

Fear Thy Neighbour: Merton and the 1961 Shelter Scare

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Introduction

On 21st October 1961, Thomas Merton replied by letter to Jim Forest at *The Catholic Worker* newspaper in New York.¹ Forest had written to Merton, as a prominent American Catholic author, urging him to speak out against anti-communist paranoia gripping the nation. Throughout 1961, tensions were mounting between the United States and the Soviet Union regarding the status of Berlin. Americans, bolstered by a nationalist media, feared Soviet expansion in the West. By autumn, the Soviet Union resumed testing nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, thereby ending the three-year temporary moratorium of such tests agreed in 1958. A thermonuclear exchange between the superpowers seemed to be edging closer. Forest informed Merton that whole towns across America were preparing to defend themselves against fellow Americans in the event of a surprise nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. On the day he received the letter Merton noted in his journal:

[E]veryone has gone crazy, building fallout shelters and preparing to shoot their neighbors. Whole towns preparing to defend themselves against neighboring towns. What do the Russians need with bombs at all? Just get a false alarm going and we will all shoot each other up without giving them further trouble! A nice testimony to democracy and individualism! ²

I have chosen to reflect on the justifications that Thomas Merton gave for his social engagement during the shelter scare in autumn of 1961 when

Americans debated the legitimacy of survival in the aftermath of a nuclear attack.³ By 1961, Merton had begun to reassess his youthful enthusiasm for the religiosity of the cloistered life as he struggled to authentically define his place as a contemplative in America. By contrast, the American Catholic mainstream regarded Merton's stance as undermining national interests by questioning the rationality of nuclear deterrence to guarantee national security. The shelter scare, as a media event, is a pivotal moment for understanding Merton as a writer. It marked a definitive turn in his concern for social justice, placing the emphasis on human flourishing and the common good, during his final decade.

American Citizens as Frontline Defenders

America's national shelter debate was provoked by President John F. Kennedy's domestic response to the Berlin crisis in 1961. Berlin was a lightning rod for East-West tensions during the Cold War. It tested American political resolve as to whether the nation would risk war to defend the city deep inside the Soviet sector.⁴ The impending crisis had been building steadily since Kennedy's disappointing Vienna summit with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Premier, in June 1961.⁶ Khrushchev was threatening to negotiate a separate peace with East Germany and to declare Berlin a neutral city from which the Western Allies, who had occupied Berlin since 1945, would have to withdraw. Walter Ulbricht, head of the German Democratic Republic, was placing political pressure on Khrushchev to stop the haemorrhage of East Germans fleeing to the West mostly through the open city of Berlin. One-sixth of Berlin's population, out of a total of 2.8 million, crossed into the West between 1949 and 1961.⁷ American Catholic media carried emotive reports of refugees escaping religious persecution for freedom in the West through the Berlin corridor.⁷ Kennedy's address to the American nation on 25th July 1961 on the crisis over Berlin assured a stunned public that his administration would inform citizens on how to protect themselves and their families in the event of a surprise nuclear attack by the Soviet Union.⁸ He rhetorically presented American citizens as soldiers in the Cold War with their own backyards becoming the front line.⁹

The *Time-Life* media consortium endorsed President John F. Kennedy's home shelter campaign.¹⁰ The editorial that seeded anxiety across America was titled 'Gun Thy Neighbor' published in *Time* magazine on 18th August 1961. This article featured a Chicago suburbanite who proudly proclaimed that in the event of a nuclear attack

he would mount a machine gun at the hatch of his fallout shelter to repel fellow Americans approaching to seek sanctuary.¹¹ The *Time* article affirmed, 'There's nothing in the Christian ethic which denies one's right to protect oneself and one's family.'¹² The article reported that the head of Civil Defence in Las Vegas, J. Carlton Adair, was anticipating an invasion of Nevada after a nuclear attack, by a tattered horde of Los Angeles residents 'like a swarm of locusts'. Adair advocated the establishment of a militia to protect Las Vegas against such an eventuality.¹³

