Endmatter

THOMAS MERTON AND LEO SZILARD: THE PARALLEL PATHS OF A MONK AND A NUCLEAR PHYSICIST

by Phillip M. Thompson

Abstract. Thomas Merton and Leo Szilard, two of the seminal religious and scientific figures of the twentieth century, briefly connected on the issue of the danger of atomic weaponry. This meeting resulted from paths that guided them to an "orbiting" or distancing from human society through a phase of intellectual (Szilard) or spiritual (Merton) abstraction followed by a return to the concerns of human society. These parallel trajectories and their eventual intersection reflect both the similarities and differences in their respective backgrounds. The briefness of their contacts and the unfulfilled possibilities from such contacts also suggest the importance of a continuing dialogue between major figures in religion and science.

Keywords: angelism; atomic bomb; contemplative; Thomas Merton; nuclear science; peace movement; Walker Percy; religion and science; Leo Szilard.

When we consider what religion is for mankind, and what science is, it is no exaggeration to say that the future course of history depends upon the decision of this generation as to the relation between them.

—Alfred North Whitehead (1925, 181, 182)

AN UNLIKELY PAIR

Two very different men had life-changing revelations on street corners. Although apparently disconnected, these street-corner revelations would be important in merging their life journeys toward a point of contact.

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It was the fall of 1933 in London. A 35-year-old Jewish scientist, Leo Szilard, had recently fled to England because of the Nazi rise to power. As was his habit, he was briskly walking along the streets and pondering a profound scientific dilemma. Then, it happened.

> As I was waiting for the light to change and as the light changed to green and I crossed the street, it suddenly occurred to me that if we could find an element which is split by neutrons and which would emit two neutrons when it absorbed one neutron, such an element, if assembled in sufficiently large mass, could sustain a nuclear chain reaction. I didn't see at the moment just how one would go about finding such an element or what experiments would be needed, but the idea never left me. (Lanouette 1992, 133–34)

The intersection revelation provided Szilard with the key direction needed to produce a nuclear chain reaction and the idea of a critical mass that were the essential elements for producing an atomic bomb. For the next three decades he would be obsessed with first creating and then controlling the bomb that resulted from additional work on his initial revelation.

Several decades after Szilard's epiphany, 42-year-old Trappist monk Thomas Merton was standing on a busy street corner in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. His revelation was not about a division in nature but about the essential unity of human beings. "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self isolation in a special world" (Merton 1966, 156–57).

Merton's revelation changed his connection to the secular world that he had abandoned in disgust in 1941 when joining the Trappist order at the abbey of Gethsemani. By ending his "spurious isolation," Merton would reenter the fray of human works, culture, and even politics with a passionate desire to contribute more to the broader human community. This new desire did not require an abandonment of religious vows or a departure from the monastery, although he speculated about these possibilities. The real transformation was in his attitude about the kingdom of God on earth, not geography or institutional commitments. He could now unequivocally lend his voice not only to an internal spiritual quest but also to interreligious dialogue, the Civil Rights movement, and opposition to nuclear proliferation and the war in Vietnam.

On first review, the men experiencing these revelations and their insights could hardly seem more different. Szilard was a secular Jewish scientist from Hungary. He exhibited no interest in formal religion and was certainly not interested in contemplative traditions. To the extent that he had a religion, it was an Enlightenment one, favoring an impersonal entity sustaining the rational patterns of nature. Szilard rarely discussed his Jewish background. When confronted by angry students in Hungary about his being a Jew in 1919, he pleaded that his family were Calvinists—which

was technically true, as his family had a conversion of convenience. The usually combative science student was unusually submissive on this occasion. There may be other explanations than religious indifference. He detested violence and may just have been trying to avoid it on this occasion (Lanouette 1992, 49).

