving greater U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Dan Berrigan founded Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. Two years later, he went to jail for his role in a march on the Pentagon. Phil Berrigan and others poured blood on records in a Baltimore draft board office and, a year later, both Berrigans, along with others, removed draft records in Catonsville, Maryland, and burned them with homemade napalm. Their continued protests landed both of them in jail or prison on many occasions. Others from the Gethsemani retreat participated in draft board action as well, including Bob Cunnane and Jim Forest. Both of them later went to prison for their participation in the “Milwaukee 14,” during which over 10,000 draft records were burned. While the Vietnam War is long over, other peacemaking efforts initiated by Gethsemani retreatants are still visible. Phil Berrigan left the priesthood, married co-activist Elizabeth McAlister, and established Jonah House. Its “Plowshares Movement” continues to employ direct actions to challenge the nuclear threat. Dan Berrigan’s activism in war resistance has become legendary.

Still, several questions remain for us. What is the state of the peace movement today? What has been the impact of the peace churches and such groups as Pax Christi? How do we handle it when our peacemaking efforts seem to be fruitless? What do we make of the fact that Merton consistently insisted that he was not a pacifist?⁶ Has discouragement allowed us to succumb to the militarism that seems to be part of the American ethos?

6. James Bacik, “Thomas Merton: Prophetic Peacemaker” (lecture, Lourdes University, Sylvania, OH, September 21, 2015).

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.

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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."¹ 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-

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 [accessed 16 Sept. 2015]).