

# The Mennonite Quarterly Review

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*Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemane Abbey Peacemakers Retreat.* By Gordon Oyer. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books. 2014. Pp 275. \$33.

In November of 1964, just two years after the Cuban missile crisis and four months after passage of the Civil Rights Act, a handful of prophetic voices from broader North American Christianity gathered to consider the spiritual roots of protest. Notable among the group were Thomas Merton (Trappist monk and the gathering's host), Abraham "A. J." Muste (Protestant clergyman and political activist), John Howard Yoder (Mennonite theologian and, at the time, administrator at Mennonite Board of Missions), and Daniel Berrigan (Jesuit, poet, and New Testament scholar).

Gordon Oyer's book about this remarkable gathering is a full and detailed record—as full and detailed as any record could possibly hope to be—of the circumstances of their meeting, what was said by everyone involved as best as it can be reconstructed, and the gathering's aftermath evaluated from a contemporary point of view. As a reconstruction from notes, handouts, letters, recollections, and interviews, the book is richly peppered with quotations, some extensive but most short phrases, and one gets the feeling that no detail has been left out. Mennonites will note with interest the significant role played by Paul Peachy as executive secretary of Church Peace Mission, an interdenominational advocacy group.

The overall structure of the book falls into three categories: prelude to the meeting (chapters on the antiwar movement, the idea of a gathering, and Merton's pre-meeting notes); the gathering itself (three chapters, one on each day); and legacy (a chapter on the immediate aftermath and one looking back from the vantage point of fifty years).

The book regularly—and sometimes frustratingly—draws on shifting historical, fictional, and theological conventions to tell its story. To put it gently, readers should not to be in a hurry. To give an example, this sentence appears at the beginning: "Fallen leaves, slippery wet beneath their feet, slowed their pace as they made their way up the dark and muddy footpath, sheltered from sunlight by the arched canopy of thinning branches that stretched over their heads" (1). But, there is also this sentence at the end, which takes us much closer to the theological heartbeat of the book: "In time, [God's movement] will seep through some crevice in the dominions' constraints and at some unpredictable moment emerge as a life-giving spring in our desert of apprehension."

The gradually emerging proposal of the book is that acts of protest can be sustained when "grounded in a hope offered by the 'mystery of God's will to save man and his promise of a reign of peace'" (207). To state the thesis succinctly: prophetic protest can only be sustained by hope grounded in trusting the goodness of God. Here Oyer has his fingers directly on the pulse of an issue facing Mennonites today, particularly our institutions of higher learning: Do we really need the "extra weight" of monastic spirituality or theological confessions or church attendance to protest the current state of the world and to go about our work of building a better one? Can't we do just fine without burdensome habits of devotion (prayer), antiquated notions of doctrine (Trinity), and awkward practices (footwashing)?

Insofar as the book wishes to advance a theological claim, and not simply give a this-happened-and-then-that-happened history (or even a somewhat elaborate historical-fictional account), the claim of the book is quite simply that we *cannot* do without devotions, doctrines, and practices because we need the structure of such a spirituality to sustain our hope for a different world. The quiet-in-the-background reasoning that supports this claim is equally simple: there are surely even more things to protest today—rampant racial prejudice, unfathomable economic disparity, irreversible environmental disasters, and shockingly brutal wars—than there was back then, and there is (let's be honest) *very* little to suggest that we can feel confident in the effectiveness of our third way strategies to engage and redeem the powers and principalities that structure our world. Placing our hope in the effectiveness of strategies, then, is a naïve, risky bet.

The central hope of prophetic protest—that God's movement will emerge as a life-giving spring in our desert at some unpredictable moment—is no less risky. It runs the risk of tragically (laughable or pitiable to those who are watching) waiting for Godot. This is nothing new. Prophetic protest has *always* run the risk of being laughable or pitiable. The apostle Paul knew that when he said that "if Christ was not raised . . . we of all people are most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:17, 19). That self-awareness, of course, does not remove the problem of protesting. In fact, it makes it worse for those of us committed to saying "No" to the current state of the world: we *know* that we may, in fact, be waiting for Godot.

Perhaps this is why Thomas Merton, the host of the conference, opened the gathering with the question: by what right do we continue to protest—or, perhaps better, where do we *stand* to continue to protest—the state of the world? The presenters each have their suggestion for sustaining roots and sustaining stance: monastic retreat (Merton), academic critique (Berrigan), ecclesial witness (Yoder), and political revolution (Muste). To the book's credit, it recognizes that there are serious and significant question marks after each of these proposals. None of these roots are pure, as only a casual awareness of the recent investigation into the life of Yoder confirms. But the book does not pursue those critical questions as far as it might have.

Instead, using the voices of contemporary protesters standing in the prophetic tradition, it proposes a standpoint in harmony with all of these—to join (call it participation, identification, or solidarity) with those who suffer, which is to say to stand with the poor. As Jake Olzen, an activist and farmer shaped by Catholic Worker houses, commented:

[I]f I have faith that I can just be with this person in their suffering and be an ally and accompany them, I think that creates space for something bigger to be born. I'm at my best when I'm just able to sit with somebody and not have to solve it or be effective, but trust that this relationship is what matters. Out of that spirit, usually if you are asking the right questions, tactics and strategies and a campaign can emerge that may change the circumstances (221).

That *standing with* is also, mystically and spiritually, an *experiencing with*, a *feeling with* and a *seeing with*, which is open to and perhaps even demands theological language: God is present here. That ground is the very crevice in the dominions' constraint out of which God's life-giving spring emerges—but to say this at this moment in time can only be a confession of faith.