

Avoiding the Nuclear Apocalypse

Mr. President, I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than 10 to 20 million killed—tops!

General Buck Turgidson describing for the President the “minor” casualties from a nuclear war in the movie,
Dr. Strangelove (1964)

It is frightening to realize that . . . “Christian society” is more purely and simply a materialistic neo-paganism with a Christian veneer. And where the Christian veneer has been stripped off, we see laid bare the awful vacuity of the mass-mind, without morality, without identity, without compassion, without sense, and rapidly reverting to tribalism and superstition. Here, spiritual religion has yielded to the tribal-totalitarian war dance and to the idolatrous worship of the machine.

Thomas Merton,
Peace in the Post-Christian Era

A Casualty of War

IN THE SUMMER OF 1942, Thomas Merton's only brother, John Paul, was training to be part of a bomber crew in Canada. On a leave, John Paul visited his brother at the monastery. Both stood in unfamiliar clothing, one in the habit of a Trappist monk and the other in the uniform of a sergeant in the Royal Canadian Air Force. John Paul

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wanted to become a Catholic. After some preparation, he was baptized and received into the Church with both brothers receiving communion together. It was the last time they would see each other. On April 16, 1943, John Paul's bomber had a malfunction and crashed in the English Channel. His back was broken on impact and he was placed in a raft where he cried in torment for water. He died and was buried at sea. Thomas Merton had lost his mother at 6, his father at 16, and now his only brother at 28.¹ This death inspired a poem, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943."

Where and in what desolate and smokey country
Lies your body, lost and dead?
And in what landscape of disaster
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road? . . .
When all the men of war are shot
And flags have fallen into dust,
Your cross and mine shall tell men still
Christ died on each, for both of us.²

An Urgent Problem

The agony of war was now personal. For the remainder of his life, the issue of war remained a central concern of Thomas Merton. He was not naive about the response his comments might evoke. Merton admitted, "that this whole unpleasant issue of war is a delicate one to handle. I know too that people are very upset and excitable, and that it is very difficult to keep a straight perspective when discussing such a critical problem. It is very unfortunate that many people think that the mere fact of hesitating to approve an all out nuclear war makes a man by that very fact a communist."³

By the 1960s, Merton declared that war was the most urgent problem of modern man. In 1962, he predicted a major war by 1967. To counter this possibility, he declared that Christians were under a divine imperative to disarm and live in peace and "this is the one great

1. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 221–22.

2. Merton, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943" in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 36.

3. Merton, *WF*, 32–33, "Letter to J. F. S" (February, 1962).

lesson that we have to learn. Everything else is trivial . . .”⁴ The pervasive violence in the world offended his deep longing for peace, balance, and a humane world. A failure to deal with armed conflict threatened any kind of spiritual progress and the formation of humane communities. The project of the Second Vatican Council to promote a viable Christian humanism was impossible amidst the ceaseless devotion to the creation and use of military power.⁵

Some hint of these concerns about warfare came early. He prepared a notice of conscientious objection in the spring of 1941. While he accepted the Catholic just war doctrine, he could not see “killing people with flamethrowers as any form of Christian perfection.”⁶ In his famous autobiography, *Seven Story Mountain* (1948), the young monk recorded his disgust with the century of “poison gas and atomic bombs.” The United States was on the “doorsill of the apocalypse.”⁷ The presence of military posts near Gethsemani was a source of enervation. In 1947 the guns at Fort Knox were “tuning up for war.”⁸ Two years later, Merton admitted that the constant artillery practice near the monastery had evoked a “feeling of uneasiness in the pit of my stomach” for over seven years. His opposition to atomic weaponry was unequivocal by 1951.⁹ A more solid theoretical framework in the 1960s strengthened these early concerns. By then he concluded that the march to mass destruction through a nuclear war was a result of the mentality of technique that prompted ceaseless military improvisation. The war machine was speeding “downhill without brakes.”¹⁰

The rapid explosion of new military technologies preoccupied both the communists and the Western democracies. Merton labeled the ideological camps, per the battling entities in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation, Gog and Magog. Merton fully recognized the terrible human rights violations of communist regimes including the persecution of religions. The communist ideology was more rigid and monolithic, but he acknowledged some similarities between communism and capitalism

4. Merton, *CGB*, 214–19.

5. Merton, *FV*, 259–87.

6. Merton, *RJ*, 10, “Letter to Mark Van Doren” (Lent, 1941).

7. Merton, *Seven Story Mountain*, 94.

8. Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, 81.

