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KING'S

Theological Review

Theology and Nuclear Weapons <i>John Austin Baker</i>	1
The Peach Pie and the Custard: Two versions of Poetry in the poems of Wallace Stevens <i>Hamish F.G. Swanston</i>	5
Remarks on Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Frazer's <i>The Golden Bough</i> ' <i>Philip Davies</i>	10
Is Structuralism Christian? <i>Glenn Fulcher</i>	15
A Theological Fable <i>Stewart R. Sutherland</i>	17
BOOK REVIEWS	20
FACULTY NEWS Insert	

THEOLOGY AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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At the start of the debate on 10 February 1983 the General Synod of the Church of England was firmly reminded of the need for theological consideration of the issues relating to peace, disarmament and nuclear weapons.¹ Yet by the most generous computation only 8.5 per cent of the words spoken that day could be said to come under the head either of theology or of Christian ethics. The figure is even more startling when we reflect that almost one-third of that exiguous total came in one speech, that of the Archbishop of York,² who was the only member to contribute what could be called a connected theological argument. It is easier to ask for theology than to provide it.

All this is the more remarkable because the subject does raise a lot of quite fundamental theological questions. In the limited space available, I would like to try to identify one or two of these (in particular ones not covered in *The Church and the Bomb*), and tease them out just a little.

The best point from which to start is certainly that which was the centre of Dr. Blanch's presentation. "We do have a distinct theological position to represent," he said, "which could in the end be more important than the exact resolutions we may pass or may reject. We stand for the truth that it was a loving Creator who made the universe, that it is a loving Creator who presides over it, that it is a loving Creator who will determine the nature and the time of its end . . . Fear and faith cannot live together in the same heart and mind . . . Right political decisions, I believe, and right moral attitudes, are more likely to emerge against this background of the universal and unfailing providence of God."³

Amen to that – but the thinking and not unsympathetic observer will want us to say what we suppose such words to mean. In my postbag there have been quite a number of letters expressing the conviction that God is in control, and that therefore we must have faith. But some of the writers mean that God will intervene miraculously to prevent a nuclear holocaust; others, that if such a disaster comes it will be the will of God; others again that if we disarm God will protect us. From any one of these standpoints there is no need to lose sleep, whatever political or moral decisions are made; for whether we arm or disarm, whether we behave peaceably or menacingly, the end result will be what God intended.

Now such attitudes are not what Dr. Blanch had in mind; but they exist, and they show how hard it is to speak plainly on this doctrine of Providence. The Archbishop was urging, rightly and properly, that fear is a bad counsellor. We have to take decisions; and one of the ways in which God exercises his providential care is through the decisions of his human servants. In a matter like that of nuclear weapons we must try to do what is both right and wise – to do right, that is, in the wisest way – and we must not let our judgment of what is right be affected by understandable terror at the prospects if our best efforts fail, whether the prospect of nuclear devastation or the prospect of subjugation to tyranny.

When we have said this, however, all is, in one sense, still to say. We may be in a better frame of mind to think, but we are no nearer knowing what to think. The decisions and attitudes are, as Dr. Blanch said, yet to "emerge". Belief in the Providence of God is not vacuous. It means that when we have done our best, in the light of what God has shown us both of our own nature and of his grace and moral will; then the result will help forward his kingdom. That faith can and should give us serenity and steadfastness. But to find out what the "best" is that we have to do, we must look beyond the doctrine of Providence.

At this point it may be as well to take in a related topic which has come up frequently in public discussion: that of the end of the world, and in particular of that biblical image of the end loosely known as "Armageddon". An equation is regularly made between the possible extinction of life on earth by nuclear war and the 'End'. To quote the Archbishop of York just once more: "This debate is about the end of the world and about how we may prevent it or delay it. Of course, this is in remarkable contrast with our founders in the historic Church who fervently longed for the end of the world and eagerly awaited it";⁴ and again, "From now on every generation will be aware that it could be the last generation on the earth."⁵ It is in this context that many, including Dr. Blanch, have quoted the saying ascribed to Jesus in the Lukan version of the Synoptic 'Little Apocalypse': "When you see these things come to pass, lift up your heads, for your redemption draws near."⁶