Raised and educated while on the move in France, England, and the United States, Merton's intellectual focus was initially in the humanities and later on spirituality. As a young man he demonstrated little interest in science or its progeny, technology. He had attended a few courses in astronomy at Columbia University in the 1930s but showed little aptitude in the natural sciences or its technological byproducts (Merton 1948, 66–67). The zealous and pious young novice at Gethsemani was full of disdain for science and technology. The regnant orthodoxies of science, technology, and materialism had ushered in an age of a potential apocalypse. Merton's response to this collapse of faith and culture was a "total rejection of the business, ambitions, honors, activities of the world." This rejection certainly included the technological inhumanity inherent in modern warfare. Although he fully accepted the Catholic doctrine of just war, he noted about the Second World War that "killing people with flame throwers" was no "form of Christian perfection." The technology of mass destruction on display in the war was also linked to the death of the last member of his immediate family, his beloved brother John Paul, who died an agonizing death as a downed bomber pilot. Merton's personal bitterness was further annealed by a continuing global violence abetted by the products of science. He lamented a century filled with "poison gas and atomic bombs" (Merton 1989, 10; 1977, 36; 1948, 85).

There were other differences with Szilard. After he entered the monastery, Merton yearned to travel but rarely did so. He was anchored by institutional rules and by a commitment to pursue a contemplative life. The contemplative ideals of peace, balance, and reflection contrasted sharply with the Hungarian's constant travel between hotels and a frenzied search for new discoveries and ideas.

Angelism

Because of the differences in occupation, lifestyle, and goals, the search for any correspondence between these very different men might appear daunting if not impossible. Their merging toward an alliance was possible, however, because of a series of historical and personal evolutions. Their evolutions reveal some striking parallels, including the tendency at different times in their lives to break radically from and toward the world, a love for and ambivalence about their vocations, and a tendency toward angelism.

The tendency toward angelism is a temptation common to religious and scientists. Novelist Walker Percy describes angelism as not a love of

angels but the tendency of intellectuals to zealously seek a specialized and esoteric knowledge that transcends ordinary human experience. Persons engaged in this quest often assume that their pursuit of an aspect of knowledge will yield some ultimate Truth. The inherent distortion in such a quest often eliminates or minimizes the value of other types of truth or reality. The seeker is propelled into an "orbit" of refined reflection that makes the reentry of the seeker into the normal flow of normal human life very difficult. A proper balance of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs is lost to the demands of a pure and almost monomaniacal pursuit of the intellect or spirit (Percy 1983, 115–19, 135, 160–74).

The term *angelism* is a key to why Szilard and Merton shared some common ground throughout their lives. In addition, the strength of angelism would make it difficult for both men, although not necessarily in an identical fashion, to transcend the obligations, restrictions, and prejudices of their orbiting phases and reenter their societies and seek a mutual collaboration on the issue of nuclear weapons. Szilard's life often demonstrates Percy's observation that

> The scientist is the prince and sovereign of the age. His transcendence of the world is genuine. That is to say he stands in a posture of objectivity over against the world. . . . The problematical self, like the young Einstein who couldn't stand the dreariness of everyday life, discovers science and transcends the world. In orbit, he enters an elect community of scientists, however small, to whom he can address sentences about the world. (Percy 1983, 115)

Even in his early years, Szilard's faith in objective science made him detached from and defiant of the rather staid and conservative society of Austria-Hungary before World War I. To many of his peers, the young man seemed rude, impertinent, and socially inept. The truth is that the rebellious youth valued the search for knowledge more than social conventions or human relationships. He was known to quickly drop a friend who ceased to challenge his intellect or to abruptly depart a party without saying anything when he was reflecting on a pressing problem. Ideas were the priority of his life, and institutional or personal commitments that made human beings seek security over intellectual exploration were shunned. This utter devotion to the pursuit of knowledge was noted even by an FBI agent spying on him at the end of World War II who described him as a "complete egotist, an internationalist, an idealist, self sufficient" (Lanouette 1993, 27).