9. Merton, *ES*, 452, entry of March 3, 1951.

10. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, 103–04, hereafter *PCE*.

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in their idolization of material realities and adopting of a mentality of technique. Based on these false premises, Gog (the communists) desired power and Magog (the capitalists) desired wealth. These shallow goals left both of them spiritually barren. They were opportunistic and pragmatic, blindly passive in their submission to a “demonic activism.”¹¹

Despite their shallowness and futility, each ideology demanded devotion to its “cause” that was justified by a “state of mind.” A “state of mind” was a foundational set of perceptions that was composed of a number of “superficial assumptions” about the world and its processes. The present “state of mind” of both Gog and Magog grounded in a pervasive materialism bred a mutual “truculence and suspicion.” Suspicion of the other justified increasingly destructive technologies because of “the needs of the moment.”¹²

The “state of mind” was powerful because of its claim to being objective. Each side imagined that their causes and only their causes were “fair, objective, practical and humane.” Taking their objectivity for granted, they did not carefully probe and check the facts of their side, their cause. Indeed, we manipulated the facts to fit our worldview. Merton concluded that, “objectivity becomes simple dogmatism.”¹³ This dogmatism threatened to spark a global collapse into another war, perhaps the last war. There were powerful forces that benefited from the plunge into darkness. The machinery of war undergirded national affluence. It was a new product line and Merton commented, “An H-Bomb I am told costs only two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to make. Was there ever such a bargain? I ask you, who can give you more destruction for your dollar? Is it believable that we can resist getting all that we have paid for?”¹⁴

Because of the absolute requirements of the contemporary “state of mind,” nations were free to create military technologies that threatened to eliminate entire societies. These weapons were not the brain children of evil scientists but the result of a moral callousness in the fabric of a technological society that placed a priority on efficiency and progress. Such goals lacked rationality. Clichés about liberty, faith, and an adherence to

11. Merton, “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra,” 372–91.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Merton, *FV*, 154–55.

14. Merton, *CGB*, 218.

material prosperity disguised an essential emptiness.¹⁵ The embracing of this emptiness by political elites spread a “motiveless violence.”¹⁶

This “motiveless violence” was demonstrated in the Vietnam conflict and was personified in President Lyndon Johnson’s Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, who was trained at Ford and directed the mass production of death in a remote country. McNamara embodied the modern bureaucrat who had “incredible technical skill and no sense of human realities.” He was lost in “abstractions, sentimentalities, myths, delusions.” More broadly, the war was the product of “good ordinary people” whose “surface idealism” and “celebration of warm human values” hid their allegiance to a technological regime of expansive capacities and swift progress. Ellul’s “technique” advances the folly of the United States in Vietnam and “comes from the blind obsession with mechanical efficiency to the exclusion of all else: the determination to make the war machine work, whether the results are useful or not.” Military systems in this context were prone to uncontrollable paroxysms of destruction producing a “sick feeling that the big machine has gone on the rampage again and no one can really control it.” Increasing violence and destruction in Vietnam only provoked higher levels of resistance.¹⁷

While he wrote extensively about the Vietnam War, the problem of nuclear war was the deepest concern for Merton. There was the constant reminder of this possibility in the airplanes of the Strategic Air Command flying over the abbey. These planes were described in various journals as “technological swans,” “ponderous sharks,” and “apocalyptic cherubs.” They were “enormous, perfect, ominous, grey, full of Hiroshimas.”¹⁸ The people on the ground were just numbers to these planes. Each person was merely a unit in a calculus of destruction.

Could the values of the modern nation state prevent a nuclear cataclysm? Merton doubted it because of our devotion to military technology. He observed in the poem, “Original Child Bomb,” that the *Indianapolis*,

15. Merton, “The Church and the ‘Godless World-3,’” 3–7.

16. Merton, *HGL*, 161, “Letter to James Douglas” (November 6, 1965).

17. Merton, “Answers for Hernan Lavin Cerda,” 5–9; Merton, *WF*, 109, “Letter to Père Herve Chaigne” (April 21, 1965); Merton, *LL*, 41, 109–10, entries of April 16, 1966 and June 6, 1967; Merton, *FV*, 109–10.