The first question to be asked is whether this is not a misuse of the biblical and Gospel eschatology. The 'End' in Scripture is the end of the cosmos, the whole created order. Just because we happen to know that the universe is infinitely vaster than the biblical writers could imagine, we do not have the right to apply their words simply to the dissolution of the surface of our small planet. When they wrote that "the powers in the heavens will be shaken",⁷ or that "the heavens will disappear with a great rushing sound, the elements will disintegrate in flames, and the earth with all that is in it will be laid bare" (or "burnt up"),⁸ it was something far more fundamental that they had in mind. Scientists are divided in their speculations as to whether the universe yet contains other creatures of whom Christians would say that they are "in the image of God", but it may do so, nor can we rule out the possibility of "many crosses, still to come or long ago".⁹ We are not the whole of God's creative story, nor is our end *the* End. Cosmological theory today does dimly glimpse, in a future far beyond the natural demise of this planet, something we could call the "end of the universe". Our antics with nuclear weapons will neither advance nor retard that by one micro-second.

There is, therefore, something ever so slightly megalomaniac about the demand from various Christian quarters that our theological reflection on nuclear weapons should take in the 'apocalyptic' dimension. To succumb to this demand is to exaggerate our own importance, and to diminish the scale of God's creative and redemptive concern. There is no fate we can bring upon ourselves which is not adequately covered by our belief in resurrection, judgment and eternal life.

If this is so, then Armageddon is equally irrelevant. This particular topic does, however, raise a rather different but

absolutely crucial issue. In General Synod the Bishop of London, Dr. Graham Leonard, said "I could have wished that we had all read the Book of Revelation before this debate, for it concentrates the mind wonderfully (Here) the vision and promise of the eternal peace, in which creation is redeemed and consecrated in Christ, is interwoven with the vision of the defeat of evil portrayed in all its horror and with which there can be no compromise. The victory of Christ, the Lamb that was slain, has to be implemented to the full before the End of the Ages when the peoples will dwell in peace in the City of God . . . We must not simply wait passively for Armageddon. Nor must we seek a peace which is no peace, in which evil could prevail unchallenged and unchecked."¹⁰ Later, replying to a point made by the Dean of Durham, Dr. Peter Baelz, he amplified the last two sentences in the above quotation thus: ". . . we must not . . . use the expectation of (Armageddon) as a cloak for our idleness and sloth and lack of effort to work for peace. What I believe the Book of Revelation says to us is that we cannot expect the peace of God unless we are prepared to face the cost which it entails; and God is giving us a moment, and the question we face is how are we to use it?"¹¹

At one point the Bishop's words are ambiguous but not, perhaps, irretrievably so. Referring to the Book of Revelation, he speaks of "the vision of the defeat of evil portrayed in all its horror and with which there can be no compromise." Is it evil or the defeat of evil which is portrayed in all its horror? The following clause about compromise seems to make reasonably certain that it is evil which is in mind. But, of course, the horror in the Book of Revelation comes in the portrayal not of evil but of the means which God adopts to defeat and destroy it. There is here an exultant piling of agony on agony for which the most charitable explanation would be that the writer was not quite sane. For theologically (and this is the crux) these chapters do not describe the appalling consequences of human folly and sin, which is how we in the light of modern technology might be tempted to interpret them. They are explicitly supernatural disruptions of the cosmos. God is doing these things; and his agents, though they include human forces, are primarily the angelic armies and Christ himself. We have no exegetical right to interpret these passages otherwise.

The Old Testament background to Armageddon is equally one of divine and miraculous destruction, though it includes a global battle between the godless nations, engineered by God himself and leading to their mutual extermination.¹² Such pictures do indeed concentrate the mind wonderfully, though not perhaps in the way the Bishop of London meant. The challenge which should stop us in our tracks cannot be put better than in his own words: "The victory of Christ, the Lamb that was slain, has to be implemented to the full . . ." This, the obscene, sadistic fantasy of *Revelation*, Chapters 6–20, is the victory of "the Lamb that was slain."

I confess I do not see how any sound biblical exposition can apply these chapters to a nuclear war, or indeed to any other purely human conflict, however terrible. But that only brings out the real problem, the one from which the Christian churches persistently run away: that there are in the Bible incompatible pictures of God, and that we have eventually to make up our mind which of them is to be in control of our faith. The total personality-change in Christ from the Crucified Son of Man in the Gospel Passion

narratives to the Rider on the White Horse in Revelation 19, 11–16, is not one that any honest person can accept as it stands. One has to be, at the very least, radically re-interpreted in terms of the other if the Christian faith is to have any coherence or credibility; and the same principle needs to be applied in a thoroughgoing manner throughout the Scriptures. The Bible does not give us a picture of God, one which however complex is yet internally consistent. It gives us several pictures of God which, even if they overlap, are at heart irreconcilable. The Holy Spirit, had we the courage to trust it, would re-expound the Scriptures for us in terms of Jesus, Crucified and Risen, as indeed the Easter Christ is himself said to have done. It is that re-exposition which alone can be a firm base for the Church's proclamation to the world and for the ordering of her own life. Personally I doubt whether such a re-exposition will allow us to use the image of Armageddon in the way it has been used in this nuclear weapons debate.

