

Thomas Merton and the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Educational Reflections on the Peacemaker Retreat

By **Dominiek Lootens**

Together with some of his trusted friends, Thomas Merton organized in November 1964 a retreat for peace activists, to which he gave the title “The Spiritual Roots of Protest.”¹ One of the central questions he asked was: by what right do we protest? Recently Gordon Oyer has written an excellent book about this retreat.² The people who gathered at Gethsemani were experienced peace activists. They were used to focusing on intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic change. The retreat was under consideration for over two years. During this long preparation process, the organizers became convinced that the central focus of the retreat should be not so much protest actions but the spiritual roots of protest. It was the intention of Merton to bring in leaders from different Christian traditions, so they could open themselves to and stimulate each other in reflecting on these roots. While reading Oyer’s book I asked myself what I could learn from this famous retreat. As a European Catholic educator in healthcare chaplaincy, I am interested in the training of Christian chaplains as social justice allies.³ Today Christian chaplains cannot restrict themselves to pastoral care of patients and their relatives, or to religious services; they also have to relate themselves critically to their organizational and societal context.⁴

When I train Christian health care chaplains as social justice allies,⁵ I make use of Intergroup Dialogue. Intergroup Dialogue is a face-to-face, interactive and facilitated learning experience that brings together twelve to eighteen people from two or more social identity groups over a sustained period to explore commonalities and differences, examine the nature and consequences of systems of power and privilege, and find ways to work together to promote justice.⁶ One of the important thinkers for Intergroup Dialogue is bell hooks. A native of Kentucky, hooks is a black feminist writer, activist and educator. She and Thomas Merton have a lot in common. They are both known and appreciated as writers. Both can be described as “contemplative activists.”⁷ Important for Thomas Merton, just as for bell hooks, is, in Thomas Del Prete’s helpful phrase, the “education of the whole person.”⁸ In her work hooks refers to Thomas Merton; she writes: “Lately, I’ve been reading Thomas Merton, especially his writings on monastic life, and I can see deep connections between spirituality, the religious experience, and longing to make a space for critical thinking, for contemplation.”⁹ In what follows I introduce some basic principles of Intergroup Dialogue.¹⁰ When appropriate I will also make reference to hooks. I will use the lens of Intergroup Dialogue to reflect on the educational characteristics of the peacemaker retreat. While I’m doing this, I hope to find out what I can learn from this famous retreat.



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Intergroup Dialogue is about relationship-building and thoughtful engagement about difficult issues. Intergroup Dialogue brings together two or more groups of people with potential or actual issues of conflict. It may bring together Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews, women and men, multiracial/multiethnic people,

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migrants and indigenous people, or gays, lesbians and heterosexual people. It can also bring together several subgroups within larger identity groups, such as Catholics and Protestants, or Europeans of many different ethnic backgrounds. The group should be small, about twelve to eighteen participants, in order to build more trusting relationships, encourage more engaged interaction, provide greater safety and confidentiality and make better use of the limited time.

The plan for the peacemaker retreat was to gather male leaders from different Christian traditions who would stay for a few days at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Due to logistical reasons and monastic rules it was not possible at the time to invite female leaders as well. (A few years later, in December 1967 and May 1968, Merton did host two retreats for women religious, at which, among other topics, Merton talked about contemplative life as a prophetic vocation.¹¹ According to John Dear [see Oyer 235], Merton also intended to host Martin Luther King Jr., Vincent Harding and Thich Nhat Hanh for a retreat in April 1968; such a gathering would have been quite an experience from which we also could have learned a lot.) During the preparation for the retreat, Merton had the intuition that the group should not be too big. He wanted it to be around ten participants. In the end, it turned out to be fourteen participants, Merton included. Members (lay and clerical) of Catholic, mainline Protestant, historic peace church and Unitarian traditions participated. Merton wanted to create an atmosphere in which existential learning could take place.¹²

Intergroup Dialogue requires an extended commitment. Intergroup Dialogue is more likely to be meaningful and successful when participants agree to participate for more than a few meetings. With commitment, people realize that they can confront tough issues and know the conversation will continue and move forward the following meetings. According to Oyer (179-80), not long after the retreat several participants collaborated in planning a convocation. This illustrates that they were in for a long-term commitment. They invited Merton to write down some reflections, which could be read at the end of the program, but in the end that was not possible. This convocation could be viewed as a reprise of some of the issues they engaged at Gethsemani.

