

THOMAS MERTON & DR GREGORY ZILBOORG: UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS

IN THE SECOND HALF OF 1956, Thomas Merton had several disturbing encounters with the noted psychiatrist and Freudian psychoanalyst Dr Gregory Zilboorg. The meetings provoked intense reactions in both men and this article is an exploration of the underlying tensions involved. Both men were adult converts to Roman Catholicism and both noted figures. To understand the psychodynamics that took place when they met we need to appreciate the circumstances of their meetings, and the personal background and circumstances of Zilboorg.

'YES', 'NO', AND 'BOLSHEVIK'

Zilboorg was born in 1890 in Russia of Orthodox Jewish parents and trained as a doctor and psychiatrist. He took part in the first (Social Democratic Party) Revolution, and he fled Russia shortly after the Bolsheviks took control. He went to the United States aged twenty-nine and is reported to have arrived only able to say three words of English: 'yes', 'no' and 'Bolshevik'.

Undaunted, he settled down to study English and, three months after his arrival, gave his first psychiatric lecture in English. In America, Zilboorg studied medicine and psychiatry again and finally trained as a Freudian psychoanalyst. He was the author of four books and over one hundred papers, and worked in private practice in New York City. He was a lecturer in five medical schools and an early pioneer of psychiatric research; he also helped found the Committee for the Study of Suicide.

Archive material reveals that he was a fashionable and prominent

figure—famous as the analyst to Ernest Hemingway, George Gershwin and many other well-known writers, artists and show business figures. The playwright Moss Hart, who had been in a long analysis with Zilboorg and who reputedly bored all his friends with stories about his analysis, finally decided to write about it, and the play 'Lady in the Dark', later a film, became a Broadway smash. One critic remarked jokingly after the show that it was one way of getting back all the money that Hart had given to Dr. Zilboorg.

Most unusually for a Freudian analyst, Zilboorg also had a rich and developing spiritual life. On reaching maturity, he abandoned the Orthodox Jewish faith into which he was born. However at that first lecture given on American soil he met the Quaker Jesse Holmes, Professor of Philosophy at Swarthmore, who invited Zilboorg to join a lecture circuit—which he did. Zilboorg admired and respected Holmes and, partly under his influence, became a member of the Society of Friends. He stopped attending Quaker meetings after World War II began.

Margaret Stone Zilboorg, who was initially appointed his research assistant in 1940 and later became his wife, was a member of the Episcopalian Church. She writes in her brief biography that Zilboorg occasionally went to church with her but was never truly touched. She reports him saying, 'It's the scholarship that's lacking; they just don't have the scholarship'.¹

Encounters and intellectual discussions with theologians, primarily monks who were interested in psychology, delighted and excited his own intellect and by the early 1950s he found himself drawn towards the Catholic faith. In

1953 he records that he was convinced that he wanted and needed to join the Roman Catholic Church, which in 1954 he did.

Zilboorg wrote about the relationship between religion and psychoanalysis and became noted for his analysis of what he referred to as 'Freud's blind spot'. In his book *Psychoanalysis and Religion* he wrote about the possibilities for a synthesis between Freudian psychology and Christian belief, and by doing so he set himself bravely at odds with the analytic establishment. Interestingly, Zilboorg in his work often refers approvingly to the same Catholic intellectuals – Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain – who so inspired Merton.

In the United States in the 1950s psychoanalysis was both fashionable as a treatment and as a way of understanding the human mind. As a discipline it was firmly linked with the scientific medical establishment, indeed only medically trained professionals could qualify as psychoanalysts. Freud's dismissal of religion as only an 'illusion' was matched by the ruthlessness within the analytic community which Zilboorg recognised as psychoanalytic imperialism and this addiction to 'onlyness'. Writing about Freud's theories of religion, Zilboorg notes how:

He [Freud] chose the least characteristic and most fluid traits of religion – its ritual aspects – and by way of singular concordism chose to equate the established rituals of religion with the sclerosed repetitiousness of the "ritual" of the compulsion neurotic. He thought that he had thus disposed of religious faith, and particularly the Christian faith to which he seemed to gravitate so intensely and which he wished to deny just as intensely.²

In the same paper, Zilboorg analyses the 'megalomaniac sort of patriotism in favour of one's own scientific

inventions' that lies behind this type of thinking, and the need to take into account one's religious bias.³ He concludes from his analysis of psychoanalytic and psychological studies of religious experience that:

While psychology can throw a great deal of psychological light on religious experiences and religious faith may enrich one's psychological functioning, psychology as a scientific discipline can shed no light whatsoever on the relations between God and man.⁴

