

Thomas Merton and Leo Szilard: A Brief Meeting at the Intersection of Science and Religion

By Phillip M. Thompson

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 Whitehead¹

1. *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. It is the fall of 1933 in London. A thirty-five year old Jewish scientist, Leo Szilard, has recently fled to England because of the Nazi rise to power. As was often his habit, he is 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.²

The intersection revelation provided Szilard with the key direction necessary 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 become obsessed with first creating and then controlling the bomb that resulted from additional work on his initial revelation.

Several decades after Szilard's epiphany, a forty-two year old Trappist monk was standing on a busy street corner in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Unlike



Phillip M. Thompson

Phillip M. Thompson is Professor of Ethics and Director of the Center of Ethics and Leadership at St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas. He is a former ITMS Shannon Fellow who speaks and writes frequently on Merton's attitudes toward science and technology.

Szilard, 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."³ 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 self 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 to inter-religious dialogue, the civil rights movement, and opposition to nuclear proliferation and the Vietnam War.

On first review, the men experiencing these revelations and their insights could not seem more different. Szilard was a secular Jewish scientist from Hungary. He exhibited no interest in formal religion and he was certainly not interested in contemplative traditions. To the extent that he had a religion, it was of Enlightenment origin, 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 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 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.⁴

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 crewman. 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."⁵

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.

2. *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 attempted 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 both 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. The 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. The person engaged in this quest often assumes 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 will make 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.⁶

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 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 appeared 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 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 true 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 27).

Many sacrifices were dutifully accepted 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 150, 151, 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 like Einstein, Bohr, Teller, etc. 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 gnosis or 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 a recent biography was titled *Leo Szilard: Science as a Mode of Being*.⁷ Another recent biographer, William Lanouette, aptly describes his impulse to angelism: "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" (Lanouette 150).

The eager, young monk who entered Gethsemani in 1941 was also 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 the early monastic years 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 in the monastery 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 is "submerged" in this community, the "world would hear of him no more [because] he had drowned to our society and become a Cistercian" (*SSM* 332, 321-25).

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" (*SSM* 128). Merton's interest in his early years in the religious life was on human sin and divine mercy, not on social reform. Such sinfulness posed a serious challenge to achieving the special gnosis or knowledge of the contemplative.

3. *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 to protest the use of atomic weaponry against Japanese civilians. The youthful search for utopian solutions was now modified by experience and was 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 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 with advice on contemporary issues facing the country (Grandy 126; Lanouette 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 Gertrude Weiss in the 1950s. The elitism also slackened with the passage of time. He made some efforts to get non-scientific 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 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 that "Although I felt completely 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."⁸ 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.⁹

The rising sense of solidarity in Merton was also 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 diaries speak of the "beautiful mind of Einstein" and refers to "Neil Bohr and Co." as his "no. 1 culture heroes."¹⁰ Merton's renewed interest in science came at a time when he was also 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.¹¹

4. *Brief Contact and a Lost Opportunity*

It is unfortunate that there is not a more storybook ending to the story. 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.¹² To secure a common effort, he proposed in a letter to the scientist a common front in April of 1962. The letter praises Szilard's recent work, offers to divide royalties from a projected book between Szilard's organization and 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 the thinking and decisions of the majority” (WF 50). Szilard responded with a letter on May 2, 1962. He is grateful for the interest and promises to keep Merton notified of his program of securing signatures in opposition to the bomb.¹³ Szilard died two years later and there were no additional efforts at contact. The opportunity for close cooperation was lost, perhaps because of their busy lives and the late date of the communication.

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 to have Szilard visit Gethsemani. Where would the conversations have taken them? Could they have contributed to greater cooperation in areas of mutual interest or assisted in the breaking down the walls of distrust between religion and science? Of course, expectations are often greater than realities in such meetings.¹⁴ It is impossible to say what would have happened, but let us hope that religious and scientific leaders today do not miss such opportunities.

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1925) 181-82.

2. William Lanouette, *Genius in the Shadows: A Biography of Leo Szilard the Man Behind the Bomb* (New York: Maxwell MacMillan, 1992) 133-34; subsequent references will be cited as “Lanouette” parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140.

4. In fact, Merton conceded that it was his brother John Paul who was the most scientific in his family; see his December 28, 1933 letter to Percyval Tudor-Hart in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 57; subsequent references will be cited as “RJ” parenthetically in the text.

5. Letter to Mark Van Doren (Lent, 1941) (RJ 10); See also Thomas Merton, “For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943” in *Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 35-36, and Thomas Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 85; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.

6. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983) 115-19, 135, 160-74; subsequent references will be cited as “Percy” parenthetically in the text.

7. David Grandy, *Leo Szilard: Science as Mode of Being* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996) 125; subsequent references will be cited as “Grandy” parenthetically in the text.

8. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 223.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 81.

10. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 482.

11. See Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 12-19.

12. Letter to Albert Sisson (February/March 1962) in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 38; subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text.

13. Letter to Thomas Merton (May 2, 1962), in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville Kentucky.

14. For an example see the meeting of Thomas Merton and Walker Percy described in Victor A. Kramer and Dewey W. Kramer, “A Conversation with Walker Percy about Thomas Merton,” in Lewis Lawson and Victor Kramer, eds., *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985) 309-20.