Laurence McHugh and the Ethics of Survival

The realist, Fr. Laurence C. McHugh, S.J., a science editor of the Catholic periodical *America*, was the dominant voice emerging from Catholic America. In his essay, 'Ethics at the Shelter Doorway', McHugh offered a consequentialist code of shelter morality: shelter owners should think twice before rashly giving their family's shelter space to friends, and those who attempted to invade private shelters should be repelled with any means necessary.¹⁴ McHugh assured readers that no Catholic moralist would condemn any man who used available violence to repel panicky neighbours plying crowbars at the shelter door who threatened the security of his family. Here he was adhering to Catholic teaching related to the preservation of private property during wartime.¹⁵ While McHugh avoided pronouncing any direct imperative on shelter ethics, nevertheless his conclusion implied his endorsement of the *Time* editorial asserting legalism over Christian charity.¹⁶ McHugh's realism highlighted for Americans that there was no conflict between Catholics being faithful and being patriotic.

A negative media backlash against Fr. Laurence C. McHugh exposed Protestant America's residual anti-Catholicism that had been deflected, but not defeated, by John F. Kennedy's election in 1960 as the first Roman Catholic American president. A fear that persisted in non-Catholic America was that the First Amendment's rights to freedom of worship and to freedom of speech would be threatened if Catholics were to become politically dominant.¹⁷ McHugh's realism drew criticism from the charismatic preacher Billy Graham who condemned it outright: 'I feel a primary responsibility for my family but I don't believe I myself could stay in a shelter while my neighbor had no protection.'¹⁸ Graham's criticism had residual echoes of the anti-Catholicism that had dominated Kennedy's presidential campaign in which Protestant churches had interpreted defeating Kennedy as a struggle of national importance.¹⁹ The

Protestant magazine *Christian Century* interpreted Roman Catholicism as the antithesis of American freedom by ascribing to it foreign loyalties, domestic intransigence, censoriousness, and opposition to a free and vigorous intellectual life, just as threatening to America as international communism.²⁰ In reaction, the editors of the Catholic periodical *America* sought to soften McHugh's uncompromising position on shelter morality by printing a byline: 'Our guess is that Fr. McHugh would be the first to step aside from his own shelter door, yielding space to his neighbor.'²¹

Thomas Merton's rebuttal of Laurence McHugh

Thomas Merton felt both intellectually and morally obliged to confront Fr. Laurence C. McHugh's realism that had sought to circumscribe personal dignity in purely utilitarian terms. Merton perceived 'Gun Thy Neighbor' realism as socially corrosive because it privileged utilitarianism over the dignity of the person and the common good. As he noted in his journal: 'It is not possible to solve our problems on the basis of "every man for himself" and saving your own skin by killing the first person who threatens it.'²² A point of contention for Merton was how McHugh's realism had the potential to be viewed by Americans as representing the consensus of Catholic American opinion.

Thomas Merton was careful not to promote disaffection against Catholicism in an America where denominations divided along lines of ethnicity. Merton's essay, 'The Root of War is Fear', published in *The Catholic Worker* in October 1961, focused on Americans as Christians, rather than on the distinctly American Catholic sub-culture, in order to influence religiously minded Americans into lobbying against the escalating arms race. Merton's rebuttal of McHugh's realism argued that it was the responsibility of individual Christians to work 'towards nonviolent settlement of difficulties and towards the gradual abolition of war as the way of settling international or civil disputes.'²³ To Merton, any possible diplomatic solution would necessitate authentic political engagement in stark contrast to the dominant value system of mutual political dissimulation. He argued that Cold War militarism was as much a moral as it was a political construct. He acknowledged that the dilemma in debating survival was one of 'terrifying complexity and magnitude for which the Church herself is not fully able to see clear and decisive solutions'.²⁴ And in 'The Shelter Ethic', published the following month in *The Catholic Worker*, Merton showed how the realist polemic of nuclear survival was morally flawed because it isolated individual, familial, and national fears from common humanity.²⁵