Intergroup Dialogue may focus on religion and tradition, but it can also address multiple issues of social identity that extend beyond religion and tradition. Because there are so many forces that constitute our individual identity and self, participants may bring in issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and religion at some point in the dialogue. hooks writes: “I have been most interested in the mystical dimension of religious experience. And that concern has not been experienced as being in conflict with political concerns, but more as in harmony with them” (hooks, *Yearning* 218-19).

Intergroup Dialogue that focuses exclusively on the individual processes ignores social structural conditions of power and place in society. On the other hand, Intergroup Dialogue that ignores participants' individual identities by insisting upon group and/or subgroup identities denies the unique character of people's lives and diminishes opportunities for personal growth and change. The starting point of the peacemaker retreat was the religious and spiritual background of the participants. Merton wanted to talk with them about their own religious experiences and beliefs. The participants dialogued about the spiritual roots of protest on different levels: on personal, community and societal levels. During their conversation, they also discussed issues of privilege, marginality, race and class.

Intergroup Dialogue focuses on both community-building and intergroup conflict. When people come together in Intergroup Dialogue, they first have to overcome their history of keeping apart from others, and they quickly confront the barriers that divide them, including the lack of awareness, skills and knowledge. None of this is easy. At the same time, as people realize how much progress they

can make during the gathering, the hard work feels good and the relationships that develop can be heartwarming and enduring. hooks writes:

Again and again I witnessed a communication breakdown in classroom settings when individuals who were speaking found not only that they had sharp differences of perspective but that attempting to engage in dialogue across these differences aroused intense passions, including anger and sadness The pressure to maintain a non-combative atmosphere, however, one in which everyone can feel safe, can actually work to silence discussion and/or completely eradicate the possibility of dialectical exchange.¹³

Oyer mentions two moments of conflict: the Mass (Oyer 129-33) and the drinking of alcohol during their free time (Oyer 126). Merton had some concern about the Mass. He knew that his abbot did not want the Protestants to receive the Eucharist. Daniel Berrigan, one of the participants, who officiated at the Mass, agreed to limit distribution of elements to Catholics. In the end though, all participants received both elements. On the last morning of the retreat, Mennonite John Howard Yoder shared a homily during the Mass. Oyer writes: “The real conflict was between the abbot external to the group and Daniel Berrigan, who felt strongly that Protestants should be included in the Eucharist – not so much conflict within the group. Merton was caught in the middle as the ‘voice’ of the abbot, though he personally deferred to Berrigan’s decision and supported a Protestant homily. To my knowledge, no one in the group openly opposed including Protestants from their own objection, independently of concern over complying with the abbot’s statement.”¹⁴ At the end of the first day, some of the Catholics decided to have a beer, which was not much appreciated by some of the Protestants.

Intergroup Dialogue takes place in an atmosphere of confidentiality. Precisely because Intergroup Dialogue is about relationship-building, it requires confidence that what people say during the dialogue will not be reported to non-participants. In Intergroup Dialogue, listening is essential, and having the opportunity during the program to say words from both the heart and the mind is paramount. Oyer writes:

I think the biggest need for confidentiality in the Gethsemani setting had to do with protecting from that “hostile element” of the abbot’s scrutiny/disapproval. Further, his abbot did not want Merton to take too much of a leadership role – it needed to be an informal conversation. And Merton was under censure from publicly writing on peace and war, so one outcome was that any his comments on the topic should not be published afterward. I didn’t sense a need for confidentiality about *most* things they shared – it was after all about protest, which is a very public activity – but all those factors I mentioned called for a certain amount of “confidentiality” among the participants regarding certain matters. I think the fact that Merton chose NOT to share with novices that Protestants participated in the Eucharist showed he honored the confidentiality of the shared Eucharist.¹⁵

