

By What Right Do We Protest?

Review of

Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest:

Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat

By Gordon Oyer

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Reviewed by **Rose Marie Berger**

On July 10, 2014, a 58-year-old grandmother of three from Ithaca, NY was sentenced to one year in the Onondaga County jail for breaking a restraining order. She was not violent. She had not physically threatened the man who took out the order against her. Nonetheless, when she crossed a particular strip of public property, the law saw her as a danger and sent her to jail. The woman is Mary Ann Grady Flores, a Catholic committed to nonviolent protest as a practice of her faith. The “endangered” man is Col. Earl Evans, mission commander of the 174th Attack Wing of the New York Air National Guard at Hancock Air Base, near Syracuse, New York. He commands a fleet of pilot-less Reaper drones that are “hovering” over Afghanistan. The Reaper drones in most common use by the CIA and US military “carry 500-pound GPS-guided bombs or Hellfire missiles. The bombs can destroy whole neighborhoods, while Hellfire missiles are designed to explode *after* hitting their target, spewing shrapnel and ‘incendiary pellets’ to ‘ensure target destruction,’” according to *Sojourners* magazine. In 2013, civilian deaths have tripled as a result of US- or UK-led drone strikes. Col. Evans took out a restraining order on Grady Flores because he wants to keep protesters “out of his driveway.”

Grady Flores is the daughter of Catholic peace activist John Peter Grady, one of the Camden 28, a group of mostly-Catholic protesters who destroyed military draft files in Camden, NJ in 1971. These actions and many more by John Grady – and by his daughters and grandchildren – were inspired in part by a retreat Grady attended in November 1964 hosted by Fr. Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, KY, exploring “the spiritual roots of protest” (243).

With the release of his first book, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*, Gordon Oyer makes a new – and timely – contribution to Merton studies and to the broader historical stream of the Christian peace movements in the United States. Oyer reconstructs the background, execution and outcomes of this historic 1964 retreat that brought together 14 members of Catholic (lay and clergy), mainline Protestant, historic peace church and Unitarian traditions to explore ecumenical collaborations for peace work. Or as Merton put it in his notes, “We are hoping to reflect together during these days on our common grounds for *religious dissent*” (243).

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Oyer, an Anabaptist Mennonite, has a degree in history from the University of Illinois. A past editor of *Illinois Mennonite Heritage Quarterly* who has also served on several regional Mennonite historical committees, he came to his subject of Thomas Merton through his study of the well-known Mennonite ethicist John Howard Yoder, one of the 1964 retreat participants. Oyer writes, “the passing reference in a Merton biography to Yoder’s presence with Merton at a gathering of peace activists piqued my curiosity” (xv). Oyer provides readers a fine, carefully researched, tightly written historical account of an encounter that might otherwise be lost, except that it looms “large in the imaginations of many religious peace advocates” (186) even to this day.

But the story starts earlier. The US peace movement had survived McCarthy’s “anticommunist obsession” (3) and was fully engaged in responding to the increasing size of the nuclear arsenal accompanied by above-ground atomic testing. Much of the “ban the bomb” movement was settling on a goal perceived as more achievable – namely eliminating atomic testing. By 1960, writes Oyer, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy was mobilizing events with tens of thousands of people (3). However, on August 5, 1963, the signing of a Partial Test Ban Treaty began to “deflate and dissolve” the peace movement (5); and the Gulf of Tonkin incident (August 2, 1964) in Vietnam was still a year away.

Many religious activists were deeply involved in the civil rights movement and had been trained in the practice of nonviolence, which fitted with their religious values. But there was confusion in the protest movement about what should be the next steps, the new direction, how to move beyond war. “The movement’s growing secular priority of fostering a new and greater consciousness sounded a familiar and recognizable chord for those who responded to a religious calling,” writes Oyer, “but it did not embody the same motives or ultimate vision” (8). Identifying religious motives and authority for protest arose out of this context and from conversations between Merton and Presbyterian minister John Heidbrink of the religious pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation and Mennonite pastor and conscientious objector Paul Peachey, in particular.