Many sacrifices were dutifully made in order to obtain this transcendence, this orbit. Szilard left his native Hungary as a young man, rarely saw his family, had few significant relationships with women, and lived simply and transiently, always ready to move as his field of knowledge and the ends of his profession dictated. Throughout his adult life, his personal possessions were kept in two bags that were always packed for a sudden departure (Lanouette 1993, 150–51, 161–73).

The prospect of reentry from his orbits was tricky. There were some furtive attempts. He was not averse to dating women briefly, observing the beauty of nature, or watching Charlie Chaplin movies. Corresponding to Percy's formulation of angelism, these brief forays into the world typically involved little or no depth of human interaction. Indeed, Szilard, until he became close to Gertrude Weiss in the latter part of his life, had almost no close relationships. He lived to intellectually parry and thrust with elite physicists including Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Edmund Teller. Within this tiny "priesthood" there was a bond built from a shared understanding of the obscure intricacies of atomic science. Mere mortals who might attempt to comprehend its complexity were readily dismissed unless they provided sources of funding for research or could help translate this specialized knowledge into a technical achievement. In the end, the orbiting pressures were severe. Still, this feature of transcendence was a key animating force in his life. Perhaps this is why one biography (Grandy 1996) is titled *Leo Szilard: Science as a Mode of Being.* Another biographer, William Lanouette, aptly describes his impulse to angelism as follows: "But for Szilard, knowing and understanding were not enough. His thoughts about his world attained a reality of their own, and his life became an urgent struggle to animate these thoughts and perhaps control them. For many hours a day Szilard kept company with thoughts that drew him, logically and persistently, toward a future that often he alone could see" (1993, 150).

The eager young monk who entered Gethsemani in 1941 also was interested in pursuing an abstract concept, a specialized form of knowledge available to only a few. The objective was not the smallest of objects, an atom, but the largest, God. The spiritual quest as Merton formulated it in his early years in the monastery was one that was largely closed to the outside world. It assumed that there is a contemplative power of an elite of religious who focused on what was written on a sign on the wall of the monastery, "God Alone."

Merton notes in these early years that Gethsemani had a "rare atmosphere of a very high mountain." The atmosphere was rare because religious orders were the "loudest and truest" in proclaiming God's honor, power, and greatness. This special pilgrimage was pursued in the spiritual laboratory of the monastery, isolated from the cares and worries of the broader world. The overpowering force of the spiritual presence in the monastery could not be conveyed to those who had not renounced worldly ambitions and entered into the "impregnable fortress" of solitude. Once a monk was "submerged" in this community, the "world would hear of him no more because he has drowned to society and become a Cistercian" (Merton 1948, 321–25, 332). The broader problems of the human world were not forgotten, but the emphasis was on how to internally curb the innate attraction of a sinful humanity to "greed and lust and cruelty and hatred

and avarice and oppression and injustice, spawned and bred by the free wills of men" (1948, 128). Merton's interest in these early years of his religious life was on human sin and divine mercy, not on social reform. Such sinfulness posed a serious challenge to achieving the special knowledge of the contemplative.

Reconnecting with Humanity

Szilard, unlike many of his scientific colleagues, had always desired to save the world through a rational form of government ruled by a scholarly elite. When the German threat of an atomic bomb ended with their surrender in the spring of 1945, he still wanted a rational elite to govern this new weapon and to protest the use of atomic weaponry against Japanese civilians. The youthful search for utopian solutions was now modified by experience and replaced by the more realistic objective of trying to limit the chances for damage from the weapon. His elitist and utopian tendencies were channeled into assisting in the formation of a number of scientific publications and social organizations with specific goals, such as *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, The Council for Abolishing War, and The Council for a Livable World. These organizations sought to lessen the possibility of another use of the ultimate weapon. A proposed National Society of Fellows was designed to provide the President of the United States with advice on contemporary issues facing the country (Grandy 1996, 126; Lanouette 1993, 437).

