

Witnessing to Christ's Peace

Review of

Thomas Merton, Peacemaker:

Meditations on Merton, Peacemaking, and the Spiritual Life

By John Dear

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Reviewed by **Maria Surat**

Thirty years of studying Thomas Merton's writings on spirituality and nonviolence led internationally recognized peace activist John Dear to write his recent book, *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker: Meditations on Merton, Peacemaking, and the Spiritual Life*. With an introduction, 27 brief chapters, and conclusion, Dear offers "simple, free-flowing commentaries and gentle meditations on key Merton teachings and moments intended to encourage all those passionate about peace and justice, the contemplative life, the spiritual life, and the long-haul struggle of active nonviolence" (xiv). Lengthy quotations from Merton's writings – including books, journals, essays, poetry and correspondence – are central points of almost every chapter. This offers the reader an opportunity to engage the breadth of Merton's thought on war, peace and Christian nonviolence. Dear also includes personal reflections from his own journey of practicing Gospel nonviolence and shares key lessons he has learned from Merton's writings, life and witness. He argues that one of Merton's core insights is that to be a contemplative is to be a peacemaker and to be a peacemaker is to be a contemplative. Dear asks the reader to consider as we read this book how Merton's life and witness encourage us to discover our own paths of contemplative nonviolence.

A reader might wonder how a cloistered, contemplative monk could have anything relevant to say to a world wrought by violence. Dear engages this question with vigor. While some deride monastics as fleeing from the "real world," Dear argues that Merton's life as a monk was integral to his struggle for peace and justice in human society. "For Merton," writes Dear, "contemplative prayer has political consequences" (6). That is, a person's intimate relationship with the God of love has a direct influence on his or her relationships, whether in the community of family, monastery, church, nation or world. Merton teaches us that prayer and meditation are not "selfish pursuits that make us superior to others" but, rather, lead us to an "inner disarmament" by which we renounce "all violence and involvement with the culture of war" (6). In so doing, we tune our hearts to the cries of our world and learn to respond to these cries with God's boundless love and compassion. For Merton, this meant that as he grew in deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, he recognized and responded to the call to be a prophetic voice for disarmament and peace in a world of cataclysmic violence.

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Dear's writing is both biographical and pastoral in tone. He invites the reader to consider the places, relationships and spiritual practices that shaped Merton's life of contemplative nonviolence and suggests ways in which the reader might deepen her own life of contemplative action. For example, in chapter 12 Dear describes a "day in the life" at Merton's hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Merton writes regarding his life in the hermitage, "I can imagine no other joy on earth than to have such a place to be at peace in" (55). And yet, while seeking to breathe deeply the Spirit's peace in this place, Merton periodically witnessed a large, dark plane carrying nuclear weapons "hardly one hundred and fifty feet above the treetops" (65). For Dear, this image places Merton's contemplative nonviolence in context. His life was "cut off from the culture of violence" and yet stands in contradiction to the forces of violence in the world (66). Merton regarded his monastic vocation as uttering an unqualified "no" to violence and despair and an unbounded "yes" to the Risen Christ's gifts of peace and hope.

Another aspect of Merton's contradictory life was the community in which he formed his conscience on issues of war, peace, spirituality and Gospel nonviolence. Thus, the author introduces the reader to Merton's friends, companions and mentors in the life of contemplative nonviolence, offering the reader insight into the communal dimension of peacemaking. Dear includes selections from Merton's correspondence with others similarly struggling for a more peaceful and just society: Buddhist peacemaker Thich Nhat Hanh, Catholic priest and activist Daniel Berrigan, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement Dorothy Day, and eremitic poet Robert Lax, to name a few.

Dear's reflections on the contexts and relationships that shaped Merton's contemplative nonviolence allow the reader to engage Merton's writings on war and peace with deeper understanding. Merton's writings on Gospel nonviolence are shaped by his daily practices: Scriptural meditation, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Eucharist, walks in the woods, dialogue, friendship, solitude and silence. These quotidian habits form Merton as he preaches the Christian call to nonviolence in essays such as "Blessed Are the Meek" and reveals humanity's widespread blindness to systemic violence in poems such as "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces" and *Original Child Bomb*.

One of the strongest points in this book is Dear's affirmation with Merton that the life of contemplative nonviolence is both incarnational and relational. In his brief conclusion, Dear sums up what he takes to be the heart of Merton's life and witness as a peacemaker, namely, that those who follow the way of Jesus Christ are people of the resurrection, called to "witness to the peace of the risen Christ" (173). The author encourages readers to fix their gaze on the one in whose name we go into the world as peacemakers, Jesus Christ. Intimate relationship with Jesus in prayer opens us to the grace, mercy and redeeming love of God such that our lives become, in Merton's words, "a continuous and progressive conversion and transformation in which we also, in some measure, help to transform others and allow ourselves to be transformed by and with others – in Christ" (43). To work for peace in our hearts, communities and world is to invite Christ's healing wherever relationships have been broken.

Given this emphasis on personal relationships in Merton's peace writings, Dear's book leaves me wondering how practices of lament, truth-telling, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation – all relational or communal practices – shape a life of contemplative nonviolence. While Dear does write in this book of transformation, inner disarmament and universal oneness as distinctive features of a peacemaker's life, he does not explore practices such as truth-telling, penance and forgiveness to any great extent. These reconciliatory practices offer space in which we honestly name and lament our complicity in sin and open our own broken relationships – with God, self, neighbor or creation – to

Christ's healing mercy. How might practices such as these deepen what Dear refers to as the contemplative peacemaker's journey of "inner disarmament" and oneness with all humanity and creation?

Overall, John Dear's reflections on Merton's witness to contemplative peacemaking are both compelling and challenging as the reader embarks on his or her own path of creative nonviolence. As a survey of Merton's writings on war and peace partnered with Dear's reflections on his own journey as a Christian peacemaker, this book should be read in the manner it was written: in contemplative reflection towards transformation in Jesus Christ, our peace.