

## Review Symposium

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*A review symposium brings author and reviewers into conversation. Prior to this publication, Gordon Oyer and the reviewers, William Apel, Deborah Belcastro, Paul Dekar and Patricia Schnapp, corresponded. What follows is the outcome of this exchange.*

OYER, Gordon, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), pp. xxii + 275. ISBN 978-1-62032-377-9 (paper) \$33.00.

Gordon Oyer's *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* is a story well told. As in any good story, the narrator has to pay close attention to both the story's content and context. And most importantly, a good story must be told in an engaging way that invites the listener (reader) into the story. Oyer has met all these qualifications and has done it with the trained eye of a historian and the compassionate heart of a peacemaker. His telling of the story of the gathering of thirteen peace activists with Thomas Merton at Gethsemani in November of 1964 is therefore something not to be missed.

Indeed, I find Oyer's account so inviting and so compelling that at times I feel like I'm present at the peace retreat itself. The author's work serves to remind me how central the call to peacemaking is to the gospel life I have tried to live. Because of this, I want to begin by telling a part of my story that relates to *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*. Then, I will make two major observations about Oyer's book – a volume which is by any measure an outstanding contribution to Merton studies and to peace studies more generally. Finally, I will end by discussing something that happened at Gethsemani in the spring of 1964 that had a lasting effect upon Merton and helped shape the person he was at the time of the peace retreat. This event, not mentioned by Oyer, needs to be added to his otherwise exhaustive account of the peace retreat.

First, my story. In the late 1960s, several years after the Gethsemani peace gathering, I began my studies as a seminarian in the Chicago area. During my first semester, we invited a small cadre of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) to stay temporarily in our dormitory. In the first chapter of his book Oyer identifies the SDS as a part of the "New Left" (6). Our small band of SDS were about to engage in a series of protests

and acts of civil disobedience in downtown Chicago. In the meantime, we wanted to provide a “safe harbor” for them away from potential police brutality and FBI surveillance. They planned to demonstrate against a number of social injustices, including the war in Vietnam, which I too actively opposed.

As we prepared to greet the SDS students, a taxi-cab appeared in front of the seminary and a fashionably dressed young woman exited the cab. About two hours later, I saw this same young woman in tattered revolutionary garb as she was about to join her SDS comrades in their political protests. I don’t know what motivated her actions, and what her reason for revolution was, but at the time I couldn’t help but think she was only playing at revolution. After all, I thought to myself, who is it that takes a taxi-cab to the revolution? But then I had to ask myself about my own reasons for protest. I knew in some vague way that it had to do with my faith commitment to do justice and oppose war. And I now realize that I could not have identified with any certainty the spiritual reasons or the roots for my desire to protest! I just wanted to be a prophetic seminarian.

According to Gordon Oyer, on the first day of the Gethsemani peace retreat in 1964, Merton asked his fellow retreatants: “*quo warranto?*” (100-101). By what right do you as Christians protest? What are your spiritual roots for protest – from whence comes your mandate and authority to challenge any form of injustice? That was my question, if I had known how to articulate it. It was an ongoing question for the retreatants (228-31) – and for me as well. It is something I’ve asked many times. Now, thanks to Oyer, this question comes before me once again – as I’m sure it does for many others as they read *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*.

My first major observation about Oyer’s work builds upon the question Merton raised on the first day of the retreat: what then is the “warrant” for our Christian protest? The answer to this question, from my perspective, was set on its proper path by the presentation of John Howard Yoder on the second day of the retreat. He pressed the question forward until his answer could not be ignored. In the end, the answer was quite simple for Yoder and his Mennonite tradition. The answer was to be found in following Jesus.

This direct and uncomplicated assertion of Yoder is discussed by Oyer in chapter five, under the title of “Day Two – Christ and the Church in Protest.” In the morning session, Daniel Berrigan, SJ, the well-known activist Catholic priest, spoke of the church as a church of protest which found its mandate for action in the risen Christ and the new life it brought to the world. He envisioned the dawning of a new age of consciousness in which the cultures of this world would be transformed here and now.

As Oyer notes, in addition to the reality of the living Christ, the work of Teilhard de Chardin also contributed to Berrigan's optimism, albeit a distinct kind of optimism derived from discovering hope out of despair (124-25). But in the afternoon session, John Howard Yoder's talk was not quite so optimistic. In a response to Berrigan, he wondered if the general tendency in Catholic thought to picture culture as being transformed by Christian witness was theologically accurate. As a Mennonite from the peace church traditions of the radical Protestant Reformation, Yoder was more skeptical about any transformation of culture due to a Christian presence. Yoder's emphasis on the incarnate Christ rather than a risen Christ presented a different assessment of the Christian's relationship to culture. For him, most societies contained "the powers and principalities" which the incarnate Christ (in all his humanity) acted and taught against – the cultures of domination in which Jesus lived and we live. Yoder saw the church as being an alternative society within cultures of domination. The alternative society as church was to be nonviolent and peaceful rather than oppressive and given over to violence (151).

Yoder's Jesus was the suffering servant who sought to elevate his disciples to the moral heights of the Sermon on the Mount. This Jesus was a Jesus who told his disciples (then and now) they must take up the cross and follow him. In his careful research of notes taken by Jim Forest, Daniel Berrigan and Yoder at the retreat, Oyer does an excellent job of representing the theological views of those who made presentations. In this regard, he brings us right to the heart of Yoder's religious perspective with a single quotation carefully chosen:

In the view of "the peace churches," an antiwar protest is not the specialty of a vowed elite with special disciplines [Trappists, other monastics?], nor an emigrant elite in the desert [the desert fathers and mothers?], nor an exceptional ad hoc response to a sense of unique urgency [the Gethsemani peace retreat?] but rather it is what is expected . . . of all people committed to simply "following" after the words and work of Jesus. (153)

Yoder minces no words in his prophetic outlook; he claims it is the responsibility of all Christians, everywhere, and in all circumstances, to follow Jesus in word and deed.

Our author points out that Yoder was able to find some common prophetic ground with some in the monastic tradition in Catholic history. He finds kinship with the fourth-century monks who went into the desert in protest against a church which had accommodated itself to the late Roman world. In their prophetic protest, Yoder is one in the spirit

with them. In all truth, he felt more affinity with these monastic desert dwellers than he ever did with the major Protestant reformers and their churches. Yoder noted that these so-called reformers merely substituted their form of Christian state and control for the earlier forms established by the Catholic Church in medieval Christendom.

