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A Theology for the Nuclear Debate

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Introduction

In the 1983 General Election, one of the major issues in public debate was the issue of defence, and in particular the issue of nuclear weapons. The Labour party promised that, if elected, it would cancel the Trident programme—designed to re-equip our British nuclear armed submarines—and the stationing of American Cruise missiles in Britain; the Conservative party promised to go ahead with both; the SDP–Liberal Alliance promised to cancel Trident and to work hard in the field of disarmament, whilst recognizing the necessity for Britain to ally itself fully with the NATO nuclear defence policy at the present time.

The terms ‘multilateral disarmament’ and ‘unilateral disarmament’ have been bandied about as if there are only two options. In fact there is a number of positions that can be held in the debate. These might include:

- a) believing that peace is best served by both East and West retaining nuclear weapons as a means of ensuring mutual deterrence;
- b) supporting arms reduction on both sides;
- c) calling for the West to abandon its nuclear weapons on moral grounds;
- d) calling for Britain to abandon its nuclear weapons because an independent nuclear deterrent is deemed unnecessary;
- e) supporting the British nuclear deterrent on the grounds that it makes for better deterrence both for Britain and for the NATO alliance.

One can, of course, hold two or more of the positions outlined above at the same time. Because the debate is not only one of practicalities but also a debate concerning morality, it is right that Christians should have something to contribute. The Methodist Church, the Church of England and the Church of Scotland have each debated the issue and made recommendations. The theological issues, however, have not always come over clearly. Richard Harries noted the lack of a theology for dealing with the nuclear debate in the discussion by the General Synod of the Church of England; he said that ‘... the Church of England desperately needs a coherent and consistent theological perspective from which to approach these vital matters’.¹ The aim of this short article will be to note some of the theological points made so far by Christians in the debate, in the hope

that it may help to forward the theological discussion which is so urgently needed if the Christian participating in the debate is to make a distinctly Christian contribution.²

1 The pacifist position

One stance held by some Christians is that of pacifism. They argue that Jesus' commands that we should love our neighbour, that we should not retaliate against our enemies and that we should pray for those who persecute us, when taken together with the example of Jesus' own life—in which he refused to retaliate against his persecutors and allowed himself to be crucified—point to the path of pacifism for the Christian. Against this logic, many Christians have argued that St Paul's teaching concerning obedience to the state in Romans 13, and his assertion that the state rightly holds the power of the sword, imply that the Christian is able to serve as a member of the armed forces and that he can therefore kill in time of war.

J. H. Yoder has argued against such a position and against such an interpretation of Romans 13. He makes the point that this chapter must be understood in the light of Romans 12, where St Paul talks of the Christian blessing those who persecute him, and where he prohibits vengeance. St Paul advises the Christian: 'Never repay evil with evil but let everyone see that you are interested only in the highest ideals ... Resist evil and conquer it with good' (Rom. 12:17,21). Yoder therefore concludes that 'any interpretation of 13:1-7 which is not also an expression of suffering and serving love must be a misunderstanding of the text in its context.'³ He then goes on to say, secondly, that the power of the sword which the state rightly possesses according to Romans 13, is the process of juridical punishment rather than war. To extend this legitimization of police and juridical power to cover war is unwarranted in Yoder's opinion: 'The doctrine of the "just war" is an effort to extend into the realm of war the logic of the limited violence of police authority—but not a very successful one.'⁴ He sees war as being structurally very different from the police and juridical function in that, in the latter, violence is only applied to the guilty party, and then only in a limited way which is continually subject to review by higher authority. To extend the power of the sword to cover the issue of war is therefore an unwarranted extension in Yoder's eyes. For him the teaching of Romans 13, when properly understood in the light of chapter 12, demands Christian pacifism.