For how has it been used? Simply to say this: we must do everything we can to avert Armageddon, but if we fail then it is right to use even the most extreme and horrific forms of physical power to defeat the onslaught of evil. But this is an illegitimate use of the biblical imagery, where Armageddon is a cosmic cataclysm, visiting a sinful world with divine vengeance, part of which is the mutual execution of the nations. The survivors are, in the O.T., the people of Israel, in the N.T. the saints; and in neither case are they supposed to have taken any part in the battle. The 'holy war' model of the O.T. is here carried to its logical conclusion, with all the destruction wrought or engineered supernaturally by God.

We have here, I suggest, two key questions: first, whether we can accept any longer pictures of the divine action so foreign to all that God has shown us in Christ of his manner of working; secondly, and following naturally from that, in what sense such an event could be said anyway to be "the defeat of evil". On the first something has been said already. I would like now to explore the second.

One of the major criticisms levelled against *The Church and the Bomb* was that it did not offer a "theology of power".¹³ In what theological context are we to understand the use of power in this world? What are the Christian ethics of power, especially the power of the State?

Christians have recognised from the first that actions are allowed to the State which must be forbidden to individuals. The power of life and death, the power of imprisonment, the power of taxation, the power to limit personal liberty: all these are powers which not only are denied to the citizen, but must be denied if society is to survive. Equally, most of them must be permitted to the State in the same interest of making community life possible. If God made us creatures who need to live in community, then he must be believed to have willed these necessary means.

At the same time, the tradition has grown up in human civilisation that the power of the State cannot be unbridled. Different societies have expressed this conviction in different ways. Trial by jury; 'no taxation without representation'; the abolition of the death penalty, and of cruel punishments such as the cat, birching, or solitary confinement; the requirement of search warrants; recognition of the right of conscientious objection to military service; these are some of the obvious examples from our western world. The

whole area of 'human rights', and the attempt of the UN to define what rights all governments ought to allow to their subjects express the same principle. We do not accept that for the State "anything goes", any more than we do for individuals.

The same applies in relations between states, both in peace and in war. There is a whole corpus of material relating to the moral limitation of war, of which that body of thought, both Christian and humanist, known as 'Just War' theory is but one major example. It needs to be stated clearly and loudly, again and again, that nuclear weapons, except possibly for certain limited uses of the very smallest types, contravene all the international conventions on warmaking,¹⁴ and have for this reason been condemned in unqualified terms by the United Nations General Assembly.¹⁵

When new technology creates the possibility of doing something that has never been done before, but which appears contrary to existing ethical standards, there is always a strong temptation to alter the rules. Today we face many problems of this sort in, for example, genetics, information technology, sexual morality, and so forth. It is rather easily assumed that such developments change the essential situation in a way which makes the old rules obsolete. This assumption has found its way into the nuclear weapons debate. Criticising the Report, *The Church and the Bomb*, the Bishop of London said of it: ". . . the doctrine of the Just War is examined in the form which it developed in the days of conventional weapons. *No consideration is given as to how far the principles which it sought to embody could and should be re-expressed in the light of modern weapons, biological and chemical as well as nuclear*"¹⁵ (italics mine). Since the Working Party decided that the doctrine ruled out the use of nuclear weapons, the Bishop would seem to imply that the group ought to have tried to find a way of 're-expressing' the doctrine that would allow such use, at least in certain circumstances.

The method hinted at is familiar. One analyses the 'principles' underlying a particular moral position, stating them in the broadest terms, and then sets out from this re-statement along a different road of argument which arrives, naturally enough, at a different destination. There would have been no problem in doing this for war-fighting – in fact, to prove the point, I will do it now. We could easily have said: "The object of a Just War is to prevent the spread of some moral evil, such as an atheistic tyranny which has attacked one's country with a view to subjugating it. To be able to achieve this object it is necessary to deploy a force equal to that of the aggressor. If the aggressor is prepared to use a particular weapon – nuclear, chemical, biological or any other – then it is right to do the same. Just War principles in fact demand it."