Despite Zilboorg's acute perceptions, this subsuming of religious faith and practice into a sort of 'psychoanalytic knowing' has largely continued into present times. However there are a small number of psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic psychotherapists who have continued such pioneering work, acknowledging the potential for mutual enrichment between the two subjects. Zilboorg died on the 17th September 1959. Throughout his illness Zilboorg kept a pen and paper beside him ready to write. His last words were directed to his wife, who had brought in a lamp to his hospital bedside (so that he could see better to write) and was fixing the plug: 'Good, good. You know dear—*arbeiten und lieben*'. It was Freud's answer to what he considered the ideally normal person, a person whose life consisted of 'work and love'. His wife writes that Dr Gregory Zilboorg died 'a good analyst and a good Catholic'.⁵

THE MEETINGS BETWEEN MERTON AND ZILBOORG

Merton first met Zilboorg at the Collegeville, Minnesota conference in July 1956—a two week workshop in psychiatry and its practical application to the religious life.

In his journal entry for 23rd July Merton notes: 'Zilboorg was there, I only spoke a moment to him'. The next mention

later that same day records some of Zilboorg's ideas from a lecture especially around the idea that 'the whole person is sick' rather than just one part of them. There is a brief interchange between the men when Merton asks 'How define the dysfunctions of a neurotic'. Zilboorg replies, 'Science does not start with a definition but ends with it'.⁶ Here we see Zilboorg firmly locating his profession in the scientific model. He speaks as the expert doctor and analyst, and there is no attempt to engage with Merton's question or what might lie behind it. It is at this point, one could speculate, that the underlying defensiveness I would suggest was present already in both men begins to emerge as possible animosity between them.

According to Merton's journal over the next four days, he is both interested in, and moved to self-reflection by, the psychiatric and psychoanalytic workshops. We read by July 29th of Merton's guilt about the beauty of the lake and he asks, 'What is there in me that makes me feel I should not have so many good things? Or, rather not only not have them, but not even see them?' His questioning and comments on fear and loneliness resonate with what we know of his early experiences of loss, and his feelings before his conversion of being unlovable. It is understandable that the subjects discussed at the conference could have stirred up past pain and old disturbances. In that same entry, Merton writes of his conscious and unconscious life:

On the surface I have my confusion. On a deeper level desire and conflict. In the greatest depths, like a spring of pure water rising up in the flames of hell, is the smallness, the frailty of a hope that is, yet, never overwhelmed but continues strangely and inexplicably to nourish in the midst of apparent despair.

The next encounter noted with Zilboorg suggests an intensification of the underlying animosity. We read that Zilboorg has been extremely critical of Merton's article 'Neurosis in the Monastic Life'—'utterly inadequate, hastily written, will do harm, should not even be revised....' Zilboorg's advice is for Merton to put the article away and, instead, read Freud's books against religion. What is happening here? Is Zilboorg threatened by Merton's personal and informal style, his lack of scientific reasoning, his intrusion into Zilboorg's field? Does Zilboorg need Merton to be 'only' a monk—and a 'proper' one at that?

The subsequent meeting is even more aggressive and, according to Merton's page-and-a-half journal entry, Zilboorg is highly judgmental. Zilboorg, amongst other things, castigates Merton for an hour and a half about his neurosis, his dependence on vows as substitutes for reality, for his megalomania and narcissism, for his pathological hermit trend, and for his lack of affectivity. Merton records that the quotes include: 'You are a gadfly to your superiors'; 'Very stubborn'; 'You are afraid to be an ordinary monk in the community'; 'you thought only of yourself'. Despite the strength of these critical comments, we can see that Merton does recognise some aspects of himself in the descriptions and, consequently, his reaction is mixed. He reflects on some of what Zilboorg says but is also furious, stunned and upset.

His pain emerges as an association in the next journal entry where he writes about the birds on the lake – the loons – and here it is no coincidence that he chooses to reflect on birds that carry the name of madness. 'The loon, I think, is a very serious bird and I take him very seriously. To me it is not crazy but even, in a way, beautiful. It means: distances,

wind, water, forests, the loneliness of the North'. The feelings aroused by his meeting with Zilboorg are implicit in his description. Although not noted in Merton's journal, a second meeting apparently took place with Zilboorg in the presence of Abbot Dom James, where Merton – horribly exposed – became furiously angry and deeply upset. Mott describes how Zilboorg had set up a situation to disadvantage Merton, whose response confirmed the worst misgivings of Dom James. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Merton's emotional outburst remained in Dom James' memory and did influence his future decision-making.

According to the letters between Robert Lax and Thomas Merton there is one further meeting between Zilboorg and Merton which takes place on December 27th 1956, when Zilboorg visits Gethsemani. Once again there is an unpleasant confrontation as he warns Merton against psychoanalysis—at least with him. Zilboorg seems to have vented more of his aggression against Merton, who, in turn, handles his own feelings by defensively joking with Lax.

Dr. Zilboorg he came all the way down here to give me the following directives 'If YGU get analysed you will ruin the business and all the analysts will have to hide in the bushes, for fear of the Index.

Furthermore you ought to get a great big overcoat ten sizes too big and wear it with dark glasses and pretend you are somebody else'. 'In addition to this it is essential that you buy a rowboat and go to the South Pole. You will be of the greatest assistance to psychoanalysis by staying as far as possible from New York.'⁷

Merton's last journal reference to Zilboorg notes his illness and Merton's intention to write to him, and then records his death in 1959, but with no comment. In a letter to Father Killian McDonnell (October 3rd 1959), Merton writes: 'Wasn't it sad to hear that Gregory Zilboorg was dead? I just

learned it yesterday. A great and good man and may God grant him rest and eternal life...' Whatever pain Zilboorg had caused three years earlier Merton had partially resolved.⁸

'THE HERMIT IN TIMES SQUARE'

Zilboorg writes that psychology as a scientific discipline can shed no light on the relations between man and God, but it can shed quite a bit of light on relations between man and man. Inevitably the following thoughts are speculative but the dynamics between Zilboorg and Merton deserve an attempted analysis.

It does seem as if the initial defensive hostility was projected by Zilboorg onto Merton. Mott notes that Zilboorg was in no state of objectivity when he met Merton. He clearly disapproved of Merton's article and of Merton's position, and is reputed to have said that he had already analysed Merton from his writings. 'His first concern was to deal with somebody he regarded as a dangerous quack. The preconception affected Zilboorg's handling of the situation'.⁹

I think there are several aspects of this disapproval. The first links to Zilboorg's attraction to the idea of the 'orthodox' in the sense of what is 'right, correct, true; in accordance with what is authoritatively established as the true view or right practice'.¹⁰ Zilboorg was brought up in the Orthodox Jewish tradition. He was in many senses an orthodox Freudian analyst and, I think, in his conversion to Catholicism made only two years before the meeting with Merton, he was looking for the authoritative, intellectual, 'orthodox' established tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. He had been impressed by the intellect and humanism of the monks he had met,

and wanted more of the same. In other words, he wanted Merton to accord to his idea of how Merton should be, rather than accepting how Merton actually was. The unorthodox writer and unorthodox monk disturbed Zilboorg's own need for the orthodox.

However, there is also a paradox here in that Zilboorg himself was unorthodox as an analyst in the sense that he went against the established Freudian theoretical understanding of religion. He was also somewhat unorthodox in the way that he built up a private practice amongst show business people and the archives record that he appeared on radio and in the press.

It is possible that in his accusation of Merton ('You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying HERMIT¹¹'), Zilboorg was denying and splitting his awareness of his own celebrity position in the media and popular culture, and pushing that onto Merton with associated venom. In other words, Zilboorg was attacking the unorthodox part of himself as he saw it demonstrated in Merton.

A second aspect of Zilboorg's hostility towards Merton links, I suggest, to the word 'Bolshevik'. Zilboorg fled to America a year or so after the 1917 October coup and the rise of the Bolsheviks. Under the Bolsheviks, public humiliation was part of a policy aimed at destroying the self-respect of the 'former classes'. A Chekist commander announced, 'We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. Neither cassock, nor uniform, nor diploma can give them protection'.¹² Zilboorg would have known about and undoubtedly have disapproved of Merton's early conversion to Communism as described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and this would have contributed to his sense of Merton. However, I think the 'Bolshevik'

connection is most evident when, in meeting with Merton, Zilboorg seems to identify with his own experience of aggression and persecution in Russia, in turn becoming the aggressor in that meeting. In other words, Zilboorg enacts his own underlying experience of persecutory aggression and need for control in the encounter with Merton.

'HOW MUCH HE LOOKS LIKE STALIN'

This speculation is, I think, confirmed by Merton on at least two occasions. The first time is in a letter to one of the Cistercian censors. 'When I was at Collegeville recently, Dr Zilboorg, who is a good judge of character, assured me that I was much more aggressive than I realised'.¹³ Here we see Merton's mixed feelings in his perception of the partial truth in Zilboorg's comment, and his use of irony in the phrase 'assured me', which hints at his experience of Zilboorg's aggression towards him.

Further confirmation is found in Merton's journal account of the hour-and-a-half meeting with Zilboorg. He writes, 'While he said all this I thought "How much he looks like Stalin"'. Here is Merton's description of what it felt like to be in the room with Zilboorg: as if he was with Stalin (which translates as 'Man of steel'), the ruthless tyrant, dictator, propagandist and destroyer of millions. We know from his writings that Merton freely acknowledged his anti-authoritarian leanings and that these at times had surfaced in the monastery and in earlier encounters.