18. Merton, “Day of A Stranger” in *Spiritual Master*, 215. Merton’s certainty that the planes belonged to the SAC command may be dubious, but the presence of military aircraft is certain. Merton, *DWL*, 72, 131, 169, 190, entries of February 7, 1964; July 28, 1964; November 24, 1964; and January 9, 1965.

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a cruiser carrying the radiation for the bomb to Tinian Island in World War II, had instructions that if the ship was sinking to save the nuclear fuel before any human life. The nuclear weapon had become an end in itself, an idol. Moreover, language was distorted on behalf of the atomic project. Merton recalled the allied code names on the mission that employed terms from birth, motherhood, and religion. Churchill was cabled after the first successful Los Alamos test that “babies satisfactorily born.” The scientists called it “little boy” and placed it in the “womb” of a B-29 named after the pilot’s mother. The original atomic bomb was code named “Trinity” as it would bring a new beatitude, a vision of ultimate destruction instead of eternal life. After delivering the bomb, the plane headed for the “Papacy.”¹⁹

The spare verses of “Original Child Bomb” slowly released the measured fury of the poem. Here was a vivid depiction of the unreality of an act that was too calm, logical, and detached. The tone of detachment signaled that the danger of nuclear war was not from insane men obeying insane orders, but from sane men following sane orders. The defense expert, Herman Kahn, in *Fortune* magazine declared “reasonable” an entire set of options that would result in the killing of millions.²⁰ The proposed use of nuclear weapons was “cool and deliberate,” based on the calculations of a computer employing ladders of escalation.²¹

The nuclear systems and strategies of the superpowers could thus arrive at a paradox, a nuclear war without anyone wanting it because if they did X, we must do Y. Complex realities and considerations must not be reduced to such an equation. In contrast to ideological slogans, there must be a careful reasoning process instead of the “fake technical objectivity of the engineers of death, who talk of the extermination of millions as if it were a matter of killing flies.”²² As for naive idealists, Merton chided those who wished to merely concentrate on the horror of weapons of mass destruction. Their energies should be redirected at controlling such powers. He found some merit, for example, in the plan of the physicist and “father” of the hydrogen bomb, Edmund Teller, for a

19. Merton, *Original Child Bomb*, 293–302.

20. Merton, *DWL*, 245–46, entry of May 1, 1965.

21. Merton, *CGB*, 209.

22. Merton, *CT*, 126, “Letter to Ernesto Cardenal” (September 11, 1961).

limited and purely defensive tactical nuclear strategy as a means to prevent an unlimited conflict.²³

Merton's analysis was foundational as well as strategic; he was also seeking the social, psychological, and economic causes of war. The modern technological war was a new type of conflict that hid its collective virulence unlike acts of individual violence.

Modern technological mass murder is not directly visible, like individual murder. It is abstract, corporate, businesslike, cool, free of guilt-feelings, and therefore a thousand times more deadly and effective than the eruption of violence out of individual hate . . . But our antiquated theology . . . blesses and canonizes the antiseptic violence of corporately organized murder because it is respectable, efficient, clean, and above all profitable.²⁴

This respectable, efficient, clean, and profitable warfare annihilated scores of innocent victims. Merton had met with some Hibakusha who were the Japanese victims of the American atomic bombs and he knew that the abstraction of nuclear war might end in the death of many similarly innocent people.²⁵ The disjunction of technological success and human annihilation in atomic weapons was possible because there was an insufficient grounding in non-technical values, particularly transcendent ones. Human beings, in the rush to production and progress, became a product, a thing to be manipulated and perfected or if necessary deleted.²⁶

Merton penned a poem, "Chant to Be Used in a Procession Around a Site With Furnaces," that described the extreme objectification of human life in the engineering of the Nazi concentration camps. Merton had read some of the memos of the engineers and commandants at the concentration camps and he used many of their phrases in the poem.²⁷ The object of the engineer/narrator was to efficiently produce a more perfect society as the machinery of death improved "upon human weakness" and produced "soap." The end of the poem about Auschwitz reminded the contemporary Western world that they too harbored a technological mentality and a comparable incapacity for self-examination. A warning

23. Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 218, entry of May 10, 1962 (hereafter, *TTW*).