The elitist tendencies were thus transformed from producing new knowledge into discovering how to restrain the results of a prior discovery, the splitting of the atom. Moreover, some of the isolation from his angelism softened during his happy marriage and partnership with Weiss in the 1950s. The elitism also slackened with the passage of time. He made some efforts to get nonscientific individuals involved in his projects. The change is dramatically reflected in a letter to *The New York Times* in 1955 in which he asked all citizens of the United States to take responsibility for their lives and push their government for an arms agreement with the Soviet Union (Grandy 1996, 127). Admittedly, this new project was still a large challenge with some utopian dimensions, but Szilard was, if not completely changed, at least a chastened contributor to human society.

Merton's turn toward the world was gradual, and his street-corner revelation was in some sense a recognition of where the preceding decade had taken him. On a previous trip to Louisville in 1948, he still rejected the illusions of the world but felt closer to individual persons. In his journal he recorded, "Although I feel alienated from everything in the world and all its activity, I did not necessarily feel out of sympathy with the people who were walking around. On the whole they seemed to me more real than they ever had before, and more worth sympathizing with" (Merton 1996, 223). In addition, Merton had already in the late 1940s and early

1950s begun to experience heightened discomfort with military activity, including the booming guns at Fort Knox and atomic weapons (Merton 1953, 81).

The rising sense of solidarity in Merton also was confirmed by a new interest in scientific matters by 1957. He was soon reading biographies of a number of physicists, science fiction, and journals like *Scientific American*. With a typical enthusiasm, his diary speaks of the "beautiful mind of Einstein" and refers to "Niels Bohr and Co." as his "no. 1 cultural heroes" (Mott 1993, 482).

Merton's renewed interest in science came at a time when he also was beginning to more explicitly oppose the nuclear weapons race. The nuclear issue was intimately connected to the superpower struggle between two systems of false materialism that made them adopt a mindless activism. This activism engaged in processes that were instrumentally sane but teleologically insane. Merton decried the prospect of a nuclear war initiated by sane men operating under sane orders. The superpowers were bound, at least partially, to this form of activism because the building of weapons maintained their national affluence. The combination of a blind activism and economic imperatives made the United States and the Soviet Union irresponsible in regard to technological advances (Merton 1980, 12–19).

Brief Contact and a Lost Opportunity

It is unfortunate that there is not a more storybook ending to this tale. The elements for such an ending appeared to be present in the early 1960s. The bomb had fostered social concern and activism in both men. They were both eager to discover allies against the threat of nuclear proliferation and destruction.

By 1962, Merton wondered whether it was possible to bring Szilard and the other peace movements under a common umbrella organization to exert some collective pressure on the political process. To secure a common effort, he proposed in an April 1962 letter to the scientist a common front. The letter praises Szilard's recent work, offers to donate royalties from a recent book to a Catholic peace group, and criticizes certain Catholic realist thinkers on nuclear weapons. There is also praise for the scientific opposition to the bomb that countered the "absurd, inhuman, and utterly distorted assumptions that have become the basis of thinking of the majority" (Merton 1994, 38). Szilard responded with a letter on 2 May 1962 in which he expresses gratitude for the interest and promises to keep Merton notified of his program of securing signatures in opposition to the bomb (Szilard 1962). There were no additional efforts at contact. Szilard died two years later, and the opportunity for close cooperation was lost.

If there had been a meeting of the two men, it might have been very stimulating. They shared the common traits of being persons of diverse

and constantly mutating enthusiasms, committed to grand goals, and capable of challenging the shibboleths of their age. Considering those points of commonality, it would have been intriguing for Szilard to have visited Gethsemani. Where would the conversations have taken them? Could they have contributed to greater cooperation in areas of mutual interest or assisted in breaking down the walls of distrust between religion and science? Of course, expectations are often greater than realities in such meetings (see Kramer and Kramer 1985, 309–20). It is impossible to say what would have happened. But let us hope that religious and scientific leaders today do not miss such opportunities.

NOTE

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