Conclusion

I am amazed about how easy it is to connect some of the principles of Intergroup Dialogue with the educational characteristics of the peacemaker retreat. Merton wanted to learn from other Christian peace activists. Therefore, he chose to organize this retreat with representatives of different Christian traditions. He took the experience of the participants seriously and invited them to listen and learn from each other. The uniqueness of the retreat was not to put concrete protest strategies at the

center of the conversation. Making “Spiritual Roots of Protest” the central topic can be linked with Merton’s vision on education. The fruit of education, whether in the university or in the monastery, is the activation of “that inmost center . . . which is a freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence, a self beyond all ego, a being beyond the created realm, and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation” (*L&L* 9). The activation of the inmost self and the identification with the poor belong together.¹⁶

The retreat was organized for experienced peace activists. It was almost natural for them to have their own practice in the background of the conversation. The retreat most likely inspired them to keep on doing their activist work. In my work as a trainer of aspirant social justice allies, I have to think about how to bring in concrete practice. Also the screening process and the issues of sponsorship need my attention. How to involve facilitators from different social identity backgrounds is also an important question for me. Because of the working context of Christian health care chaplains, it is crucial to create an atmosphere of confidentiality. Dear (Oyer 234) asks what would have happened if also female activists had participated in the retreat. One could wonder how different the peacemaker retreat had been if activists from other religious and racial backgrounds had participated. One could imagine that different conflicts or “hot topics” had come up during the retreat sessions (see Zúñiga et al. 28). Black feminist activist hooks stresses the importance of letting anger, sadness and conflict come to the surface in diverse classrooms (see hooks, *Teaching* 86). When this had happened during the sessions of the retreat, the participants would have had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on their history of distance, separation and power imbalance.

1. See Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 259-60 for Merton’s outline of the rationale for the retreat.
2. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemaker Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014); subsequent references will be cited as “Oyer” parenthetically in the text. Along with Merton, the principal organizers of the retreat were Paul Peachey (1918-) and John C. Heidbrink (1926-2006), neither of whom were able to attend. Participants along with Merton were Abraham “A. J.” Muste (1885-1967), John Oliver Nelson (1909-1990), Jim Forest (1941-), Tom Cornell (1934-), Daniel Berrigan (1921- 2016), Anthony “Tony” Walsh (1898-1994), Philip Berrigan (1923-2002), John Peter Grady (1925-2002), Robert Cunnane (1932-), Charles Ring (1925-1986), John Howard Yoder (1924-1997), Elbert Jean (1921-2014) and Wilbur H. “Ping” Ferry (1910-1995).
3. See Dominiek Lootens, “Diversity Management in European Healthcare Organizations: The Catholic Chaplain as Advocate,” in *Intercultural and Interreligious Pastoral Caregiving: The SIPCC 1995-2015 – 20 Years of International Practice and Reflection*, ed. K. Federschmidt & D. Louw (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2015) 201-14. See also F. Norwood, “The Ambivalent Chaplain: Negotiating Structural and Ideological Difference on the Margins of Modern-Day Medicine,” *Medical Anthropology* 25 (2006) 1-29.
4. See S. Pattison, “Dumbing Down the Spirit,” in *Spirituality in Health Care Contexts*, ed. H. Orchard (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001) 33-46.
5. See R. D. Reason, E. M. Broido, T. L. Davis and N. J. Evans, eds., *Developing Social Justice Allies* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), and E. M. Broido, “The Development of Social Justice Allies during College: A Phenomenological Investigation,” *Journal of College Student Development* 41 (2000) 3-18.
6. See X. Zúñiga, B. A. Nagda, M. Chesler and A. C. Walker, *Intergroup Dialogue in Higher Education: Meaningful Learning about Social Justice* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2007); subsequent references will be cited as “Zúñiga et al.” parenthetically in the text.
7. For this concept see Mario Aguilar, *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: SPCK, 2011).
8. See Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990).

9. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) 219; subsequent references will be cited as “hooks, *Yearning*” parenthetically in the text.
10. See D. Schoem and S. Hurtado, eds., *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).
11. See Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992).
12. See Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 3-14; subsequent references will be cited as “L&L” parenthetically in the text..
13. bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 86; subsequent references will be cited as “hooks, *Teaching*” parenthetically in the text.
14. Gordon Oyer, April 4, 2015 email to author.
15. Oyer, April 4, 2015 email.
16. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 192-93, 250-51.