24. Merton, *FV*, 7.

25. Merton, *DWL*, 104, entry of May 17, 1964.

26. Merton, *SS*, 299, entry of June 30, 1959; Merton, *TTW*, 4, entry of May 25, 1960.

27. Merton, *CGB*, 241.

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at the end of the poem proclaimed, “Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done.”²⁸

In November of 1964, there was a retreat at Gethsemani with noted peace movement activists like Philip and Daniel Berrigan and John Yoder. The issue of technology became a central focus of this gathering. The discussions centered on whether a technological society was inherently oriented to self-destruction or could be redeemed in a new “sacral order.”²⁹

This “sacral order” was the Kingdom of God, a path beyond Marxism and capitalism and the false collectivities of the modern world. The goal was not the freedom of the Soviet Man after the mythical “withering away of the state,” nor the chaotic irresponsibility that leaves Western man the captive of economic, social, and psychological forces “[but] the freedom of the Sons of God, on earth, in which individual life becomes the life story of God and its contents filled the vast expanses of the universe.”³⁰

This “new sacral order” would be difficult to achieve and required an “*inner renewal of the Christian and of his Church.*” In this renewal the Christian conscience must not remain a “vestigial faculty.” The Christian conscience must rediscover an internal spiritual communion with the “hidden ground of our being.” This “hidden ground” was revealed in the “human compassion and charity of Christ.” From this grounding in reality, the Christian could recover a moral orientation and reach correct judgments.³¹

One must have profound and solid grounding in spiritual principles, one must have a deep and persevering moral strength, a compassion, an attachment to truth and humanity, a faith in God, an uncompromising fidelity to God’s law of love. Failing this, a nebulous and all pervading ‘state of mind’ will take the role of morality and conscience, and will rationalize its prejudices with convenient religious or ethical formulas. The result will be a fatal turning away from truth and from justice.³²

28. Merton, “Chant to Be Used in a Procession Around a Site With Furnaces” in Merton, *Collected Poems*, 345–49.

29. Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, 259–60.

30. Merton, *DQ*, 24.

31. Merton, *PCE*, 124–162.

32. *Ibid.*, 91–92.

The Christian must carefully apply this approach to modern nuclear warfare. Dangerous simplifications resided within either the complete resignation of the pacifist or the indifference to carnage of the foreign policy realist and his drive to preserve the national interest. The situation required a subtler analysis. Extraordinary technological advances must also prompt a reconsideration of the validity of Catholic just war theory because of the risks to humanity. In the place of just war, realism, and traditional pacifism, there was another possibility for evaluating war, the ideal of “relative pacifism.” Relative pacifism occupied a moral no man’s land, a territory of contradictions and tensions. It assumed that nuclear war would “almost inevitably” violate all the conditions of a just war. Hence, peace negotiations through international organizations must be sought without capitulation or escalation.³³

The Scientist and Nuclear War

As noted in chapter 1, Merton’s notes for a lecture to his novices on technology cited with approval some public policy principles of the founder of the nuclear navy, Hyman Rickover. One of the admiral’s essential principles was that political authorities should listen to their technical experts. Merton observed that scientists like Neils Bohr, Leo Szilard, and Werner Heisenberg were among those who eventually grasped the problems with their atomic discoveries in a “widely human way.” Their caution could be contrasted with the proponents of a “narrow scientism” whose horizon considered only the short-term technical consequences of their actions.³⁴

Why had many scientists, albeit a bit tardy, exhibited sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of the nuclear project? In a chapter on nuclear scientists in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, Merton declared that a divinely inspired moral or natural law written on the heart of each person insured such an outcome.

The natural law has not been and cannot be abrogated. It is written in the hearts of all men, including Communists. It can of course be violated and silenced and indeed it is frequently and systematically violated, and has been for centuries in numberless ways both by societies and individuals. Still it must be recognized that the voice of conscience cannot be permanently

33. Merton, *PCE*, 83.

34. Merton, *LL*, 244, entry of June 3, 1967.

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silenced. Men will continually be confronted with truth. Even if natural ethics do not guarantee protection against the danger of nuclear war, there should be at least a vestige of sanity and common sense that would make us all realize that massive nuclear destruction should be avoided . . .³⁵

In a somewhat curious move, Merton was prone to give scientists the ethical benefit of the doubt even if they had ignored the natural law. He readily exonerated atomic scientists for not being able to stop their weapons from being deployed by political leaders. The physicist, Neils Bohr, could not be blamed for working on the atomic bomb project because he was a “modest soft spoken man, a reflective man and not an operator.”³⁶ Albert Einstein was a “great prophet of the now dead age of liberalism. He emerged with the disconcerting kindness and innocence of the liberal, came forth from the confusions of his day to produce for us all a little moment of clarity, and also, as an afterthought, he left us the atomic bomb. But we cannot take the bomb as a pretext for looking down on his liberalism, or doubting his benevolence.”³⁷