The root of this dynamic lies, I suggest, in the early mother-son relationship. Merton records his feeling that his mother was critical of him, disappointed in the way he was, and her great ambition after perfection and 'how things should be':

one night I was sent to bed early for stubbornly spelling "which" without the first "h" ... I remember brooding about this as an injustice. "What do they think I am, anyway?" After all, I was only five years old!¹⁴

Perhaps here there is some resonance with Zilboorg's criticisms of Merton's article? When Merton writes that he wonders whether 'solitaries are made by severe mothers' he understands the danger of intimacy that leads to critical rejection.¹⁵

One can surmise that Merton might have been anxious about meeting Zilboorg, but was also looking for some support and insight both for himself and for his novices. In a letter to Abbot James Fox some months before the meeting with Zilboorg, Merton writes:

I am beginning to realize that I am something of a problem and that I need plenty of grace now. I am coming to a crucial point in my life in which I may make a complete mess of everything – or let Jesus make a complete success of everything. On the whole my nerves are not too good and I can't rely on my faculties as I used to – they play tricks on me, and I get into nervous depression and weakness. However I have to react by faith, by love of the cross, and work especially.¹⁶

He also demonstrates great insight about the mental strain experienced by those entering the monastery. In a letter to Abbot Augustine Moore he wryly notes amongst other observations the dangers of perfectionism and the tendency to force sanctity by sheer strain. Unlike the observation from Zilboorg, Merton in 1953 recognises the false notion of the monastic life: 'In fact, we are ordinary people'.¹⁷

AFTER THE STORM

In Minnesota, when there is thunder it is continuous. There was thunder last night and now it has been thundering again—softly, stubbornly, and without interruption.

Following the disturbing encounter

with Zilboorg at the conference we read of Merton's upset, confusion and then his recommitment to Christ in prayer.

Forgive me, O Lord, by your Cross and Passion and Resurrection... Teach me to live in You.¹⁸ Later in the same journal we read of his use of various insights gained from the conference in his work with novices. One account very soon after the Minnesota conference is particularly relevant, as it seems to somewhat replicate the Zilboorg experience, as if Merton has enacted aspects of the same psychodynamic. He describes his relationship with one of the novices and the confused projections and dynamics between them.

He became very upset fancying that I demanded that he be a brilliant and complicated person (which is what he fancies me to be) and I enhanced that illusion by not giving him time to talk about himself but always delivering the diagnosis before he had even the chance to tell me all the symptoms. This while beating him down and rendering him very insecure, also stimulated a desperate search for more "symptoms" so that I would deliver more and more godlike diagnoses. Finally, in a culmination of stupidity I even gave him the Rorschach Test... and interpreted it all wrong.

However, unlike Zilboorg, Merton recognises what he is doing:

'I will say this—I could see at once that my interpretation was useless. I hope I have learned a lot from all this. It was a great relief and liberation to admit my stupidity'.¹⁹

Some time later Merton also acknowledges the relief that he had not gone to be analysed by Zilboorg in 1956, as the abbot had originally wanted,

What a tragedy and mess that would have been ... There was no conceivable part for me to play in his life, on the contrary!... The whole thing would have been unimaginably absurd.²⁰

Four years later, after Zilboorg's death, Merton began to meet with Dr James Wygall, a Louisville psychologist who had in fact been recommended by

Zilboorg. This proved a very different sort of experience but not without its own problems.

We have no record of Zilboorg's reaction to the encounter, except that he clearly felt there was unfinished business that necessitated his later visit to Gethsemani and another attempt to sort out Merton. Two and a half years later he was dead.

Shannon comments that it is questionable whether Zilboorg, in his resentment of Merton's attempts to write about psychological matters, was capable of an unbiased analysis of Merton's psychological stability. He also adds that what occurred was a conflict between two men whose adult conversion to Catholicism had made them prominent figures in the Catholic community.²¹ Whilst this rivalry is clearly the manifest case I think that at the latent level, the experiences that both men brought to the encounter reveal a deeper dynamic going on between them. Both men needed and wanted something else from the encounter, and both were angry and disappointed by each other. The intellectual Zilboorg wanted orthodoxy, control and order. He wanted to remain the scientist, the doctor in charge, and the analyst. He wanted clear rational thinking, and clear boundaries and positions in his relationships. The emotional Merton did not want the criticism and severity he immediately experienced from Zilboorg about his article. He wanted insight, support and understanding for his confusion. As a monk, writer and poet I think he was looking for a more mutual and sympathetic relationship—

perhaps even based on a form of sharing and common understanding. He saw 'psychiatry, psychoanalysis, Zen' as 'important instruments...for the apostolate'.²² He was looking for a connection that Zilboorg unfortunately was unable to offer.

Notes and References

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