Unfortunately, it was Heidbrink and Peachey who in the end could not attend the Gethsemani retreat due to personal and work-related emergencies. But, with Merton, theirs was the creative genius and network of relationships that brought together the 13 others: Wilber “Ping” Ferry, Elbert Jean, John Howard Yoder, Charles Ring, Jim Forest, A. J. Muste, John Oliver Nelson, Tom Cornell, Anthony Walsh, Daniel Berrigan, Philip Berrigan, Robert Cunnane and John Peter Grady. Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King would likely have attended (234) except that King was named recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize the month before. The retreatants were all men since Gethsemani did not have accommodations for women at that time. Later, however, Merton proposed a similar retreat for women peace movement leaders to include Dorothy Day, Joan Baez, Rosemary Radford Reuther and others but he died before this retreat came to fruition (see 234).

Oyer provides Merton scholars and aficionados thorough primary-source material for establishing what Merton was reading and how he was thinking in preparation for the three-day gathering. Merton shaped the opening day around this question: “*By what right* do we assume that we are called to protest, to judge, and to witness?” (98). Merton phrased it using a Medieval legal term – *quo warranto* – “by what warrant?” Oyer writes, “It referred to a mandate issued by the crown that required a person to demonstrate they held the authority to exercise a particular right or exert some power that they claimed to have” (100). This was Merton’s Zen koan that he laid before the retreatants.

The discussion prompted by Merton's question ranged through the biblical prophetic tradition, the role of the Holy Spirit, marginalization as a result of protest both from the society and the Church, Louis Massignon's concept of "mystical substitution" on behalf of another (120), "lifestyles" of protest such as monastic life, the role of protest in modern media, and – significantly drawing on Jacques Ellul – the deification of technology and technique in modern society. Oyer describes Merton's conclusion from that first day as the conviction that the real roots of protest "are planted in our identification with the underprivileged as an epiphany and intercessory for us, and with refusal of our own privilege and denunciation of the arrogance expressed by those who retain theirs" (122). The "warrant to protest," concluded the retreatants, was something that was not only a democratic right, but inherent in the dignity of the human being as a defense against inhuman forces and in alignment with the "Creator's intent for creation" (128).

The second day was shaped by Daniel Berrigan's exploration of the Risen Christ and new understandings of the role of Church as protest or, as theologian-activist Ched Myers put it later on, "teaching and learning church history as movement history all the way back to deep roots in the prophets" (225). John Howard Yoder followed with an inquiry as to the Incarnate Christ having dominion over the powers and principalities of the world, drawing heavily on Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof's work, particularly *Christ and the Powers* (147), and on the incarnate Christ, rather than the resurrected Christ, as our model for ethical transformation of worldly structures.

A. J. Muste, the venerable leader of the Christian peace movement at the time, concluded the retreat on the third day by summarizing the most vital points he'd heard and warning those present that the only failure they could make was to be lukewarm in their efforts in protest against war and dedication to peace. Oyer paraphrases Muste: "The current 'highly developed technological situation' – in which those who execute such destruction never see a victim they obliterate – would appear to block out the 'sensitivity and humanity' that these specialists display in other areas of life. This can hardly be accepted as psychologically 'normal'" (171). Muste quoted poet Muriel Rukeyser: "Now again we see that all is unbegun. The only danger is in not going far enough" (174).

Oyer's concluding section offers another tremendous contribution to Christians who are part of movement history. He invites four contemporary Christian activists to reflect on the same questions that animated those at the 1964 retreat, each activist representing some unique strand of the tradition. Ched Myers is a theologian-activist who now associates with the Mennonite tradition and was mentored by radical Catholic activists such as Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister (210). Jake Olzen is a farmer-activist in the tradition of the Catholic Worker movement (211). Elizabeth McAlister, a Roman Catholic former sister, is a founder of the Jonah House community in Baltimore and helped launch the Plowshares movement of direct action against nuclear weapons and other war machines. In 1973, she married retreat participant Philip Berrigan (211). George Packard is a retired Episcopal bishop who became deeply immersed in the Occupy movement happening in Zuccotti Park outside his church in Manhattan (211). Each one brings a fresh perspective on the 1964 conversation and deepens it with their life witnesses.

The witness of Mary Ann Grady Flores would also be appropriate here. From "all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops" (Exodus 14:9), through Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrators and B61 gravity bombs in the US nuclear weapons arsenal, up to today's US and UK drone warfare and surveillance (like those based at Hancock Air Base in New York), technique, as Ellul uses the

word, dominates unchecked like a cancer. Merton identified our current “stage of historical evolution in which everything that is not technique is being eliminated” (63). In such a world, Merton writes, “not even the moral conversion of the technician could make a difference. At best they would cease to be a good technician” (63). In this context, drone commander Col. Earl Evans is indeed an “endangered” man and Grady Flores his only hope of salvation.