

NUCLEAR ABOLITION: THE MORAL CASE

by DOUGLAS ROCHE

NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE THE ULTIMATE EVIL.

This is a view I have held since the 1997 publication of my book, *The Ultimate Evil*, in which I appealed for public recognition of the moral bankruptcy of nuclear weapons. The phrase was not mine. I took it from the statement issued by Judge Mohammed Bedjaoui, then the President of the International Court of Justice, who said: “Nuclear weapons, the ultimate evil, destabilize humanitarian law...” Judge Bedjaoui honored me by writing the Foreword to my book. He excoriated the doctrine of nuclear deterrence for driving the development of ever-more sophisticated nuclear weapons. “Fear and madness,” he warned, “may still link arms to engage in a final dance of death.” For decades, media and political processes ignored the centrality of the nuclear weapons issue: evil. When they did deal with nuclear weapons, it was usually in terms of deterring an “enemy.” The Cold War language has continued into the new era: the old euphemisms of “nuclear preparedness” and “collateral damage” continue to hide the real issues of extermination by the millions, incineration of whole populations of cities, genetic deformities, inducement of cancers, destruction of the food chain, and the imperiling of civilization. And so the calamity awaiting humanity has been obscured.

For too long strategists have defended the possession of nuclear weapons on the grounds of security, and marginalized the moral argument. Now, with the rise of the humanitarian movement — the basis for the recent series of international conferences in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna — the moral argument is coming into better focus. The Austrian Pledge emerged out of these consultations, citing “profound moral and ethical questions that go beyond debates about the legality of nuclear weapons.” The powerful personality of Pope Francis has underscored the moral argument. The Pope sent a

MESSAGE

to the 2014 conference in Vienna, hosted by the Austrian government and attended by more than 150 governments, to advance public understanding of what is now termed the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of any use of the 16,300 nuclear weapons now possessed by nine countries. Pope Francis stripped away any lingering moral acceptance of the military doctrine of nuclear deterrence: “Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for an ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence.” The Pope’s rigorous stand was supported by a remarkable Vatican document, “Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition,” also put before the conference. The document did not mince words: “Now is the time to affirm not only the immorality of the use of nuclear weapons, but the immorality of their possession, thereby clearing the road to abolition.”

The nuclear powers would not be able to so blithely carry on with their nuclear weapons programs if world consciousness, raised to a new recognition of this evil, demanded abolition. But world consciousness has been dulled. We have lived with the bomb so long that it has insinuated itself into our thinking. Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem so long ago, they are but a blur in memory. The Oslo-Nayarit-Vienna processes seek to re-open the eyes of society to the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of this evil. Society is not impervious to evil: the Holocaust and genocide in places like Cambodia and Rwanda have been recognized as the evils they are. But the ultimate—last, final, most remote in time or space—evil appears to be too far removed from daily life to engage public attention. It is almost as if the reality is too big to handle. Nuclear weapons assault life on the planet, they assault the planet itself, and in so doing they assault the process of the continuing development of the planet.

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» affront to the mysterious process of creation that makes a connection to an unfathomably distant past that the present generation has no right to interrupt. Nuclear weapons rival the power of God. They challenge God. They lure us into thinking we can control the destiny of the world. They turn upside down the natural morality that flows from the relationship between God and humanity. Nuclear weapons are evil because they destroy the process of life itself. They invert order into disorder. The covenants of humanitarian law are supposed to govern nuclear weapons. In fact, as Judge Bedjaoui noted, a nuclear war would destroy the very basis of humanitarian law. The structure of our civilization would disappear. Nuclear weapons, with no limitation or proportionality in their effect, make a mockery of old “just war” theories. How can self-defense be cited as justification for the use of nuclear weapons when their full effect destroys the “self” that is supposed to be defended? Nuclear weapons will only be abolished when the moral consciousness of humanity is raised, just as it was raised by the moral re-assessment and rejection of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid.

This renewed focus on the immorality of nuclear weapons comes just at the time when their utility is being severely questioned. The military effectiveness of nuclear weapons is coming under increased challenge. They cannot be used against military targets as such without enormous civilian damage. Terrorism is the biggest threat today to security, but how can a nuclear weapon be used against terrorists hiding in urban populations without also killing most, if not all, of the area’s residents?

The proponents of nuclear deterrence theory—with concomitant modernization programs soaking up vast amounts of money needed for economic and social development—seem not to care that there is no logic to support their case. Nuclear weapons have become the currency of power, and the five permanent members of the Security Council retain their status in no small measure due to

their continued possession of nuclear weapons.

These adherents are essentially pessimistic about the future of humanity. They believe that, since history is filled with accounts of warfare, war will continue to characterize human relations. Thus they have, to date, been successful in painting nuclear abolitionists as well-meaning but naïve in the ways of the world. The moral objection to nuclear weapons is consistently depicted as idealism. Even President Obama, rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize largely for his idealistic Prague speech against nuclear weapons in 2009, soon reverted to political realism and accepted the Pentagon's plans for a \$355 billion nuclear modernization program over the next decade.

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cursory assessment suggests that neither the moral argument, nor even the utility argument, can stand up against the lobbying power of the military-industrial complex. But if we look more deeply at what is happening to the world as a whole, in moving from the old culture of war to the new prospect of a culture of peace, we can take some hope. The multi-faceted work of the United Nations gradually defines a new caring for the wholeness of life. Humanity is learning how to understand all our human relationships, our relationship with the Earth, and how to govern for the common good. This is the stirring of a global conscience.

Through the United Nations and its systems we possess, for the first time in the history of the world, a catalogue of information about how our planet works, and we have developed treaties to protect the rights of individuals and the environment itself. Both people and governments are learning that they must cooperate for a host of purposes—to maintain peace and order, to expand economic activity, to tackle pollution, to halt or minimize climate change, to combat disease, to curb the proliferation of weapons, to prevent desertification, to preserve genetic and species diversity, to deter terrorists, to ward off famines. All of this work flows from the recognition of the inherent dignity and rights of every individual.

WE ARE LIFTING

- » ourselves up as a species that is moving, despite the headlines of the day, toward a state where non-violence can become the global norm. But we have not yet arrived at a non-violent world. And the global conscience has not yet infused enough strength in the voting public to overturn the prophets of doom. Nonetheless, the moral case against nuclear weapons, built on humanity's growing rejection of violence as a means of resolving conflict, is gathering strength. Fortified by a reaffirmation of the moral case, the international community now has an opportunity to build the legal framework to accomplish the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. The abolition of nuclear weapons, then, is a natural consequence of enlightened realism.

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“PEACE CANNOT BE BUILT ON EXCLUSIVISM, ABSOLUTISM, AND INTOLERANCE. BUT NEITHER CAN IT BE BUILT ON VAGUE LIBERAL SLOGANS AND PIOUS PROGRAMS GESTATED IN THE SMOKE OF CONFABULATION. THERE CAN BE NO PEACE ON EARTH WITHOUT THE KIND OF INNER CHANGE THAT BRINGS MAN BACK TO HIS “RIGHT MIND.”

~Thomas Merton