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558. Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat, by Gordon Oyer (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014. Pp. xxii, 275. Paper. $33.00. ISBN 978-1-62032-377-9).

"The Spiritual Roots of Protest," a retreat hosted by Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in November, 1964, has taken on an almost legendary aura in the lore of the religious peace movement. This was due in large part to the distinguished contributions of many of its fourteen participants to the anti-war writings and actions of the 1960s and beyond. They included the Berrigan brothers; the young Catholic Worker and Catholic Peace Fellowship activists Tom Cornell and Jim Forest; the "elder statesman" of the peace movement A. J. Muste; John Howard Yoder, Mennonite theologian and author-to-be of the seminal work *The Politics of Jesus*; and of course the host himself, arguably the most prominent Catholic voice for peace of that era.

But aside from summary overviews in a number of Merton biographies and impressionistic reminiscences by a few of the participants, Merton's brief handout outlining the retreat's themes and schedule, included as an appendix to *The Non-Violent Alternative*, Gordon Zahn's collection of Merton's writings on war and peace, has been the only published material relating to the retreat—until now. From extensive interviews with participants and meticulous gathering of archival materials from numerous widely scattered repositories, as

well as a comprehensive mining of published sources, Gordon Oyer, a trained historian and former editor of a Mennonite historical journal, has produced a thorough, unexpectedly rich, superbly organized re-creation of the context and content of this historic ecumenical gathering almost a half century after it took place.

The opening chapter sets the event in its particular historical moment, just before the rise of widespread resistance to the Vietnam War but after the ratification of the Partial Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union had reduced a sense of urgency among many peace activists, when attention had largely shifted to the struggle for civil rights. The author then provides brief biographical sketches of each of those present at the retreat (a couple of whom have seldom if ever been mentioned previously), most representing what historians Charles Chatfield and Charles DeBenedetti have called the "radical pacifist" wing of the peace movement, though Merton's friend W. H. Ferry would be identified more with the "liberal internationalist" approach championed by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, of which he was vice president.

The following chapter charts the process that eventually led up to the retreat, focusing on the roles of Paul Peachey, the Mennonite Executive Secretary of the Church Peace Mission, and John Heidbrink, Director of Interchurch Activities for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Heidbrink was especially interested in developing a Catholic branch of this most influential of religious pacifist organizations (soon to be formed – by retreat participants – as the Catholic Peace Fellowship). Both had visited Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the early 1960s and had suggested and encouraged the idea of some sort of gathering of influential Catholic and Protestant figures at the monastery to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of peacemaking. Heidbrink in particular was deeply involved in the planning process, though in the event neither of the two was able to attend. The original six or seven participants eventually expanded to fourteen, five Protestants of quite disparate backgrounds and nine Catholics, five priests and four laymen (it being impossible at the time to include women in the cloistered environs of the abbey).

Chapter 3, drawing extensively on Merton's reading notebooks and other archival materials, provides a detailed consideration of his own preparations for the gathering, despite his stated intention "to have no plans and go along quite informally" (52), as he remarked in a letter to Daniel Berrigan shortly before the retreat. Oyer provides an extensive consideration of Merton's reading, prompted by his friend W. H. Ferry, of Jacques Ellul's critique of technology. But the real

revelation of this chapter is Oyer's discovery of the profound influence that Merton's friend Louis Massignon, the French Catholic scholar of Islam, had on his developing spirituality of nonviolence. He had turned to nonviolent resistance in opposition to French repression during the Algerian War for independence in the years immediately before his death in 1962. Oyer shows in convincing detail how Merton drew extensively on four essays of Massignon to formulate his own position of "monastic protest," combining nonviolent witness, identification with the excluded and a rejection of technocracy.

In the three chapters that follow, Oyer reconstructs with a striking precision of detail the sequence of events for each of the three days of the retreat, from the time the first of the guests arrive at the monastery gatehouse on Wednesday, November 18, to the departure of the last to leave, after lunch on Friday. Drawing on notes and jottings of some of the participants, unearthed in various archival collections, as well as speakers' outlines, the author is able to provide surprisingly complete summaries of all four of the main presentations, by Merton on Wednesday afternoon, Daniel Berrigan and John Howard Yoder on Thursday, and A. J. Muste on Friday morning (hence the specific inclusion of these four in the volume's subtitle), and even to reconstruct much of the free-wheeling discussion that followed the talks and took place in less structured conversations throughout their time together, whether at Merton's hermitage or in the monastery gatehouse when rain kept them from making the trek up the hill.

He both highlights the common themes and shared insights and analyzes the different emphases and divergent perspectives of various participants; for example, contrasting Daniel Berrigan's Teilhardian focus on humanization and human progress as a sign of divine activity in the world with Merton's and Ferry's warnings of the dangers of over-dependence on technology, subsequently linked by Yoder with the scriptural imagery of the fallen powers and principalities. He also provides details on the Masses, celebrated by Daniel Berrigan, that included, somewhat by accident, open communion for all participants, as well as readings and preaching by the Protestants, a most unusual occurrence in the years when the Second Vatican Council was still in session.

In his final chapter Oyer surveys the retreatants' impressions of the event, as articulated both soon afterwards in letters and journal entries and in retrospective comments made months, years, even decades later. He also summarizes the subsequent lives and involvements of the participants, most of whom became or remained leaders in the

religious wing of the peace movement. He is careful not to overstate the significance of the retreat, as though it were the determining catalyst for its participants' activism, but at the same time makes clear how both in substance and in symbol this encounter of perceptive and committed figures that spanned the spectrum of American Christianity did mark a significant moment in the development of an ecumenical witness to the centrality of a dedication to gospel nonviolence as an integral element of authentic discipleship. This "iconic" aspect of the retreat is underscored by the unexpected but very effective epilogue, drawing on the experiences of four contemporary "descendants" of the original group, an activist theologian, a retired Episcopal bishop, a young Catholic Worker and journalist, and Philip Berrigan's widow, Elizabeth McAlister. They situate their religiously rooted acts of resistance in the framework of the issues raised and insights provided by the 1964 retreatants, concluding with Oyer's invitation to his readers "to extend the conversations shared in these pages and pursue the deepening of our own spiritual roots of protest" (231).

In his Preface the author notes that the book originated in his personal curiosity about an event that featured an encounter between Thomas Merton and a leading figure of his own Mennonite tradition, John Howard Yoder, and his discovery, first, that so little had been written about the event at which they and other equally significant figures had come together, and then, gradually, that there was in fact an abundance of unexamined material available to construct an extended narrative of the retreat. Following the advice of novelist Toni Morrison that "If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written, then you must write it" (p. xv), Gordon Oyer has produced a work that many others should and will "really want to read."

Liberally illustrated by Jim Forest's photographs taken at the retreat, framed by Forest's perceptive Foreword and a challenging Afterword by activist and prolific author John Dear, along with five appendices providing copies of key documents and a helpful map of the Gethsemani grounds, as well as a comprehensive bibliography, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* is quite simply a stunningly original piece of research. It is also a compellingly well-told story that makes a signal contribution both to Merton studies and to the wider field of the history of Christian peace activism, which is to say, of the challenge of the Gospel for the present and the future as well.

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