And why did Merton give Einstein and other scientists a pass on an ethical condemnation? Scientists on the Manhattan project did not express a moment of hesitation about the atomic bomb after the Nazi surrender and the threat of an atomic weapon by an Axis Power was removed. Perhaps the scientists should have developed their consciences and their moral sensibilities earlier. Were good intentions or detachment a sufficient excuse for their actions? Was Merton sufficiently aware of the dangers of an ethic of intention instead of an ethic of responsibility? Shouldn't we have a moral duty to anticipate certain outcomes from our actions?

In defense of Merton's analysis, it is worth remembering that many scientists had morally awakened after the Second World War and by the time of Merton's comments, they were agitating against nuclear weapons. Unlike the politicians, they confronted their mistakes and willingly reversed their positions. The *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* was advancing a disarmament agenda. The politicians, however, listened to the minority of scientists like Edward Teller and Herman Kahn, who told them what they wanted to hear. In fairness, Teller and Kahn wished to avoid

35. Merton, *PCE*, 110.

36. Merton, *LL*, 245, entry of June 6, 1967.

37. Merton, *CGB*, 99.

the use of nuclear weapons, but they supported the acceleration of the development of nuclear weapons under the assumptions of mutually assured destruction. The danger was that this acceleration invited a nuclear apocalypse.³⁸

Merton developed a correspondence with one of the scientists opposing this acceleration, Leo Szilard. This physicist provided a rare “civilized voice” in the age of the nuclear arms race. In the early 1960s Szilard had contacted the monk about his proposal for a peace lobby. Merton acknowledged that these proposals were “as close as anything I have seen fitting on with Catholic moral teachings and the Popes.”³⁹ Specifically, Szilard held that one of the superpowers must make the first move, and he recommended a limited unilateral initiative. The United States must adopt a defensive strategy that did not aim at the massive destruction of civilian populations. The United States would openly declare that it would not bomb Russian cities and army bases with atomic bombs unless the Russians first initiated such an attack. Moreover, a warning to civilian populations would precede any detonation of atomic bombs. Tactical nuclear weapons would only be deployed for defensive measures.⁴⁰

Merton was impressed by these ideas. He wondered whether it was possible to bring Szilard and the other peace movement leaders under a common umbrella organization in order to exert some collective pressure on the political process. To secure a common effort, he wrote Szilard a letter in April of 1962 praising the scientist’s recent initiatives and offered to donate royalties from a recent book to a Catholic peace group. The letter criticized certain Catholic proponents of nuclear weapons while praising scientific opposition to the bomb that countered the “absurd, inhuman, and utterly distorted assumptions that have become the basis of thinking of the majority.”⁴¹ Szilard responded that he was grateful for the interest and promised to keep Merton notified of his program for securing signatures in opposition to nuclear weapons. When Szilard died two years later, there had been no additional contacts. The opportunity for

38. Merton, *PCE*, 112–122. Merton did not lump all proponents of nuclear war into one basket. Kahn and Teller were distinguished. Teller, in contrast to Kahn, ruled out a preemptive strike or massive retaliation except as a final expedient.

39. Merton, *WF*, 55, “Letter to Father J. Whitney Evans” (June 13, 1962).

40. Merton, *PCE*, 119–120.

41. Merton, *WF*, 38, “Letter to Leo Szilard” (April, 1962).

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close cooperation was lost, perhaps because of the extent of their other commitments and the late date of their communications.⁴²

Inconvenient Warnings

Merton's ideas on war and military technologies were suspect in the Church and the broader American society. His articles constantly warned of the dangers of a nuclear war between October of 1961 and October of 1962. Merton's protests prompted warnings and then an order from Abbot General Dom Gabriel Sortais to not publish any more articles on issues of war and peace. Merton was entering the realm of public policy controversy and bringing unwanted attention to the monastery. The Abbot General reminded him that the order was devoted to prayer, not teaching, but there were some precedents in Merton's favor. Bernard of Clairvaux, the founder of the Trappists, had offered advice to those in power. There was another problem. Merton was attacking the long-standing Catholic position of just war. Despite such concerns, Merton published two articles under pen names. He also had articles that were eventually titled, "The Cold War Letters," mimeographed and circulated among friends.⁴³

