

**Religion and Secular Culture:
A Common Drive to Abolish Nuclear Weapons**

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The insistence of the nuclear weapons states in maintaining nuclear weapons for war-fighting purposes is a violation of God's law against murder. It is time for religious leaders of all the major faiths to make this point clearly and unite in their opposition to any state holding on to nuclear weapons.

A united moral stance has become all the more necessary with the dawn of the Second Nuclear Age. In the First Nuclear Age, nuclear weapons were justified by the policies of deterrence. Those policies have given way to new strategies in which nuclear weapons are now maintained for war-fighting purposes. Shortly before his recent death, Rev. William Sloane Coffin, one of the great leaders in the anti-nuclear weapons movement, issued a Call to Action:

It is time to break faith with nuclear weapons once and for all. Nuclear weapons merit unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation. The [27,000] nuclear weapons around the globe have more than 100,000 times the explosive power of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These are doomsday arms – genocidal, ecocidal, and suicidal.

Nuclear weapons and human security cannot co-exist on the planet. Nuclear weapons are anti-human. That is what the moral aspect of the discussion is all about. Humanitarian law has always recognized that limitation and proportionality must be respected in warfare. But the very idea of a nuclear weapon is to kill massively; the killing and the poisonous radiation cannot be contained. The social and economic consequences of nuclear war in a world

intimately inter-connected in life-support systems would be catastrophic. The severe physical damage from blast, fire and radiation would be followed by the collapse of food production and distribution and even water supplies. The prospect of widespread starvation would confront huge masses of people. Rampant disease would follow the break-down in health care facilities. These immense brutalities would violate the universal norm of life – to go on living in a manner befitting a human being with the inherent right to life.

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Refocusing the Message

Today, in the Second Nuclear Age, religions must re-focus their message.

In 1983, the World Council of Churches, a fellowship of 342 denominations from virtually all Christian traditions in more than 120 countries, rejected the doctrine of nuclear deterrence and unequivocally declared:

That the production and deployment as well as the use of nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity and that such activities must be condemned on ethical and theological grounds.

The Canadian Council of Churches, a community of 19 denominations, stated in 1998:

The willingness, indeed the intent, to launch a nuclear attack in certain circumstances bespeaks spiritual and moral bankruptcy. ...Nuclear weapons do not, cannot, deliver security – they

deliver only insecurity and peril through their promise to annihilate that which is most precious, life itself and the global ecosystem upon which all life depends. Nuclear weapons have no moral legitimacy.....

In 1999, more than 7,000 people from around the world gathered in Capetown, South Africa for a Parliament of the World's Religions and issued *A Moral Call to Eliminate the Threat of Nuclear Weapons*, which states:

The threat and use of nuclear weapons is incompatible with civilized norms, standards of morality and humanitarian law which prohibit the use of inhumane weapons and those with indiscriminate effects. We say that a peace based on terror, a peace based upon threats of inflicting annihilation and genocide upon whole populations, is a peace that is morally corrupting.

Jewish and Muslim voices have also been heard, as befitting the fact that all three revealed religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, have deep commitments to compassion, justice and peace.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis, founded in 1889 as the organized rabbinate of Reform Judaism, expressed their concern in 1982 about nuclear war in terms of Jewish traditions:

A "limited" one, would result in death, injury, and disease on a scale without precedent. Civil defense and medical treatment would be totally inadequate. Our traditions speak to us of Sakanat Nefashot, the danger of exposing ourselves to health hazards; Bal Tashchit, the abhorrence of willful destruction of the environment; and Yishuv Ha-arets, the betterment and guardianship of the earth.

In 2000, Muzammi H. Siddiqi, President of the Islamic Society of North America, called for a total ban on the production and testing of nuclear weapons:

Islam stands for peace and protection of all human beings and their environment. Islam is against any war in which the innocent and the non-combatants are made to suffer.

The Christian, Jewish and Islamic voices that have been heard on the issue of nuclear weapons are mostly from groups or individuals within the structures of those religions.

Definitive Catholic teaching on nuclear deterrence is found in the Second Vatican Council and subsequent statements by Pope John Paul II. Vatican Council II taught:

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation. (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 80).

Though they elaborated their concern that a universal public authority be put in place to outlaw war, the fathers of Vatican II rather grudgingly accepted the strategy of nuclear deterrence. The accumulation of arms, they said, serves “as a deterrent to possible enemy attack.” Thus “peace of a sort” is maintained, though the balance resulting from the arms race threatens to lead to war, not eliminate it. Pope John Paul II restated the Catholic position on nuclear

deterrence in a message to the U.N. Second Special Session on Disarmament in 1982:

In current conditions, “deterrence” based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way towards a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with the minimum, which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.

In this statement, it is readily seen that deterrence, in order to be acceptable, must lead to disarmament measures. Consequently, deterrence as a single, permanent policy is not acceptable. The American Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on War and Peace, published in 1983, took up this theme. Though The bishops expressed a strong “no” to nuclear war, declared that a nuclear response to a conventional attack is “morally unjustifiable,” and were skeptical that any nuclear war could avoid the massive killing of civilians, they gave a “strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence.”

As the 1990s progressed, it became clear that U.S. policy was not moving to nuclear disarmament. Even before the arrival of the Bush Administration in 2001, the U.S. rejected a no-first-use policy and adopted flexible targeting strategies to use nuclear weapons either preemptively or in response to chemical and biological weapon attacks. The Bush administration’s Nuclear Posture Review explicated the maintenance of nuclear weapons for war-fighting strategies.