Another way in which one might try to argue for total pacifism is to develop an approach based on 'kingdom theology'. Kingdom theology says that, as inhabitants of God's kingdom, which has already begun on earth, Christians should live in a manner that expresses the quality of life which will exist in the consummated kingdom. 'The thrust of Christian ethics in the New Testament is to

live the life of the kingdom now on earth ... In expressing the life of the kingdom of God for justice and mercy, our methods should be methods that would be acceptable in the final kingdom of God.⁵ Kingdom theology would seem to demand logically, therefore, that since there will be a total absence of violence in the final kingdom, Christians should abandon its use now. Not all proponents of kingdom theology would agree with such an absolutist stance: Christopher Sugden, for example, in his book says that kingdom theology has to be tempered by the fact that we still live in a fallen world and that some use of violence is necessary. He sees three areas where violence may legitimately be used: in self-defence, in protection of the innocent, and in the use of governmental force. Whilst some proponents of kingdom theology would therefore demand a pacifist stance, others who use its theology would permit certain uses of violence, including war.

2 The Church of England report: *The Church and the Bomb*

The Church of England report, entitled *The Church and the Bomb*, argues that nuclear weapons are immoral and that we should work towards multilateral disarmament. To start this process, Britain should embark on a programme of unilateral disarmament and renounce the use of its independent nuclear deterrent.⁶ The report does not, however, suggest that we abandon NATO, or ask NATO to abandon its nuclear weaponry; we should remain a NATO partner and accept the nuclear protection it affords whilst working towards multilateral disarmament. To demand that NATO renounce its nuclear deterrent would, the report argues, have an unacceptable destabilizing effect.

The report's moral stance against the use of nuclear weapons is based mainly upon argument using the just-war theory.⁷ This theory says:

- a) a war must be undertaken by the leaders of the state;
- b) a war must be undertaken for a just cause;
- c) recourse to war must be a last resort;
- d) there should be a formal declaration of war;
- e) those engaging in war must have a reasonable hope of success;
- f) the evil and damage which the war entails must be judged to be proportionate to the injury it is designed to avert;
- g) non-combatants must be immune from attack;
- h) the methods of war must not result in disproportionate harm for any of the populations engaged, or for third parties.

The report believes that a nuclear war would be unable to fulfil many of these demands. It is difficult, according to the report, to see how any side could have 'success' in a nuclear war, in view of the devastation that would occur both to the physical and social fabric of

the nations involved. The report also questions whether the damage which would result from a nuclear war could be said to be proportionate to the injury it is designed to avert: 'What injury or injustice would be so great that it would be reasonable to avert it in such a way and at such a cost?'⁸ Whilst it stresses that non-combatant immunity does not imply that non-combatants can be protected against all the consequences of war, it maintains that action is ruled out where it is taken 'intentionally against non-combatants'.⁹ The report fails to define adequately the distinction between the two. In discussing non-combatant immunity, it concludes that '... attacks which indiscriminately destroy anyone and everything in an area containing non-combatants cannot be justified even though there are legitimate military objectives in the area.'¹⁰ Finally it believes that the last requirement of the just war, the principle of proportion, cannot be met in the case of a nuclear war. Since nuclear war would be so terrible, the report believes that it must result in disproportionate harm. To argue that small tactical nuclear weapons would satisfy this criterion is not acceptable since the report believes that once tactical nuclear weapons have been used, escalation would invariably follow. The report therefore concludes that '... the use of nuclear weapons cannot be justified. Such weapons cannot be used without harming non-combatants and could never be proportionate to the just cause and aim of the war.'¹¹ The just-war requirements rule that nuclear warfare is immoral.

Professor Keith Ward, writing about the report in *The Times*, suggested that the way in which the report applied the requirements of the just-war theory was poor; he seemed in fact to suggest that the just-war theory was not applicable in this modern age. First, as regards the principle of discrimination, he said that '... there is surely nothing magically sacrosanct about non-combatants. ... Of course, we should seek to limit those subject to direct attack as much as possible but the principle is not absolute and inviolable.'¹² The report believed that it was, in general, easy and correct to make distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and that where non-combatants were going to be killed, one should not use nuclear weapons. Taking Ward's point further, one might argue that when a country goes to war, it is the whole country which is at war and not just its servicemen. To distinguish between combatants and non-combatants is therefore an irrelevant distinction. Secondly, Ward noted that the report uses the principle of proportion in four different ways, and in using it seeks to balance incommensurable values. How, for example, does one balance the 'injury' of military occupation and a loss of freedom against death and destruction?