For the sake of full disclosure, I must confess that Yoder's theology and ecclesiology is close to mine. The BPFNA (Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America), a peace group with which I have identified for decades, is Anabaptist in its disposition and shares in the biblical perspective of most traditional peace churches. However, I would nonetheless submit that it was Yoder's presentation, more than any others, that turned the Gethsemani peace retreat toward an ever-deepening exploration of the spiritual roots of protest.

My second major observation in relation to *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* celebrates the fact that Oyer did not conclude his book at the close of the third and final day of the retreat. Instead, he ends with a final chapter (chapter seven) which is a debriefing of sorts and shares in the memories of various participants. The chapter is entitled "Impressions that Remain" and proves to be one of the best chapters of the book. Since my normal pattern of behavior (unfortunately) is to hustle out of retreats as soon as possible, I appreciated being slowed down by the author. This gave me a chance to reflect on all that happened during these three historic days.

One participant's memories were especially meaningful to me. Robert Cunnane, one of five retreatants still alive, was a thirty-two-year-old activist priest at the time of the retreat. Oyer interviewed Cunnane some forty-eight years after the event. During the course of the interview, Cunnane observed: "What struck me most [at the retreat] was that the people seemed like people you could trust almost immediately just by their attitude and their bearing" (199). Men like the Berrigan brothers, Jim Forest, Tom Cornell, John Howard Yoder, A. J. Muste and Thomas Merton had an openness and strong desire to be fully present for each other. These attitudes removed any self-centered egotism and rigid commitment to ideology that otherwise might have been a problem. Had women of peace been permitted to attend – women like Dorothy Day and Sr. Mary Luke Tobin – the same "attitude and bearing" would have been evident in their spirit. If Martin Luther King, Jr. had attended, as was hoped, he too would have projected the same spiritual qualities. This is how it is with people of peace! They find a unity in their common commitment to live a life characterized by peace and peacemaking. In Merton's language, they were all willing to be "signs of peace" and to be active witnesses for peace even though as Merton indicated the way of peace was "arduous"

and often times an “unthanked pioneering.”<sup>1</sup>

The Gethsemani retreat had ended in a spiritual bond – something that happens when peacemakers get together. Friendships are formed and individuals are energized for the work ahead of them. Cunnane told Oyer in his interview that at the meeting “I was charging myself – meeting all these people gave me strength . . . My friendship with Jim Forest began here, as well as with Tom Cornell. I read John Yoder’s book on the Jubilee Year shortly after” (199). In a section of chapter seven called “Lingering Themes,” Oyer concluded, “their work together that week modeled, and in some cases created, a powerful salve for easing the burden of isolated marginality – what Daniel Berrigan would characterize as ‘friendship’” (205). This issue of friendship leads directly to my last point.

I think Oyer makes a very important observation when he notes that Merton often relied upon previous readings and experiences in preparation for events like the peace retreat (53-54). With his rigorous monastic schedule and writing deadlines, Merton seldom had much time for anything else. Thank goodness, he was very proficient at drawing upon past events and readings for future events. On his mystical side, Merton was open to learning from past activities, “knowing” that by the grace of God all things somehow fit together. The secret was discovering how this was so. Through his research, Oyer was able to identify how Merton would fit things together. A case in point is Oyer’s work on the friendship of Merton and Louis Massignon and how Merton applied what he learned from his friend’s writings in creative and redemptive ways to his work on issues of peace and justice (81-94).

One influence upon Merton that Oyer seems to have missed is an event at Gethsemani that happened less than half-a-year before the peace retreat. On May 16, 1964, survivors of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima visited Merton. They were on a worldwide pilgrimage for peace and for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Eight Hibakusha (blast-affected people) met with Merton in the Abbey’s guest area just as the peace activists were to do. They then walked with Merton up to his hermitage, again, as the peace retreatants did. Merton wrote about the visit of the Hibakusha in his journal on May 17, Whitsunday: “It was moving and good to have them [the Hibakusha] there. People signed and marked by the cruelty of the age, signs on their flesh because of the *thoughts* in the

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 126 [January 13, 1961 letter to Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy]; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text; for further information see William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) xvii-xxi.

minds of other men.”<sup>2</sup>

While with his guests in the hermitage, Merton gave a brief talk and read his poem “Paper Cranes” (*DWL* 105). One of the survivors, Hiromu Morishita, told me in an interview at Hiroshima in 2013 that he was profoundly touched by Merton’s gracious hospitality and compassion. Morishita said his host showed a genuine interest in the Hibakusha as individual persons and did not treat them as a faceless group or patronize them in any way. He said that it was clear that Merton knew what it meant to suffer; he not only had empathy for their suffering but seemed to enter into it. Morishita said Merton must have been “a Buddha.”<sup>3</sup>

The experience of the Hibakusha had a lasting effect upon Merton. Men and women “signed by the cruelty of the age” had been in his hermitage. He had touched the wounds. He was humbled and more committed than ever in his call for the abolition of war and the elimination of nuclear weapons. Given all this, it is hard to imagine that Merton’s first-hand experience of those brutalized by the Bomb was not deep within his consciousness when he convened the Gethsemani peace retreat. Later, on August 3, 1965, in a letter to his friend Hiromu Morishita, Merton talked about the terrible disregard for human life displayed by those in power. “The great problem,” Merton wrote to Morishita, “is that those in power do not think in terms of human beings and living persons, but in terms of political abstractions which tend to become more and more unrelated to human reality” (*HGL* 460). The peace retreatants would have immediately recognized this concern.

Oyer in his last chapter reflects upon what might be called the “big-picture view” that came out of the peace retreat. He writes, “Theirs was not merely a quest for particular political ends.” It was much more than that. “They were players in the ongoing pilgrimage of humanity to assume its intended place of shalom and harmony within the universe. Their resistance to the seductive pull of technological efficiency and its stifling of human freedom, as well as their calls for peace, would represent an extension of the grand biblical narrative itself” (207).

This is the mega-story yet to be realized. Oyer’s work enables us to see this grand vision through the eyes of the Gethsemani peace activists. They believed in God’s continuing work of transformation and redemption. The Christian’s task is to actively join in this grand God-initiated march toward peace. This is our hope, even if at times it seems to be

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2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 104; subsequent references will be cited as “*DWL*” parenthetically in the text.

3. William Apel, “Hiroshima Notes: The Friendship of Thomas Merton and Hiromu Morishita,” *The Merton Journal* 22.1 (Eastertide 2015) 14.

a hope against hope. But fortunately, the responsibility to fulfill some design for a new world of peace is not in our hands. As those gathered at Gethsemani understood full well, following Jesus in the way of peace does not call us to victory or success; it only calls us to faithfulness. It is in this reality that the spiritual roots of protest are firmly planted.

William Apel

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With the increasing number of organized protests throughout the world, it is difficult to imagine a more timely and appropriate focus of Merton research than Gordon Oyer's new book. Thousands of people have united to confront autocratic and ineffective governments in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. They are seeking an end to injustice and changes in social structures in order to give voice to people who have been denied basic freedoms. In the U.S. the Black Lives Matter movement has brought renewed awareness of the ongoing racial divide in this country and patterns of discrimination against people of color. The Occupy movements in this country protest against social and economic inequality here and around the world. These and other demonstrations of resistance are manifestations of the commitment by people across the globe to bring a united voice of opposition to forces that threaten human life and dignity.

Gordon Oyer's work offers an opportunity to reflect upon these events with a focus upon what motivates or inspires people to engage in social protest. Using his expertise as a historian and inspired by his own commitment to social action, Oyer provides the first written account of a retreat for peace-makers hosted by Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in November 1964. His detailed narrative allows the reader to understand how this unusual meeting of fourteen activists came to be and provides an in-depth discussion of their ideas and motives and the conversations that took place as they explored the spiritual roots of resistance to social ills. While the world today is very different than it was in 1964, Oyer's thorough investigation and skillful narration of the ideas that were shared during the three-day retreat allow Merton and the other participants to speak again to people of faith who are seeking to bring spiritual integrity to the protest against violence and injustice.

As a Mennonite steeped in the Christian values of responsible action for peace, Oyer writes as one who is genuinely interested in reflecting upon the place of protest in a person's life of faith. It is this stance as a writer that adds to the quality of the text and makes the work timely and significant. Oyer believes that actions today for peace through "resistance and protest" must be "nourished by deep roots of spiritual integrity" (xvii). Oyer's purpose, as was Merton's, is to bring about a focus of ideas upon the role of faith in

social protest.

One of the ways he is effective in meeting this goal is by offering an excellent analysis of the thinking of two French scholars and their influence upon Merton's presentation at the retreat. Ping Ferry, Merton's long-time friend and a retreat participant, had introduced Merton to the writings of Jacques Ellul. Merton's reading of Ellul's *The Technological Society* and his conversations with Ferry on the topic prior to the retreat were instrumental in shaping Merton's reflections upon the effects of technology upon human freedom and the dangers of war in a highly technical age. In addition to Ellul, Merton's reading of Louis Massignon, a Catholic priest in the Melkite tradition and a scholar of Islam, factored significantly in Merton's opening presentation from a "monastic desert viewpoint." Oyer delves deeply into the lives and works of Ellul and Massignon and shows how Merton's "harmonizing" (86) of the thinking of each scholar provided the basis of his opening remarks. Merton concluded that spiritual roots of protest required detachment from both technological excess and privilege in order to stand with the underprivileged (93).

In his remarks, Merton stressed these ideas along with the point that a truly monastic and Christian position in protest is a compassionate identification with those in despair; and the act of standing with those who suffer injustice is the important thing. He stressed the Christian priority of "participation rather than efficacy" (112). In identifying with the oppressed, the rejected, the suffering ones, there is the discovery of God and of our own human inadequacies. The question of human efficacy in matters of social change garnered lively responses from the participants, as did the concern about the dangers of technology as a "cultural force" (104) which Merton and Ferry raised together on the opening day of the retreat.

Oyer helps the reader to begin to consider the applications of Merton's questions and comments to current protest efforts by including an epilogue that summarizes conversations he had with a select group of contemporary peacemakers. In his interviews with them, they responded to some of the same questions that were posed by Merton at the retreat. This part of the book might serve to inspire others to take up the questions and respond in light of their own experiences. In any case, with this additional text, Oyer suggests that the focus of the retreat and the questions posed by Merton are still useful for us today.

While the epilogue was an interesting way of bringing the questions of the retreat to bear on contemporary experiences, it would have been interesting to read how Oyer might imagine the conversation with Merton at Gethsemani if it were happening today. Who would be invited? What questions would be chosen to guide the discussion? Which participants would have been asked



to comment? Would Merton's remarks be any different given contemporary events and changes that have occurred over the fifty years since 1964?

Of particular interest would be what Merton would have to say about technology today since social media have helped to give voice to so many and have helped to make possible the organization of so much of what has been happening worldwide in protests involving thousands of young people. Merton stressed the importance of participation with those who despair and that the act of standing with the oppressed must be viewed as the most significant indicator of one's Christian motivation to bring about change. It appears that technology has made it possible for many people to "stand" alongside the oppressed, not only in a traditional sense of joining in a public protest but in voicing opinions through Twitter, Facebook and the like. The exchange of ideas and the voicing of one's commitment to the LGBT community, for example, are viewed by some as being instrumental in recent changes in federal laws regarding the fundamental right to marry for members of this community.

This raises the question of how access to technology could be seen as a means of broadening the definition of activism. In 1964, the primary mode of anti-war protests or civil rights activism would have been limited to public gatherings in town squares, a march in Washington, or some form of civil disobedience. While many of these events would have been intended as non-violent protests, clearly there was the possibility of violence and risk to those who engaged in these forms of resistance. "Liking" a cause on Facebook or expressing one's opinions in a post does not put one in harm's way, but it would seem that at some level these activities constitute a form of social discourse that could effect change in opinions or raise consciousness about the kinds of injustice that demand a response today. Would the members of a similar meeting of minds today acknowledge that technology has made it possible to expand the notion of what constitutes activism and has made it possible for many more people to protest in some form or another against violence and social injustice?

In addition to rethinking the role of technology, a contemporary meeting of activists might have a different sort of discussion regarding the spiritual roots of protest. Members of various Christian traditions, both Protestant and Catholic, attended the meeting in 1964. Current discussions would hopefully include the necessity for interfaith dialogue as well as the need for finding common ground among various Christian groups. Perhaps the discussion might even deal with the question of whether or not a person grounded in faith can effectively join hands in protest with one whose protest is not rooted in a spiritual commitment. Are there ethical or moral roots of protest that are broader and less easily defined today? Is it possible to find common ground

between people of faith and those who do not claim to have spiritual roots? These questions, and undoubtedly others, could form the basis for lively conversation among activists today.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the retreat, a meeting was held at Bellarmine University in 2014 with three remaining original participants and others currently involved and interested in the ongoing work for peace and justice. As with the 1964 meeting, this event focused upon the spiritual underpinnings of social action by raising again the question that Merton posed to the original group: by what right do we protest? The question requires one to focus upon the importance of the prophetic nature of resistance: that the spiritual roots for Christians, at least, demand that our resistance be loving and non-violent. Engaging in protest with a more socially and religiously diverse world community may bring new challenges and opportunities. In any case, the meeting at Bellarmine indicates that the retreat with Merton in 1964 is a significant reference point for social activists and a springboard for continuing dialogue.

Oyer's book reminds us in a new way of the importance of spiritual roots when protesting social injustice. For those who wish to protest without carefully examining their own motives or goals, the retreat serves as a reminder that the spiritual or moral roots of one's protest should be examined. Would the witness of contemporary activists be more faithful and prophetic if people who envision a better world paused to examine their right to protest and their motives? And, would more people of faith, after examining their spiritual roots, take up the cross of protest and stand with the disenfranchised, the suffering and those in despair? Oyer invites us to participate in the conversations that took place at Gethsemani with Merton. More importantly, his inquiry into this historic event has resulted in a text that encourages similar discussions as a foundation for the current witness to peace and justice.

Deborah Belcastro

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Gordon Oyer gives a "who, what, when and why" of the November 17-19, 1964 retreat that anticipated and in some ways catapulted many of its participants into active resistance to growing United States military engagement in Southeast Asia. Oyer blends what might appear as disconnected, Thomas Merton's withdrawal to his hermitage for greater silence, solitude and stillness, and his resolve to write on social issues despite a ban on publication of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.<sup>1</sup>

Meticulously researched and well-written, the book's concluding

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1. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

chapter seven identifies “Impressions that Remained” for our generation, twice-removed, seeking to strengthen core values, become self-aware and part ways from social norms. Among “lingering themes” (203-207) of the Gethsemani Abbey retreat, Oyer identifies several legacies. Some offer deep insight into the challenges for peace activists of our day, as they did in the 1960s.

A key issue for Merton was his insistence on the importance of nurturing contemplation as a personal resource in protest. An example is his February 21, 1966 letter to James Forest, one of the retreat participants and a member of a fledgling Catholic Peace Fellowship affiliate of the Fellowship of Reconciliation:

do not depend on the hope of results. . . . [T]hese are not in your hands or mine, but they can suddenly happen, and we can share in them: but there is no point in building our lives on this personal satisfaction, which may be denied us and which after all is not that important. So the next step in the process is for you to see that your own thinking about what you are doing is crucially important. You are probably striving to build yourself an identity in your work and your witness. You are using it so to speak to protect yourself against nothingness, annihilation. That is not the right use of your work. All the good that you will do will come not from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God’s love. Think of this more and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it. The great thing after all is to live, not to pour out your life in the service of a myth: and we turn the best things into myths. If you can get free from the domination of causes and just serve Christ’s truth, you will be able to do more and will be less crushed by the inevitable disappointments.<sup>2</sup>

This theme during retreat conversations did not end there. One of Merton’s myriad friendships by correspondence was with Amiya Chakravarty, whom Merton met in India and to whom Merton dedicated his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.<sup>3</sup> The Bengali poet believed that “to be peaceful one has to be spiritually rooted, and practice the law of divine love.”<sup>4</sup>

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2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 294, 296-97 [February 21, 1966 letter to Jim Forest].

3. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

4. Amiya Chakravarty, *The Indian Testimony*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 72 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1953) 15.

The theme recurs on May 28, 1966, when exiled Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh visited Gethsemani with John Heidbrink of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Merton wrote of the spiritual bond the two monks established: “Nhat Hanh is a free man who has acted as a free man in favor of his brothers . . . moved by the spiritual dynamic of a tradition of religious compassion.”<sup>5</sup>

In another context, reflecting the retreat theme on the spiritual roots of protest, Nhat Hanh wrote:

I hope we can bring a new dimension to the peace movement. The peace movement is filled with anger and hatred. It cannot fulfill the path we expect from them. A fresh way of being peace, of doing peace is needed. That is why it is so important for us to practice meditation, to acquire the capacity to look, to see, and to understand. It would be wonderful if we could bring to the peace movement our contribution, our way of looking at things, that will diminish aggression and hatred. Peace work means, first of all, being peace. Meditation is meditation for all of us. We rely on each other. Our children are relying on us in order for them to have a future.<sup>6</sup>

Merton sought “the true way of unity and peace, without succumbing to the illusion of withdrawal into a realm of abstraction from which unpleasant realities are simply excluded by the force of will.”<sup>7</sup> He called for a deep engagement in the spiritual and liturgical life of Christ as an antidote to an explosion of “violence, hatred and indeed . . . a kind of insane and cunning fury which threatens our very existence” (*FV* 224).

For Merton, living a faithful life required that one ground oneself in the messianic lifestyle of Jesus, and a desire to become a living sign of God’s presence. In his disordered world, he discerned that many persons endlessly accumulate rubbish and new satisfactions. He counseled vigilance in the face of “the sham, the unreality, the alienation, the forced systematization of life,” and realism about all of human condition that is alienated and suppressed.<sup>8</sup>

5. “Nhat Hanh Is My Brother,” in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 107; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text (Merton dedicated this book to conference participants Phil Berrigan and Jim Forest; Heidbrink had helped organize the retreat but had been unable to attend.) See also Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

6. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987) 80.

7. “The Contemplative Life in the Modern World” (*FV* 221).

8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday,

Merton warned against an “idolatrous cult of technology and power, and the senseless magnification of man’s greatness,” advising, “let us ‘turn to the world’ in the sense of regaining command over our vast powers and using them to fulfill man’s needs” (*CGB* 203). He encouraged people to live in the knowledge that God loves each and every person irrespective of her or his merits. Merton understood that what is good in a person comes from God’s love, not from their doings, nor from that which is external to one’s true self.

Merton and his fellow retreatants continue to offer spiritual direction to all who struggle with the role of technology in society. They were prescient given the tsunami of concern, fifty years later, that mobile phones and other technological gizmos have become an “addiction” and source of death. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Geraldine Brooks characterizes these in comments on John Freeman’s *The Tyranny of E-mail*: “I’m feeling the same way about my laptop. . . . [T]his so-called boon to communication and productivity has become a distracting, privacy-sapping, alienating, addicting time-suck. He has convinced me that the new mantra for our times ought to be Tune out, Turn off, Unplug.”<sup>9</sup>

A specific legacy of the Gethsemani retreat is Merton’s reminder that the search to live more humanly requires grounding in prayer. Reading Oyer’s fine book, I recalled having discovered Merton’s writings in a course on modern Catholicism that I took at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in 1967. This led me to undertake a monastic retreat, repeated virtually every year since.

I have met several of the retreatants, including Philip Berrigan whose role I played in a production of Dan Berrigan’s *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*.<sup>10</sup> To raise funds for our defense after an action involving civil disobedience in relation to the draft and Vietnam War, a group of us, the Flower City (Rochester) Conspiracy, performed the play in several upstate New York communities. Deepening my commitment to the spiritual roots of protest, I was privileged to help host Thich Nhat Hahn’s visit to Memphis, Tennessee for a peace walk in 2002. We sought to counter growing rhetoric about “war on terrorism” in the Middle East. Nhat Hahn urged that practicing peace means being peace in everyday aspects of living such as walking and eating.<sup>11</sup>

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1966) 234; subsequent references will be cited as “*CGB*” parenthetically in the text.

9. <http://books.simonandschuster.ca/The-Tyranny-of-E-mail/John-Freeman/9781416576747>; see John Freeman, *The Tyranny of E-mail: The Four-Thousand-Year Journey to Your Inbox* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

10. Daniel Berrigan, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

11. <http://www.buddhachannel.tv/portail/spip.php?article3576>. Peacewalk 2002 led to

Merton's call for living in obedience to God, Source and Giver of life, infused a spiritual dimension to the civil rights, ecumenical and peace movements of his day, as well as ours. We face challenges perhaps more threatening than those faced by the fourteen retreatants. Rebecca Tarbotton, Executive Director of the Rainforest Action Network (1973-2012) observes, "We need to remember that the work of our time is bigger than climate change. We need to be setting our sights higher and deeper. What we're really talking about, if we're honest with ourselves, is transforming everything about the way we live on this planet."<sup>12</sup>

At the start of the retreat, Merton called for "*metanoia*, total personal renewal" (245) rooted in a deep spirituality. This endures as a source of hope and stimulus for constructive, nonviolent responses to the challenges of today. With Merton and his friends on retreat, we embrace that "Creative Force who bids reverence for mysteries that sustain all of life" (231).

Paul R. Dekar

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Gordon Oyer didn't intend to write a book. His reading of fellow Mennonite John Howard Yoder's peace literature, however, led him to the peace writings of Thomas Merton and a Merton biography. He became intrigued by the reference to a gathering of fourteen peace activists held in 1964 at Gethsemani at which Yoder himself was a participant. Curiosity led Oyer to start intensive research, which eventually culminated in his meticulously documented book *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*. Using the resources of journals, notes from participants, the archives of several universities (most importantly the Bellarmine Thomas Merton Center), and personal interviews, Oyer has compiled a remarkably detailed account of this significant retreat, which proved to be an energizing and enduring stimulus for the ecumenical group as well as a fruitful exchange of reflections on social protest.

The gathering itself had been in the works for almost two years, spearheaded, interestingly, by laymen John Heidbrink of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Paul Peachey of the Church Peace Mission. Presenters at this two-and-a-half-day conference were: Merton himself, who gave the first talk; Dan Berrigan, Merton's friend and confidant; A. J. Muste, the eldest guest and the one with the most prominent pacifist credentials; and

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creation of Magnolia Grove Monastery in Batesville, Mississippi, a community center for mindfulness in the tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh ([http://magnoliagrovermonastery.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=71&Itemid=56](http://magnoliagrovermonastery.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=71&Itemid=56)).

12. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014) vii.

Mennonite John Howard Yoder. Other participants included John Oliver Nelson, Phil Berrigan, Jim Forest, Tony Walsh, Robert Cunnane, Charlie Ring, Tom Cornell, Elbert Jean, Wilbur (Ping) Ferry and John Peter Grady.

The political backdrop of the time (1964) included the Civil Rights Movement, the nuclear threat and the saber-rattling in Washington as U.S. military support for South Vietnam increased. Among other peace concerns, what this diverse group at Gethsemani had in common was a desire to explore the potential for nonviolent social change. Shortly before the gathering, in fact, Merton had asked Dan Berrigan to prepare a discussion on the “spiritual roots of protest,” a phrase the host used as the title of his outline for the event.

Merton, recently acquainted with Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Society*, drew heavily on it in the retreat’s opening talk, asserting that “Technology makes war almost inevitable” since it requires that “what is possible becomes necessary” (239). There is a branch of scientism, Merton suggests in this comment, that recognizes no moral restraints on technology, thinking whatever is possible should be done. Stressing Ellul’s concerns about the dark side of technology, especially in the nuclear age, Merton expanded on what became a much discussed topic among the fourteen, noting that Louis Massignon had named contemporary technology an “idolatry” seeking to replace God.

Another topic Merton explored was what he called “the monastic protest” (244). The early desert fathers, he claimed, became hermits as a way of saying NO to the decadent society of their times. Applying this notion to himself, Merton said he wanted his own life as a monk similarly to be, as he had written in the 1963 preface to the Japanese edition of *Seven Story Mountain*, “a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race.”<sup>1</sup> Because of the imposition of Western technology and the colonial penetration of so much of the world, he believed protest had to be rooted in identification with the oppressed and subjugated. This identification would require embracing suffering and a refusal of privilege. A detachment from privilege, he said, allows one to share in the “suffering and struggle of others” (81).

Drawing on ideas of Massignon and Charles de Foucauld, Merton added that one must also reverence the “presence of the word,” be attuned to “the sacred in others” (84), and thus avoid a presumptuous sort of spiritual arrogance that could accompany protesting an injustice. Raising the question “by what right” protesters assume to judge and oppose, Merton

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1. Thomas Merton, “*Honorable Reader*”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 65.

drew on the medieval legal term “*quo warranto*” (100), used centuries earlier by Dominican Antonio de Montesinos in protesting the brutal subjugation by Spain of the indigenous people of Hispaniola.<sup>2</sup> This question was frequently raised in the course of the retreat. As Oyer makes clear in his book, Merton was concerned that the *roots* – clearly an important word and concept for him – of “religious dissent” be deeply planted in God’s Word, and not just in one’s personal convictions.

Other ideas flowed from the participants. Although only fragmentary notes from Dan Berrigan’s contributions to the retreat were preserved, a few of them offer some of his thought. He noted that our privileged position has blinded us to the fact that “the lost save the saved,” that the condition of privilege means “we need help the most” (119). These paradoxical statements, typical of Berrigan, suggest the parable of Dives and Lazarus. More than that, however, they remind us of Matthew 25, in which Jesus tells us that our salvation as the “sheep” who are “blessed by the Father” resides precisely in our treatment of “the lost,” or the poor and needy.

Not surprisingly, Berrigan decried the divorce of worship from social action, especially in the Catholic Church, with its wealth of social teaching. He mentioned the example of Franz Jägerstätter, the Austrian Catholic executed by the Nazis for refusing to fight in World War II, as an example of the “Church of Protest” (138), and expressed his hope that the church would become more relevant, more attuned to what he called “the social implications of a true liturgy” (143), one which importantly includes the social gospel. Instead of these “social implications,” Berrigan believed the Catholic Church, not yet greatly affected by the still-ongoing Vatican Council, was too focused on Christ as human and on legal observance. This last judgment may hint at the style of his later protests, for just three years after the meeting, both Berrigans performed bold acts of civil disobedience leading to numerous arrests.

John Howard Yoder, coming from a peace church, saw the warrant for protest as the incarnate Christ himself. For him, war resistance was and should be an expectation for Christians, because “to do otherwise would be wrong” (153). Yoder also claimed we must love the person we protest against, let him make us suffer. Because we are on his side, we get in his way. This provocative statement suggests the image of a peacemaker *blocking* an aggressor from striking and harming someone. This intervention prevents the assailant from doing something wrong and protects him from its consequences, as well as protecting the potential victim from harm, even at the cost of personal suffering for the one who

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2. Andrew Wilson, “With What Right and What Justice? The Cry in the New World Was First a Decree of Excommunication,” *First Things* 218 (Dec. 2011) 47-52.



“got in his [the aggressor’s] way” (158). Protest, according to Yoder, means affirmation; we stand against because of what we stand for – “the enemy, the poor, the truth” (158).

Yoder also spoke against equating results with “success” in the efforts at peacemaking. In doing so, he anticipated Merton’s own sentiments, as seen in his 1966 “Letter to a Young Activist.” In it, Merton firmly counsels the activist (Jim Forest): “Do not depend on the hope of results.”<sup>3</sup> He elaborates on this warning, which evokes the Hindu maxim “Renounce the fruits of action.”<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of Merton’s oft-quoted letter, after admitting that he saw in the work of peacemaking nothing but “disappointment, frustration, and confusion,” he added, “The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. . . . But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand” (*HGL* 297).

Despite A. J. Muste’s expressed need to participate in “non-violent direct action,” the book doesn’t mention any discussion of various strategies of such action. Indeed, Oyer believes Merton strongly guided away from that, focusing instead on a deepening of spiritual roots. Given that social protest frequently entails acts of civil disobedience, and that the Berrigans and others were to push the boundaries of this concept a few years later, such a discussion would have been provocative. It’s interesting to note that Merton himself originally distanced himself from the more dramatic acts of civil disobedience which put the Berrigans and others in the headlines (and in jail), believing they were too near acts of violence. Later, however, he praised their integrity and perseverance in opposing an unjust war.<sup>5</sup> One wonders if he had changed his mind about what was permitted when one protested violence and war.

Muste, the group’s elder and a decades-long activist, expressed hopes for reviving the peace movement in the States, which had flagged after the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty passed in 1963. He challenged our nuclear assumption that if we in the U.S. armed ourselves with nuclear weaponry, “they won’t.” History has proved him correct, as nuclear proliferation is an ongoing concern and threat.

The retreat over, its participants returned “into the world,” where their

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3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 294; subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text.

4. Vinoba Bhawe, “Talks on the Gita: 18 Conclusion: Renunciation of the Fruit of Actions Leads to the Grace of the Lord,” Gandhian Institutions, n.d. [web: accessed 20 Sept. 2015].

5. See Patricia Schnapp, “Dan Berrigan’s Lyrical Memoir,” *The Merton Journal* 20.2 (Advent 2013) 56.

involvements in a variety of peacemaking and war-resisting activities spawned several tangible results. One was a “Declaration of Conscience,” crafted in part by Muste, who also recruited many prominent leaders – including both Berrigans – to sign it. The Declaration unequivocally opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Another peacemaking event was a major convocation organized by several of Merton’s guests as a way to share some of the key ideas from the Gethsemani retreat. It was titled “Peace on Earth: Moral and Technological Implications: A Consultation of Leaders of Religion.” An ecumenical gathering, it illustrated how, as Muste later wrote, the peacemaking retreat had strengthened the interfaith bond of peace workers. Additionally, not long after the retreat, Jim Forest and Tom Cornell created the Catholic Peace Fellowship, which supported resistance to the Vietnam War.

The impact of the peacemaking retreat at Gethsemani, Oyer notes, took various forms for different participants. Some of them chose radical and creative ways to confront the newly established draft, a result of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution approving greater U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Dan Berrigan founded Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. Two years later, he went to jail for his role in a march on the Pentagon. Phil Berrigan and others poured blood on records in a Baltimore draft board office and, a year later, both Berrigans, along with others, removed draft records in Catonsville, Maryland, and burned them with homemade napalm. Their continued protests landed both of them in jail or prison on many occasions. Others from the Gethsemani retreat participated in draft board action as well, including Bob Cunnane and Jim Forest. Both of them later went to prison for their participation in the “Milwaukee 14,” during which over 10,000 draft records were burned. While the Vietnam War is long over, other peacemaking efforts initiated by Gethsemani retreatants are still visible. Phil Berrigan left the priesthood, married co-activist Elizabeth McAlister, and established Jonah House. Its “Plowshares Movement” continues to employ direct actions to challenge the nuclear threat. Dan Berrigan’s activism in war resistance has become legendary.

Still, several questions remain for us. What is the state of the peace movement today? What has been the impact of the peace churches and such groups as Pax Christi? How do we handle it when our peacemaking efforts seem to be fruitless? What do we make of the fact that Merton consistently insisted that he was not a pacifist?<sup>6</sup> Has discouragement allowed us to succumb to the militarism that seems to be part of the American ethos?

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6. James Bacik, “Thomas Merton: Prophetic Peacemaker” (lecture, Lourdes University, Sylvania, OH, September 21, 2015).

Oyer's painstaking scholarship provides a source of historically and intellectually rich perspectives on the whole question of resisting the "powers and principalities" (147-48), especially given the immense and often frustrating challenge of peacemaking. While it may seem a futile and Sisyphean task, it is both urgent and necessary, rooted in our Christian identification with the oppressed and powerless, as the Gethsemani peacemakers agreed. In saying "No" to war and to the arms race, both Merton and the other retreat participants embraced Christ's principle of non-violence as the best way to bring about God's Kingdom. Ultimately, it is in this "No," in Jesus' command to Peter to "Put down your sword," and in his call for all of us to, instead, love one another, including our "enemies," that the spiritual roots of protest can be found.

Patricia Schnapp, RSM

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Aside from enhancing the historical record, perhaps the most one can hope in writing on a lesser-known event fifty years past is that readers might draw implications for their own lives and times. In this case, as Pope Francis recently mentioned to Bolivian activists, our own times badly need "real change, structural change, [because] the system is now intolerable."<sup>1</sup> Since Francis also suggested community activists rather than power elites must drive this change, one hopes in particular that writing a book about fifty-year-old views on "spiritual roots of protest" might reintroduce ideas still relevant for today's peace advocates. The reflections shared in these four reviews, therefore, prove very gratifying.

Considered today, the Gethsemani retreat's "new" approach to preparing for protest – one of gathering across boundaries to prioritize reflection rather than calculated strategizing – might seem outdated, inspiring, or some mix of both. Responses to the book sometimes imply that the retreat's absence of explicit protest strategies disappoints younger and action-focused peace advocates. And despite Thomas Merton's prescient critique of "privilege" and the event's groundbreaking Catholic/Protestant, lay/clerical mix, a gathering of fourteen white men can invite skepticism in a time when inclusive representation is taken for granted.

But in their reviews, these four writers choose to accompany those fourteen in probing deeply to pursue spiritual roots and remain open to gaining insight from the retreat dialogue. In doing so, they demonstrate that many questions asked then still remain worthy of exploration. Wil-

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1. Paul Valley, "The Pope's Priorities in America," *The New York Times* (16 Sept. 2015) ([http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/the-popes-priorities-in-america.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/the-popes-priorities-in-america.html?_r=0) [accessed 16 Sept. 2015]).

liam Apel, Patricia Schnapp and Deborah Belcastro all, for example, note the value of Thomas Merton's opening question that asks "By what right?" we protest. It forces one to step back and scrutinize presumptions often ignored when pragmatic strategizing takes priority. It also offers an example of what Pope Francis named in his congressional address as Merton's ability to "challenge the certitudes"<sup>2</sup> we often hold, regardless of political alignment. Schnapp insightfully connects this question to its use 500 years ago in confronting colonial conquest of the Americas – a dynamic with horrific consequences we still inadequately acknowledge. For Apel, the retreat's objective resonated with his need as a young man to face the "spiritual reasons" for his activism beyond simply wanting to be a "prophetic seminarian." He suggests that John Howard Yoder's answer – "the words and work of Jesus" – set them on the "proper path" to consider "By what right?"

Apel also suggests that Yoder's presentation more than others helped the retreatants strengthen their spiritual roots of protest.<sup>3</sup> This may be the case. Yoder often came up in their later reflections. The later acts of civil disobedience by participants that Schnapp notes, coupled with Yoder's impact, suggest that core points from his comments – mimicking Jesus' nonviolent resistance to his era's religious and political structures and viewing Jesus' followers as an embodied alternative to those structures – offered inspiration, rationale and blessing for acts of civil disobedience to come. Perhaps revisiting Yoder's presentation may help address Schnapp's essential question of whether today "discouragement has allowed us to succumb to the militarism that seems to be part of the American ethos." Apel also highlighted how the participants demonstrated "an openness and strong desire to be fully present for each other" that minimized "self-centered egotism and rigid commitment to ideology."

To me, both of Apel's insights also invite awareness of their shadow sides. Granting significance to Yoder's retreat comments must be counter-balanced with his abusive treatment of female acquaintances that began a decade later and only recently came to full light. It does not invalidate his contribution in 1964, but it cautions against uncritically idolizing persons with wisdom and intellect while benefiting from their insight. It also reminds that even as we remain obedient to God's word in some realms we may fail in others. Similarly, though dynamics at this cloistered retreat fostered mutual respect, some<sup>4</sup> have testified how contention can also

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2. Transcript of papal address to Congress (see pages 16-23 above in this volume).

3. John Dear expresses similar views in *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker: Meditations on Merton, Peacemaking, and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015) 73-74.

4. See for example Jim Forest, "Some Thoughts on Resistance," *WIN* (January 15,

emerge among peace advocates in the heat of their engagement. Apel's observation about the "spiritual bond" that was formed and strengthened at Gethsemani suggests great value in periodic retreats with others of similar commitments. The practice can help repair strained friendships and recover support sometimes lost in the intense maze of tactics and strategies required of advocates for change. Recognizing these shadows reinforces the need to cultivate humility and self-awareness when advocating for peace and justice.