In 1998, seeing the institutionalization of nuclear deterrence taking place, 75 U.S. Catholic Bishops signed a statement criticizing the U.S. for moving beyond original nuclear deterrence policies “to which we grudgingly gave our moral approval in 1983.” The bishops said they were painfully aware that many policymakers sincerely believe that possessing nuclear weapons is vital for national security. “We are convinced, though, that it is not. Instead, they make the world a more dangerous place.”

We cannot delay any longer. Nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent because it is the excuse and justification for the continued possession and further development of these horrendous weapons.

At the 2005 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, the Holy See made it clear that nuclear deterrence, in the modern context, cannot claim any moral legitimacy. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Permanent Representative of the Holy See at the U.N., stated:

When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way towards progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.

In his January 1, 2006 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Benedict XVI criticized the idea of nuclear arms for security as “completely fallacious.”

He said: “Peace requires that all ... strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament.”

The new General Secretary of the World Council of Churches has also spoken out, excoriating the spread of nuclear weapons technology as “an outrage to all humanity.” He focused on the core of the problem: “The recent reports of countries acquiring nuclear weapons technology is frightening. But it is equally a scandal that countries which possess vast arsenals of nuclear weapons are unwilling to renounce their use.”

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Addressing Secular Culture

The voice of religion in addressing the immorality of nuclear weapons is clearly important. If religion does not speak out on the paramount moral issue of our time – the threat of annihilation of humanity – how can we expect the political order to consider the morality of their decision-making? But religion by itself cannot raise the level of public attention high enough to be effective. First, religions too frequently speak only from their denominational perspective; some ecumenical cooperation in joint statements has occurred, but there is no sustained follow-through to impress on law-makers the widespread nature of moral concern. Second, the failure of all the major religious leaders of the world to work and speak together results in compartmentalization of morality,

which further weakens religious perspective. Third, even a sustained high-level joint religious call for the end of nuclear weapons, while much better than we have at the moment, would still tend to be marginalized from the mainstream of secular culture.

It is secular, humanistic, culture that we must address when driving home to the political order that the world can no longer tolerate nuclear weapons. Religion must speak forcefully. That would be a strong beginning in raising the moral issue. But it must do more. Religions must learn to work with secularists for the common good of preserving the planet. They must find a way to show that morality is not something added on to daily affairs, rather, morality must be a first principle in any discussion of nuclear weapons, since it speaks to the heart of the continuation of life. Once this essential truth is recognized, new coalitions of action become possible.

Sir Joseph Rotblat, one of the fathers of the atomic bomb, who resigned from the Manhattan Project in moral opposition to such enormous destruction, provided an example of the fusion of religious and secular language on the anti-human nature of nuclear weapons. For many years, he was President of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995. Just before his death at the age of 97, Rotblat sent a message to the 2005 NPT Conference.

Morality is at the core of the nuclear issue: are we going to base our world on a culture of peace or on a culture of violence? Nuclear weapons are fundamentally immoral: their action is indiscriminate, affecting civilians as well as military, innocents and aggressors alike, killing people alive now and generations as yet unborn. And the consequence of their use might be to bring the human race to an end. All this makes nuclear weapons unacceptable instruments for maintaining peace in the world. Rotblat then sealed his argument.

How can we talk about a culture of peace if that peace is predicated on the existence of weapons of mass destruction? How can we persuade the young generation to cast aside the culture of violence when they know that it is on the threat of extreme violence that we rely for security?

This language transcends religion as such, yet is deeply moral. It is the language that crosses all boundaries and becomes inextricably interwoven with all the processes of daily life. This language can resonate with politicians, who need to be able to relate to all segments of their constituencies.

No civilization, no culture has ever denied this common foundation upon which all peoples stand. Leaving aside the massive suffering, which by itself ought to stir the consciences of the nuclear proponents, the entire question of human rights would be up-ended. The right to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, would be completely lost. The structures underpinning humanitarian law would be gone. Order would be inverted into disorder. What is the “self” that the proponents of nuclear use for “self-defence” supposed to

mean? The only way to really uncover the hypocritical defence of nuclear weapons as instruments of self-defence is to focus on the over-arching humanitarian question.

The humanitarian question is of growing concern to scientists and technologists who see the fruit of their work turned into instruments of death. A code of conduct for scientists, strengthening their resistance to more advances in the technology of killing, can come about by emphasizing the assault to life that nuclear weapons pose. This was, in fact, the stance taken by Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, two of the leading intellectual figures of the 20th century, when they signed the Russell-Einstein Manifesto in 1955, along with nine other scientists. Their scientific critique of nuclear weapons ended with the stirring words: *“We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity and forget the rest.”*

It is empowering to note that the age of weapons of mass destruction arrived just at the time when the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and its follow-up instruments were being codified. Just when we have finally learned that every human, no matter the culture, religion, ideology or geography, has the right to life, we have perfected our ability to kill massively. The U.N.’s idea of a culture of peace leads us inevitably to the recognition that every human being has the right to peace -- in fact, to the “sacred” right to peace, it

is said in the early declarations on this subject. The gradual increase in humanity's understanding of itself will lead to a societal condemnation of nuclear weapons when it is fully understood that such instruments of evil are a violation of life itself.