The debate in Synod rejected the report and voted instead for the retention of nuclear weapons and a policy of 'no first use'. But if our overriding priority is to avoid war, then a retention of the ability to

use them first would seem to be demanded. To have the ability to use nuclear weapons first if, for example, the Russians were to invade West Germany tomorrow, would make the Russians less likely to invade in the first place. To allow only the Russians the policy of first use, which is what Synod was asking for, is to invite them to knock out our own nuclear capability with its own first strike. That is not real deterrence and does not make for stability. These points were all echoed by Richard Harries: 'The prime moral duty is to avoid war, for if war broke out there is no likelihood that it could be brought to a slithering halt at the nuclear firebreak. A policy of no first use accompanied by promises to this effect makes war more, rather than less, likely.'¹³

If nuclear weapons are wrong and immoral, as the report believed, then surely it is not good enough for the report to go on and suggest that we should renounce our own nuclear capability but shelter under the American capability of the NATO umbrella. If nuclear weapons are immoral, then we should have no truck with them at all. We must stand up for what we believe and face the Russian nuclear threat naked—without nuclear weapons. To say that nuclear weapons are immoral, and to sanction their use, is sheer hypocrisy. On the other hand, if nuclear weapons are not immoral, then we must be given the freedom to use them as and when our political and military leaders decide. We would hope, of course, that that would be as late as possible, but I do not think that it makes moral sense to say that nuclear weapons are acceptable and then to permit their use in such a way that they cannot maintain an adequate deterrence. If they are morally acceptable, then we must be able to use them.

3 Accepting nuclear weapons

Whilst some Christians are pacifists, and some are nuclear pacifists (I am putting the writers of the Church of England report under that heading despite their stated policy of sheltering for the moment under the NATO umbrella), others believe that the Christian can support the use of nuclear weapons with a clear conscience. Sir Neil Cameron, formerly Chief of the Defence Staff, is one such person. For him the matter is quite simple: effective deterrence requires that we possess nuclear weapons.

Put in its most simple form it means getting across to a potential enemy that if you are attacked you will retaliate through the whole spectrum of conventional and nuclear weapons, and at the end of the day you will have inflicted on him a degree of damage quite beyond the value he could possibly have expected to gain from the original aggression.¹⁴

The holding of nuclear weapons, for Cameron, is the only secure way to ensure effective deterrence. And, he argues, this requires continued research and development in the field of nuclear weapons

until a totally watertight agreement on multilateral nuclear disarmament can be negotiated. Any refusal to press ahead with technological advance will only lead to instability between East and West and hence a weakening of deterrence. Michael Quinlan argues in similar vein: effective deterrence demands the possession of nuclear weapons. To renounce their use is tantamount to allowing the unscrupulous and the aggressive to wield unboundless force in any way that they wish; if nuclear weapons were abandoned by the Western Alliance, we would have no way of effectively stopping hostile nations from doing their worst. Again, effective deterrence demands the possession of a nuclear capability.¹⁵

Colin Fletcher accepts that nuclear weapons can be morally acceptable to the Christian, but lays more stress than either Cameron or Quinlan on the necessity for negotiated, multilateral disarmament. He uses, in his argument, the just-war theory. Unlike the Church of England report, he accepts that there can be a legitimate use of nuclear weapons against military targets, even if such a use were to involve a small number of casualties in the surrounding civilian population. But what if the military targets were near to large centres of population?

Can we justify attacks in these cases? The answer must be 'no' under the principle—the destruction of a missile launcher cannot be considered to be proportionate to the deaths of many thousands of people. The only way in which it might, is if something far larger than a particular target was at stake in the destruction of that target. For instance, if by destroying a launcher world peace would be preserved, then that might be justifiable.¹⁶

The problem with this argument is that one can never know in advance whether a nuclear attack would have such an outcome. Presumably if the Christian *thought* it might, then the nuclear attack would be morally justified. Fletcher believes, however, that the vast majority of anticipated uses of nuclear weapons cannot be justified. The number of instances in which it would be morally right for the Christian to permit the use of nuclear weapons is so small that it can *almost* be said that the use of nuclear weapons is morally unacceptable.

Fletcher continues to argue that whilst the *use* of nuclear weapons cannot often—if ever—be justified, their possession as a threat *can* be justified. The *threat* to use nuclear weapons can be justified as being the lesser of two evils. He believes that there is a moral distinction to be made between using nuclear weapons and possessing them as a deterrent. Possessing them as a deterrent is morally acceptable because it prevents the unscrupulous from wielding power unchecked. Therefore, the possession of nuclear weapons '...

remains an evil, and one we should seek to be without, but one it may at times be necessary to retain in the world in which we live.¹⁷ For reasons similar to Quinlan, then, Fletcher accepts that to possess nuclear weapons as a deterrent is morally acceptable. For him there is a moral distinction to be made between the use and possession of nuclear weapons.

Many would see such a distinction as invalid. They would argue that if one is prepared to possess nuclear weapons as a threat, then that threat can only be real if it is a threat to use. There is no such thing as a threat, unless it is at the same time a threat to use. Fletcher can therefore be accused of muddled thinking. Nevertheless, it remains true that he believes that the use of nuclear weapons can be morally justified, albeit in a very small number of circumstances.

A view very similar to that of Fletcher is put forward by Richard Harries. Harries begins his study from a practical viewpoint and notes that the life we live here on earth is one which is fallen. As such it is characterized by the clash of self-interest, and this therefore makes the use of force by government a necessity. He believes that the nuclear weaponry in the world today has brought a stabilizing factor into the balance of power that has never been there before. The Christian should welcome this balance and stability. 'Though we can and must strive to maximise the peace of heaven on earth, we cannot afford to dispense with the uneasy peace based on a parity of power.'¹⁸

In the same way as Fletcher, Harries discusses the just-war theory in relation to nuclear war and comes to similar conclusions. By applying the two principles of non-combatant immunity and proportion, he concludes that although there could be instances where it would be correct to use nuclear weapons, these are very few. In any case, he argues, to permit a just use of nuclear weapons would be highly likely to result in an escalation of the nuclear exchange, which would violate the two principles. Like Fletcher too, however, he believes that nuclear deterrence is of a different order to the use of nuclear weapons. He states the problem in this way: '... although the use of nuclear weapons on military targets near centres of population would be in danger of being disproportionate, must the deterrent effect provided by the thought of that damage be condemned in the same way?'¹⁹ He believes that it cannot be condemned in the same way for a number of reasons: first, nuclear deterrence, as it stands at the moment, has led to stability; secondly, to give it up and leave a nation helpless against antagonistic nuclear powers would be immoral; thirdly, it would be wrong to allow aggressors to get away with nuclear aggression. It is worth quoting his basic conclusion at some length because he puts matters quite succinctly:

All out nuclear war would be immoral and therefore the conditional intent to unleash such war is also immoral. But against this has to be weighed the fact that if a nation is to be protected, then nuclear deterrence is necessary; and that not to protect those we have a responsibility to protect, to allow aggressors to get away with their aggression, and not to stand up for what we judge to have real value, is also immoral. It is not a question of choosing between right and wrong, but between two evils. My own judgement is that to use nuclear weapons other than on relatively isolated military targets would be morally worse than the evil of submitting to an alien power, but that to hold a conditional intention to use them is less evil than the alternatives.²⁰

Having drawn such a conclusion, however, Harries says that, if deterrence broke down and nuclear war began, we would be morally justified only in using nuclear weapons in such a way as to satisfy the two principles already discussed. In other words, we threaten to do one thing (engage in an all-out nuclear exchange) but in practice would do another (allow only a very limited use of nuclear weapons by our side). To say this seems to ruin the whole argument. If deterrence is to work, then the threat must be carried out if it becomes necessary. If the other side believed that we would not commit ourselves to an all-out exchange, then the stability which he so much values would seem to break down. Harries appears to say that we should threaten one thing and do another. That does not seem logical or practically possible.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be drawn from our study? It would seem that there are four different ways (at least) of trying to discuss theologically the morality of nuclear warfare. The first way is to argue from the example of Jesus and from biblical texts. The conclusion one draws, of course, depends on how one interprets the texts: most would see Romans 13 as justifying the use of force by a government, but we have seen that J. H. Yoder has interpreted it differently, resulting in a pacifist position. In addition, different Christians will place a greater or lesser emphasis on the Old Testament: where the Old Testament is understood as being as much God's Word as the New, then there will be a more ready acceptance of the use of force than where the teaching of Christ is isolated from the rest of Scripture. The second way is to argue one's point by using kingdom theology. The conclusions here are uncertain: some would certainly say that its logic commits us to total pacifism, but it may be that kingdom theology cannot really deal with the issue we are debating, since it primarily concerns itself with individual actions on behalf of the Christian, or corporate actions done by the body of Christ.

Exactly how one applies kingdom theology to problems of government is unclear.

The third way in which the morality of nuclear weapons has been discussed theologically is by using the criteria of the just-war theory. From this standpoint, as Fletcher and Harries have shown us, although there might be a small number of instances in which it would be correct to use nuclear weapons, the escalation which would probably result virtually invalidates their use at all. To draw a distinction between their use and their threatened use in deterrence, is in my opinion illogical. The fourth way of arguing is to argue from an empirical standpoint. This is the method taken by Cameron and Quinlan: although both write as Christians their use of strictly theological argument is minimal. Although Fletcher and Harries claim to be using the just-war theory to argue their point of view, much of their conclusion concerning the validity of nuclear deterrence is in fact based on practical rather than theological considerations.

There are, then, at least four ways in which one can argue theologically concerning the morality of nuclear warfare: 1) using the example of Jesus and the Bible; 2) using kingdom theology; 3) using the just-war theory; 4) using empirical considerations. It is uncertain whether kingdom theology can actually be applied to our problem. As for the just-war theory, I doubt if it is really applicable in the twentieth century: the theory was devised in the days of knights in shining armour, and although Fletcher and Harries claim to use it as a basis for their discussion they obviously had great difficulty with it and in practice ended up giving weight to empirical considerations. That leaves us with two approaches that seem to be meaningful: using the example of Jesus and the Bible, and using practical considerations. Perhaps what we need to do is to develop an incarnational approach which uses both of these approaches together. As I see it, such a method seems the only valid one. If this is true, then it means that Christians will have no simple solutions: instead we will have to grapple with a multitude of political, military and scientific theories, ideas and facts before we make a valid decision. And that will be no easy task.

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NOTES

- 1 R. Harries, 'Nuclear Weapons: The General Synod Decision in the Light of Day', *Crucible*, April-June 1983, p.63.

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- 2 In writing this article I am most grateful for comments made on the first draft by the Revd Dr M. McCall, RN.
- 3 J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1972), p.197.
- 4 *ibid.*, p.207.
- 5 C. Sugden, *A Different Dream: Non Violence as Practical Politics* (Grove Books, Nottingham 1976), p.24.
- 6 The Church of England, *The Church and the Bomb* (Hodder and Stoughton/CIO 1982), p.159.
- 7 There is, in fact, no one single just-war theory: it is rather a group of theories which argue towards the concept of a just war. For the purposes of this article I will refer to the just-war theory as the majority of authors on the subject do.
- 8 The Church of England, *op. cit.*, p.96.
- 9 *ibid.*, p.87.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.92.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.97.
- 12 K. Ward, 'The Church is Wrong on the Bomb', *The Times*, 20 Oct 1982, p.14.
- 13 R. Harries, *op. cit.*, p.61.
- 14 N. Cameron, 'Deterrence and the Superpower Balance', in R. Harries, ed., *What Hope in an Armed World?* (Pickering, Basingstoke 1982), p.17.
- 15 M. Quinlan, 'Nuclear Weapons: A View of the Moral Problem', *Crucible*, July–September 1982.
- 16 C. Fletcher, *Banning the Bomb? An Argument from the Just War Position* (Grove Books, Nottingham 1982), pp.15–16.
- 17 *ibid.*, p.20.
- 18 R. Harries, 'The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence', in R. Harries, ed., *op. cit.*, p.94.
- 19 *ibid.*, p.107.
- 20 *loc. cit.*