**Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat.** Gordon Oyer, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2014

Gordon Oyer’s book is an almost magical bridging of a half dozen genre in a single work. It starts out as a detective story, reconstructing, through sheer leg-work in archives and interviewing surviving participants, the explanation of how and why this retreat was held in 1964 at Thomas Merton’s residence, the Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. It then becomes a day by day account of the proceedings, almost dramaturgical in its structure; one could almost see it restaged. But it also works as meta-theory and meta-praxis, describing the way it which the event opened new ecumenical conversations and offering a powerful rationale for the continuing practice of retreats. It serves as a theological study of the roots of some strains of thinking later deepened by Merton and Yoder in particular. Historical biographies flesh out the incredibly significant small collection of agents of peacemaking in the room including, like a documentary film rolling credits, what they went on to do (or in the case of A.J. Muste what was brought to the table) with their witness. Finally the entire story is reexamined through the lens of contemporary voices, people who if the retreat were scheduled today would likely be in the room.

While the multiple layers could be unsettling or a distraction, and for some readers will seem a “something for everyone” mélange, it works very well to cover a lot of ground distilled in the events of three days at a time when the peace movement was boiling with challenges and uncertainty, about its impact and its future (think particularly of Viet Nam and nuclear disarmament). For those continuing the legacies of Thomas Merton and the Gethsemani Abbey, the Catholic Worker, the Catholic Peace Fellowship, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Historic Peace Churches, John Howard Yoder, the principals will be familiar and their colleagues well-known; but the fact that they were brought together in this way for this purpose will be a surprise to most and will seem a minor miracle. (It would have been an even more auspicious event is Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King had managed to participate, and if key organizer of the event, FOR general secretary John Heidbrink, had not been hospitalized just before the gathering and thus was absent.)

To invite the prospective reader with a theological and/or an activist bent to pick up the book, I will point to only a handful of topics explored by the participants and fleshed out in Oyer’s treatment. Merton was most moved to address the question “by what warrant do the faithful protest”, a question still worth pondering today. He also advanced a number of questions growing out of his introduction to Jacque Ellul’s work (thanks to Ping Ferry who also participated in the gathering), in particular the impact of technology (both as threat run rampant as in the atom bomb, and as a tool that tended to alienation and dehumanization). Yoder and Muste both spoke to the Protestant foundations of resistance, Yoder more academically, Muste more experientially. Dan Berrigan served to signal the internal critique of Catholicism from a peacemakers perspective in the 60s and managed to rock the boat of liturgy by offering an open communion in the bowels of Trappist monasticism. This really only scratches the surface of issues raised and even in the monograph they are treated in more inferential fashion than by deep examination. But once raised they will not go away.

Similarly, a reprise constructed from interviews with Ched Myers, Elizabeth McAlister, George Packard and Jake Olzen, and the afterword by John Dear, are mostly suggestive of the continuing relevance of the questions raised rather than a full contemporizing of the themes. But at least they are all writing and practicing at the intersection of theology and activism today and are accessible in a number of ways.

I will close with a few more personal observations related to the presentation Oyer will make on this book at a meeting of the National Committee of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship at the Stony Point Center, under the auspices of the Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice on Friday, September 26th at 7:00 p.m., an event open to the general public.

As someone who has spent most of his professional life (i.e. 45 years) in the realm of retreat centers and conference sites, responsible for constructing events very much like that reported in **Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest**, I would argue that the Gethsemani retreat was part of a long history of such gatherings. It is no less glorious and exemplary for that, and Oyer has done a magnificent job of more than reporting, more nearly recreating the event, but what strikes me as a central and important message is this: it is important in the movement work of peacemaking to step back, from time to time, with deep intentionality to examine “what warrants the work?”. The work is significantly nourished and advanced when it creates a conversation that acknowledges and is informed by theology and spiritual practice, and when it is conducted with a commitment to action that rides the long arc of history bending toward justice. And finally, there can be no better way to lift up the intention, even the inspired purpose of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, the Stony Point Center’s Community of Living Traditions, and the Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice than through an evening with Gordon Oyer on the subject of his monograph.

Mark C. Johnson

Executive Director

The Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice