

BOOK REVIEW

PURSUING THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF PROTEST: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat, by Gordon Oyer. Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon 2014. Reviewed by Ted Nee Walker.

A few years ago, I was over at my sister Amanda's place spending the evening together with a number of people, one of whom was Fr. Daniel Berrigan SJ. After a little bit of time, Dan quieted the room of our small talk and individual conversations and said, "Now let's talk of real things." By this, he meant, let's speak of ourselves. And so we did. Repositioning ourselves into a circle, we spent the rest of the evening taking turns talking about where we each found ourselves at that moment in our life. How quickly this day transformed into a kind of marker in my life, one to which I hold myself accountable.

I was reminded again of the spirit of that impromptu evening discussion while reading Gordon Oyer's *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*. In November of 1964, fourteen men, then already entrenched in various parts of the peace movement, gathered together for a retreat led and hosted by Thomas Merton. In preparation for the retreat, Fr. Berrigan wrote to Thomas Merton, "...our best contribution to one another is simply to come and be ourselves and let the chips fall where they may. I am so damn sick of trying too hard to not do the wrong things; what [John] Heidbrink and the rest of us, in measure need, is precisely a change [of pace] that will plunge us into some silence and direct sharing.... Please don't allow anything formal, and please keep it small."

With his meticulous and well-researched account of this retreat, Mr. Oyer guides us from the conception and planning of the retreat to well beyond the gathering. With this, we realize that only half of Father Berrigan's advice was heeded. And that, most definitely, is to our benefit today. The retreat as a book displays the depths and breadth of their exploration of the roots of resistance. "What we are seeking," we read in the retreat handout that is a part of the book's appendix, "is not the formulation of a program, but a deepening of roots." And it invited the participants, who were from various Christian denominations, in this way: "It would help if in our meetings we could show our various ways of answering these questions, thus helping one another to attain new perspectives. We can help one another to a new openness."

It is this striving for openness that Gordon Oyer preserves and deepens in his fleshing out of the handwritten notes and leaflets, correspondences and personal interviews that record these discussions. He even recalls the challenges to this openness amongst the various Christian denominations of the group—particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist. He quotes from Thomas Merton's journal the night of their first Mass together: "[a] way-out Mass... yet it was beautiful too... Dan's celebration of the sacrificial liturgy was simple and impressive. All in English and 'uncanonical' even to the extreme point not of Communion in both kinds but Communion to the Protestants!!" (Please note, the double exclamation mark is all Merton.) Although it is tempting to confuse a desire for openness with wanting everyone to do the same, the genuine interactions and internal struggles of these men so well brought back to life by Mr. Oyer is instructional for us all.

But before we the readers are invited to enter onto the Gethsemani Abbey grounds with the retreatants, Gordon Oyer prepares us carefully and patiently with the backgrounds of the individuals involved, as well as with that particular moment in history—both in terms of world events and human thought. With the considerable military build-up in Vietnam, President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, China's successful detonation of its own atomic bomb in mid-October of 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. winning the Nobel Peace Prize (and thus not able to

attend the retreat as desired!), the Second Vatican Council in its third of four sessions, these men had the pulse and movement of all this weighing heavily on them. Even in 1960, Thomas Merton described the situation this way in a letter to Louis Massignon: "It is dawning more and more on me that I have been caught in civilization as in a kind of spider's web, and I am beginning to say 'No' louder and louder, though surrounded by the solicitude of those who ask me why I do so. There is no way of explaining it, and perhaps not even time to do so."

In the midst of the terrifying spider web which was that time, we learn of how these activists gained both consolation and provocation in works recently published, such as Gordon Zahn's biography of Franz Jägerstätter and Ping Ferry's translation of Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*. This, the first of Jacques Ellul's work for the US reader, Thomas Merton discovered in it a language for his own developing distrust of technology, noting that this work is "prophetic and I think [a] very sound diagnosis" of today's society, although perhaps too "pessimistic." Ah! But to only have this single book of Jacques Ellul's *oeuvre*, it would certainly be pessimistic! At this point, Daniel Berrigan had yet to befriend William Stringfellow, who best introduced the fullness of Mr. Ellul's work to this country. But just as well for the reader of this book, Gordon Oyer succinctly introduces us to the work of

Jacques Ellul as well as that of the Catholic essayist and scholar of Arabic and Islamic civilizations, Louis Massignon, a unique pairing that informed Thomas Merton's opening session for the retreat.

Gordon Oyer recreates the four main sessions and discussions during the retreat, adding commentary when needed. I found such additions very helpful, as the spectrum and scope of the references undoubtedly already common to these men were often new to me. Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan began the sessions with a grounding of religious mysticism rooted in a solidarity with the poor. John Howard Yoder reflected upon the Christian faith's most practical implications and A.J. Muste concluded the retreat's discussion with the demystification of the State. Consider A.J. Muste's focal question: "Why have we peace talk on the verbal rationalized level... yet continue with arms and war preparation on the level of Realpolitik?" To which he elucidated, in part, "The point is not who is worse, but that they are all trapped."

For myself who is still quite a novice in the rich tradition of peace studies, it was also a great benefit to have Gordon Oyer's comparative summaries in the midst of the discussions. For example, between Fr. Dan Berrigan and the Mennonite pacifist John Howard Yoder, Mr. Oyer writes: "...both could also assert that spiritual roots of protest must reach toward Christ. Their biggest contrast, though, lay in where they located Christ—where He could be tangibly found as a source from which to draw nourishment. For Berrigan, these roots spread

outward toward creation and humanity, where the risen Christ dwelt and expressed Himself through a progressively divine and 'adult' human consciousness. For Yoder, they instead drilled toward the incarnate Christ, Jesus, the ultimate human who demonstrated perfect obedience to God's voice and called us to the same. Yoder's Christ dwelt primarily in a gathered body of committed believers who lived in contrast to human society that rejected—rather than embodied—Christ's conscience."

Again, further on, we have this summary comparison between John Howard Yoder and A.J. Muste. Mr. Oyer writes, "Yoder's unity as mission and Muste's mutual trust as prerequisite and goal both demanded more than words of inspiration to motivate others. They required vulnerability and risk to actually begin living out a better way, to live it together with others, and to live it for all to see. The only danger, as Muste reminded, was in not going far enough or deep enough to reach this common life, a failure that invites 'several kinds of deaths.'" The breadth and scope of the discussion contained in this book will benefit each person differently, individually.

Some will tend toward the discussions of monastic protest, where others like Tom Cornell were moved by John Howard Yoder's *Theology of the Cross*. Recalling that day's session, Tom said, "He brought a cogency to it, a relevance, the theology of the cross that lives today." But I submit all will be impressed by how all the angles of discussion, all the perspectives, all the faith traditions even in their differences, like the roots of a tree that necessarily spread out in all directions in search of sustenance and providing stability, become the roots of a testifying for life.

At the end of *Pursuing the Roots of Protest*, we follow these men as they go their own ways and we learn of the retreat's effect, such as the renewed vigor of daily work and presence such as with Tony Walsh who had come from Montreal where he had co-founded and operated the Benedict Labré House of Hospitality. We also learn of actions taken years later that are relevant to the discussion developed in this book, such as the public draft card burnings first by Tom Cornell who ignited his own in Union Square in November of 1965, and then Frs. Phil and Dan Berrigan who destroyed draft files beginning in 1967. And, at the close of the book, we are invited to bring the questions and perspectives of this historic retreat into our own time and lives with a virtual dialogue between Liz McAllister of the Jonah House resistance community, activist-theologian Ched Myers, Catholic Worker farmer-activist Jake Olzen, and George Packard, a retired Episcopal bishop who participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Having recently read a provocative study on the history of "human rights" as a discourse, *The Last Utopia* by Samuel Moyn, I would like to end this review with Thomas Merton's guiding question, "By what right do we assume that we are called to protest, to judge, and to witness?" To this "Zen koan" Jim Forest recalls, "Merton's contribution was to impress on us, often more with questions than answers, that protest wasn't simply an almost casual human right, but rather a terribly dangerous calling that, if it lacked sufficient spiritual maturity, could contribute to making things worse." And Tom Cornell remembers that Thomas Merton linked this medieval legal term *quo warranto* to a passage in Scripture, *Jeremiah* 20:1-18, "a fire that was burning in my heart."

What we have throughout this book is a cloud of witnesses in thought and in action, of hearts burning for the love of God in the world, of models for how to devote one's self to deepening that spiritual maturity. We can learn and practice their ways, indeed be inspired by the commitment of these men, but let us also remember to always gather together, even for a brief time. And, yes, sometimes an informal gathering in the right spirit is just as life-changing as a formal retreat. What is always important is being present to one another and then let this strengthen our responsiveness in the world. May we always make room, on all occasions, to speak of real things.