On a deeper level, Thomas Merton perceived Laurence McHugh's realism as masking a Roman Catholic complicity towards an escalating militarism that endangered the institution's moral authority. In December 1961 Merton wrote to Archbishop Thomas Roberts in London: 'This gradual progress is accepted with fatalistic indifference or ignored in a spirit of irresponsibility and passivity. The most scandalous thing of all . . . is that the Church and her clergy have been almost completely silent.'²⁶ Merton noted in his journal: 'It appears that I am one of the few Catholic priests in the country who has come out unequivocally for a completely intransigent fight for the abolition of war, for the use of non-violent means to settle international conflicts.'²⁷

By Thanksgiving, November 1961, Fr. Laurence McHugh, whose controversial views had ignited America's shelter debate, remained stalwart and unapologetic.²⁸ He acknowledged that his opinions had caused national controversy; but he assured the readers of *America* magazine that his numerous detractors, who included Thomas Merton within their ranks, in arguing that 'a vote for shelters' was 'a vote for nuclear war' had expressed just as perilous a viewpoint as the one of which he had been accused in the national media. McHugh argued that while he had suggested a partial guide for shelter morality, his detractors, who considered his position immoral, had not proposed any alternative preventative measures.²⁹ The Catholic periodical *America* blamed the ambiguity of liberals for the rise of right-wing radicals, such as the John Birch Society, with threats of international communism infiltrating and subverting America.³⁰

Total War Requires Total Pacifism

The members of the Catholic Worker Movement, founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, could not morally support America's conflict with the Soviet Union, however lofty its justification, because they belonged to the 'other International', the Catholic Church. With a headline in *The Catholic Worker*, Dorothy Day had declared, 'We are Un-American: We are Catholics', as patriotic sentiment had soared in 1948.³¹ The threat of total war required a total pacifist response. The movement's anti-nuclear protest received neither sanction nor support from the American Roman Catholic hierarchy.³²

As radical pacifists, Day and her co-workers regarded the national security drills of 'Operation Alert', staged in over 200 cities from 1954 until 1961, as inculcating a culture of moral anesthesia by promoting a false sense of security against nuclear war. Day, as a radical pacifist,

considered that America had betrayed the righteousness of its calling in the world and she perceived violence as an affront against God.³³ Her concern that civilian defence had the potential to escalate the risk of nuclear war influenced Merton's understanding of the shelter mentality, that a nuclear war was in some sense survivable, as a link in the military's 'kill chain' strategy.³⁴

Thomas Merton was not uncritical of Dorothy Day's absolute pacifism. In this, he concurred with the Catholic church's ethical position of qualified pacifism by affirming the right of the state to engage in a defensive war.³⁵ Merton's position aligned with Pope John XXIII in his social encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher) promulgated in May 1961.³⁶ As Merton wrote to Dorothy Day in December 1961, the Christian ethic was to 'rise above nature' to 'see the person'.³⁷ Naked individualism, Merton argued, corroded community values and, as a consequence, was detrimental to America's espousal of freedom.

Conclusion

American politicians did not adequately communicate necessary reassurances to the civilian population during the shelter scare. This failure opened a space for moralists to critique the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence to secure freedom. Fr. Laurence C. McHugh, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, advocated from different ideological positions, that American Catholics could be disciples as well as citizens. McHugh's partial code of shelter ethics was too instrumental for Merton who considered Jesuitical regulations too systematic in contrast to his own Cistercian spirituality promoting the importance of the individual. Merton's social writings put him in an awkward position of being both inside and outside the anti-war movement, and inside and outside Catholicism. Yet he considered this liminal position as the only one a person of conscience could occupy.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, letter to Jim Forest, 21 October 1961, in *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2010), p. 250.
2. Thomas Merton, journal entry, 21 October 1961. *Thomas Merton, Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals 1960-1963*, ed. Victor Kramer (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 172.
3. Robert Jacobs, "'There Are No Civilians; We Are All at War': Nuclear War Shelter and Survival Narratives during the Early Cold War", *The Journal of American Culture*, 20:4 (2007), pp. 401-416.