To cultivate humility and self-awareness, Merton famously relied on the discipline of contemplation. Though he prepared for the retreat contemplatively and provided his guests a highly contemplative environment, the surviving record suggests that contemplation was not central to their discussions that week. As Merton later told his novices, at such a gathering, "you don't fool around with a half-hour conference and then go meditate. You really work" (187). But in his review, Paul Dekar helpfully uses his reading of the retreat as a springboard to draw on both Merton's larger body of writing and comments of others to reflect on the discipline of contemplation as it relates to action. His quotations of non-Christians illustrates the potential to draw from beyond Christianity in pursuit of spiritual roots – as Merton himself often did (including use of Louis Massignon's essays on Islam for the retreat).

Dekar's reliance on a broad faith spectrum also suggests that responding to Deborah Belcastro's inquiry about "who would be invited" if the retreat occurred today surely requires naming non-Christian guests. We would also invite representatives of movements such as climate change advocacy, Occupy, Idle No More, Black Lives Matter and others besides core peace advocates. Climate change now rivals nuclear conflict as perhaps the greatest existential threat humanity has encountered. But as Dekar's citation of Rebecca Tarbotton reminds – and Merton would heartily endorse – in confronting that enormous challenge we cannot single-mindedly sacrifice the integrity of unique persons and species and ecosystems for the sake of "humanity." Our work requires "transforming everything about the way we live on the planet," including relationships to each other.

An expansive, ecologically-driven urgency to "transform everything" may also help inform Belcastro's search for "ethical and moral roots of protest that are broader and less easily defined today," roots that might nourish all regardless of faith (or non-faith) convictions. Merton's response to retreat organizer John Heidbrink's concerns about collaborating with the secular peace movement may apply here: "[We need to] get with

them and stop emphasizing we are different. . . . We are all concerned with man living and surviving . . . The word of God reaches us somewhere in the middle of all that” (41).

This touches on Schnapp’s question about “the state of the Peace Movement today,” an era when post-9/11 fear continues to stifle voices that oppose U.S. military investment. In 1964 A. J. Muste lamented how civil rights activism siphoned energy from efforts to curtail nuclear arms and promote international peace – we might now hear similar concerns regarding environmental activism. Perhaps, however, today’s dynamics reflect a broadened paradigm that seeks peace not just among nations but also with our planet, in all its complex interdependence, a movement of interconnected limbs that envisions shalom as harmony with all of creation, not just among technologically empowered humans.

One of our greatest challenges to “transforming everything” in pursuit of shalom, in fact, may center upon how we address our technological empowerment, a force deeply and reflexively interwoven into our lives. Schnapp, Dekar and Belcastro all note technology’s prominent role in retreat conversations. Rather than specific technologies, the 1964 discussion centered on the uncritical mindset with which modern Western society has integrated assumptions about technology into its essence. This is Jacque Ellul’s “technique,” or what Michael Higgins has named “technologism”<sup>5</sup> – an ideological social force with impersonal power over individual lives that takes on a life of its own. Dekar observes technology’s power to alienate and distract, to invite deference toward effectiveness for its own sake rather than meet genuine human need. Belcastro, for her part, poses crucial questions that ask whether fifty years of technological evolution requires us to modify the retreatants’ skepticism. Rather than focus on the more abstract concern of “technologism,” she asks whether specific technological applications of social media offer helpful tools to exchange ideas and to include and “stand with” the marginalized across vast distances. Might such virtual discourse “expand the notion of what constitutes activism” beyond traditional flesh-and-blood engagement, which “put[s] your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels [of an impersonal bureaucratic machine] to make it stop”?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps, to frame her questions in language from the retreat, might social media provide an example of Yoder’s suggestion to “make use of fragments of the system

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5. Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998) 162.

6. Spoken by Mario Savio in Berkeley’s 1964 Free Speech Movement, just two weeks after the Gethsemani retreat (see <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariosaviosproulhallsitin.htm>).

to reconquer portions of the turf and use it for good” (154)?

In response to Belcastro, without doubt, social media has enhanced the effectiveness of locating allies and mobilizing for mass dissent. It has also vastly expanded our potential to connect with and advocate on behalf of the marginalized in many corners of the Earth. Social media offers a tool for nearly instantaneous opinion-polling that can influence legislation and policy decisions. Today’s equivalent of 1960s draft board raids to destroy records seems impossible without technological sophistication – the impact of Wikileaks disclosures continues to reverberate. Therefore, abstaining entirely from social media or current technology as a whole seems futile.

One suspects, however, that aspects of the 1964 critique continue to speak regarding use of today’s social media. Yoder followed his comment on using system “fragments” by suggesting that “the way to do so is to tame it, make it modest, deny its idolatrous pretensions, refuse to obey it” (154). So, temptations to idolize it as our primary source of hope to “transform everything” may lead it to blind more than enlighten. To the degree that social media replaces rather than supplements direct engagement, it surely harms. Unequal access to social media may carry the ambiguities of privilege. Alternatively, it can help neutralize advocates’ messages through co-optation and surveillance. It can exacerbate the echo chamber Merton knew as the “void” of “mass culture.” Virtual engagement cannot substitute for a direct encounter with our “ground of being”; its capacity to connect with (rather than alienate from) the material realities of life in our ecosystem seems limited.

Further, in preparatory notes, Merton doubted whether “a technology of peace” rather than of war could even exist at this point. But he suggested that nonetheless, “We should still ask for it” – for an “alternative *technical complex*” devoted to peace (239). If we concede that technological solutions may be vital to transforming everything, perhaps envisioning Merton’s alternative technical complex may be part of that task, beyond merely adopting fragments of what society currently offers us.

These reviews contain the seeds of many other threads for reflection and discussion. Schnapp’s question of seemingly “fruitless” protest efforts might be further explored, for example. Apel’s treatment of Merton’s visit from eight Hibakusha – Hiroshima survivors – elevates our awareness of another important point along Merton’s path of peace, one that illustrates the value of engaging with the marginalized as a key spiritual root of protest. It undoubtedly played a role in sensitizing Merton to the personal, human impact felt from such impersonal, monolithic acts of destruction. Merton’s retreat notes and recorded comments failed to explicitly refer-

ence this experience, but Apel is surely right that it was seared into his consciousness as the retreat convened.

As a writer, what an incredible gift this symposium has been! I can conjure no adequate words to express my gratitude to *The Merton Annual* editors and these four reviewers for investing their time, intellect and ink in this way, helping further extend the 1964 Gethsemani Abbey conversation into the twenty-first century. I encourage readers to continue that conversation with others around them, and I welcome them to continue it with me.

Gordon Oyer