Despite the censoring of his ideas, Merton believed that the Church could be a vehicle for the promotion of peace. He took solace from John XXIII's positions in the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, which approved many of the pacifist themes that were being censored in Kentucky. The encyclical condemned the arms race as a threat to human dignity and pleaded for peace on the basis of "a humaneness, a reason, a compassion which both the 'world' and the Church are capable of understanding."⁴⁴ This plea included a call for the restraining of nuclear weaponry. Merton slyly noted to the Abbot General that it was a good thing that the pontiff was not a Trappist monk for he would have been in trouble. The Abbot General countered that the encyclical did not change the restrictions on his writing about nuclear war. John XXIII had written only about aggressive war, not self-defense. The problem with Dom Sortais' distinction is that his just war categories of aggression and self-defense had become less

42. Szilard, "Letter to Thomas Merton."

43. Shannon, "The Year of the 'Cold War Letters,'" 166–171; Merton, "Foreword" to *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, v–viii.

44. Merton, *CGB*, 317.

applicable because of the speed and destructiveness of nuclear weaponry. Moreover, the creation of such weapons removed the notions of restraint and proportionality in waging war that were keystones of traditional Catholic just war theory.⁴⁵

While it is hard not to have some sympathy for Merton's position, I have a concern. Once they existed nuclear weapons were very difficult to eliminate, because of the level of technical issues in monitoring their reduction and elimination. The evidence of recent decades suggests that we still do not have foolproof means for accurately monitoring the nuclear capabilities of other countries. We invaded Iraq thinking we would find weapons of mass destruction and there were none. There is also the real possibility of a mistake or miscalculation. During the Cuban missile crisis an unarmed ICBM launch was not canceled, bringing the world perilously close to a nuclear holocaust.⁴⁶

Moreover, nuclear weapons had, in admittedly a very unsettling way, maintained a standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union which created a Cold War but prevented in all likelihood a third world war. I was in a class at the University of Georgia Law School in the 1980s on international law that was taught by the former Secretary of State Dean Rusk. He had discussed in one class the possibility after World War II of an international agreement eliminating nuclear weapons. I approached Secretary Rusk after the class and asked if the elimination of such weapons might have meant a third world war. He acknowledged that such a war might well have resulted from a nuclear ban, but at least it would have eliminated the possibility of a future nuclear war. His view sets a very steep price for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Was it worth risking millions dying in a conventional war? Time may justify his answer, but it has not done so to this point since we have avoided both a nuclear war and a conventional third world war.

Still, the concerns of Rusk and Merton about the insanity of destroying the human race through a deliberate policy of mutually assured destruction remain worthy of very careful consideration. Indeed, major foreign policy cold war warriors like Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, Sam Nunn, and William Perry have formed a loose coalition for eliminating nuclear weapons. This "partnership" realizes that we live on a razor's edge.⁴⁷ A wager that superpowers will not opt for mutual nuclear

45. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 386; Merton, *PCE*, 68–69, 80.

46. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, 78–80.

47. Taubman, *The Partnership*.

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annihilation is indeed a wager that has the ending of sentient life on the planet as one possible outcome. Such an outcome is hardly imaginable, much less acceptable. For Merton, the American public and politicians had become too comfortable with the possibility of this total destruction. This acceptance of nuclear warfare was the result of “almost total passivity and irresponsibility on the moral level, plus demonic activism in social, political and military life.”⁴⁸

This state of affairs regarding nuclear weapons was a direct denial of our humanity, of our vocations as children of God. It assigned our fate to mindless forces of technology, progress, and nationalism. Process trumped principle in this context. The slide to ethical acceptance of mass destruction was illustrated in World War II where permitted targets for the Allies went from being restricted to only military facilities to entire cities. For Merton wars in the modern technological context unleashed “a massive suspension of conscience” in which the only requirement was “destroying the enemy.”⁴⁹ A potential result of this instrumental form of analysis was violence and destruction on an unimaginable scale. In the face of such horror, Merton urged the restoration of our moral conscience on issues of warfare. Ultimately, he argued that we must align ourselves with life and creation or be subjugated to systems and technologies of destruction.

48. Merton, *PCE*, 104.

49. Merton, *CGB*, 228.