4. For a detailed account of the Berlin crisis see Fredrick Kempe, *Berlin, 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (London: Penguin, 2012).
5. John F. Kennedy, 'Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis', 25 July 1961, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), pp. 533-540.
6. Kenneth Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 255.
7. Francis Lally, 'Berlin - A Gaping Hole in Iron Curtain', *The Record* 83:32 (11 August 1961), p. 20.
8. Kennedy (note 5), pp. 533-540.
9. Raymond Bosler, 'Can we Defend Ourselves', *The Criterion* 1:40, (28 July 1961), p. 1.
10. 'Kennedy's message on fallout shelters', *Life* 15 (September 1961) in Rose (note 6), p. 84, fig. 22.
11. Charles Davis, 'Gun Thy Neighbor?', *Time* 78:7 (18 August 1961), p. 60.
12. 'Gun Thy Neighbor?', p. 60.
13. 'Gun Thy Neighbor?', p. 60.
14. Laurence McHugh, 'Ethics at the Shelter Doorway', *America* 105:27 (30 September 1961), pp. 825-826.
15. Thomas Slater and Michael Martin, *A Manual of Moral Theology Vol. 1* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1909), p. 322.
16. Rose (note 6), pp. 96, 257.
17. Gerald Fogarty, 'Reflections on the Centennial of "Testem Benevolentiae"', *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17:1 (Winter 1999), p. 9.
18. Peter Braestrup, 'The Shelter Dilemma: Great Confusion Exists over What to Do', *New York Times* (19 November 1961) in Rose (note 6), p. 257.
19. Shaun Casey, *The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 178.
20. Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 310.
21. McHugh (note 14), p. 824.
22. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, journal entry for 23 October 1961, pp. 172-173.
23. Thomas Merton, 'The Root of War is Fear', *The Catholic Worker*, 28:3 (October 1961), p. 1; The essay is included in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: Reflections on War and Nonviolence*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad Books, 1995), pp. 11-19. It consists of the censored chapter 16, 'The Root of War is Fear', from *New Seeds of Contemplation* preceded by 3 long uncensored paragraphs..
24. 'The Root of War is Fear', *Passion for Peace*, p. 12.

25. See 'The Shelter Ethic', first published in *The Catholic Worker* 28:4 (November 1961). It is included in *Passion for Peace*, pp. 20-26.
26. Thomas Merton, Cold War Letter # 9 in *Cold War Letters*. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (eds.), (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 25.
27. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, entry for 23 October 1963, p. 172.
28. Emma Harrison, 'Priest Unmoved On Shelter View; But Calls Violent Defense One of Many Questions', *The New York Times* (22 November 1961), p. 3.
29. Laurence McHugh, 'More on the Shelter Question', *America* 106:8 (25 November 1961), p. 267.
30. Robert Graham, 'The John Birch Society', *America* 108:9 (2 December 1961), pp. 324-329. The John Birch Society, founded in 1958, was a radical right-wing fiercely anti-communist organization. Over the last 20 years its membership and influence has dramatically declined. It now aligns itself with the Tea Party movement.
31. Dorothy Day, 'We are Un-American: We are Catholics', *The Catholic Worker* (April 1948), p. 2; Mel Piehl, 'The Catholic Worker and Peace in the Early Cold War Era' in Anne Klejment and Nancy L Roberts (eds.), *American Catholic Pacifism: The Influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (Westport Connecticut: Praeger, 1996), p. 80.
32. Mark S. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), pp. 120-121.
33. Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), pp. 493-494.
34. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2009, originally published in 1966), p. 192. On implications of the 'kill chain' see Derek Gregory, "'Doors into Nowhere': Dead Cities and the Natural History of Destruction", P. Meusburger *et al.* (eds.), *Cultural Memories, Knowledge and Space* 4 (Berlin: Springer, 2011), pp. 249-283.
35. Lucy Brown, 'Intentions in the conduct of the just war', Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichman (eds.), *Intention and Intentionality: Essays in Honour of G.E.M. Anscombe* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1979), pp. 133-145.
36. John XXIII 'Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress' (1961) in Daniel J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (eds.), *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), pp. 82-127.
37. *Cold War Letters*, # 11, p. 33.

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