Simple, isn't it? Indeed, not only is it simple, it is also the argument which is actually used by all those good people, outside the churches as well as within them, who are content that in the last resort the nuclear trigger should be pulled. What it ignores is, of course, that traditional Just War thinking, like all respectable moral reflection, is concerned not just that a righteous object should be achieved but that righteous methods should be used. Since, however, war cannot be regarded as wholly or ideally righteous (and, generally speaking, has been deplored in the best secular as

well as religious thought at most periods of history) the Just War doctrine finds itself from the start in a weak position as regards methods. Is there any difference of *principle* between killing in one way and killing in another? A counter-argument, stressing the horrific nature of modern conventional weapons, is a standard move in this debate. Again, 'ordinary' war kills non-combatants: what then is the difference in *principle* about nuclear weapons? This, too, is a regular riposte.

Our re-expression of principles is now, however, in danger of proving too much. Once set out along this line of argument, and no methods of war fighting are tabu. All restraints on war are compromises which are made in the light of particular circumstances. When new weapons are developed, new conditions have to be evaluated, and in the process old principles are inevitably re-expressed. The new considerations raised by nuclear weapons are, quite simply, the very long-term lethal damage to the environment, and the long-term genetic risks to all reproduction, not just human. There are no precedents for assessing the moral quality of these things. By analogy, however, from such traditional crimes as 'poisoning the wells', and from the horror expressed throughout human history at injury to the unborn child, one can say with reason that these are morally unacceptable as well as being, from a pragmatic viewpoint, potential collective suicide. By extension, therefore, not only from 'Just War' thinking but also from international conventions, there is a strong case for saying that nuclear weapons should be outlawed, and that this is an instance where clear restraints should be put on the exercise of State power. For Christians, this conclusion is reinforced by the biblical doctrine of human stewardship of God's creation. A 'theology of power' which pointed to a different conclusion would, in my view, be a deeply suspect theology.

Where, however, a theology of power could help a great deal would be in examining the very assumption on which readiness to fight a nuclear war is based. This, as we have already seen, is that force is justified in the last resort as a means to defeat evil. We come now to the heart of the matter. It has often been pointed out, not least in this debate, that Jesus gives little or no guidance to those who have to wield worldly power. The reason, I believe, is this. *Jesus was concerned with the defeat of evil: and evil cannot be defeated by the use of coercive power.* This is not to denigrate the State, nor to propose anarchy. It is simply to recognise an insuperable spiritual limitation. Evil can be 'defeated' only in the soul of an individual or in the souls of a community, and only if people are prepared not to retaliate, not to hate, not to pass the evil on to others, but simply to love and to forgive. If this is not the message of the story of Jesus, what message does he have?

The most that State violence can do is to restrain one evil by means of another. That is not to say that there are not many other, positive things which the State can do to promote good and diminish evil. Justice, social welfare, education, truth and fair dealing in international relations, generosity to poor nations – the list is endless. And where evil exists it has to be restrained lest it devour the good. But because coercion is not in itself a good, but only a necessary evil, we have to be exceptionally vigilant to ensure that the evil in coercion is not greater than the evil it is needed to restrain.

The idea in which we must never acquiesce is the belief that nuclear war, or any other war, is a means of 'defeating' evil. It is not. This is not just a matter of words. It is only by making this distinction that we can hope to evolve a Christian policy in respect of war. Non-violence is, I am sure, a call with which Jesus challenges all who would follow him. It demands from us not just the renunciation of force but the readiness to be crucified for love, truth, justice and forgiveness, and so to transmute the evil done to us into good by suffering as Jesus suffered. The world can never have too many people who accept this vocation. But it is essentially and exclusively a vocation for individuals and communities, not for States. The State as a corporate entity, however powerful, is impersonal, and cannot live or die sacrificially in this way.

The State, however, as Jesus and the primitive Church saw clearly, can within its own limits serve good and restrain evil. In particular, as regards violence and war, it has a special role to protect those who have not attained to Christ's vocation to non-violence. What is vital is that it should do this with as little counter-evil as possible. In this respect deterrence, which prevents war, is obviously better than war-fighting. But in both cases force must be minimum force; it must, to the limits of our ingenuity, be humane and just force; it must be manifestly defensive force.

It is, paradoxically, easier to apply these principles in nuclear weapons matters than to conventional military power, because *nuclear deterrence does not demand parity*. Provided you have an invulnerable means of inflicting on the other side more damage than it is prepared to endure, you have a sufficient deterrent. There is, therefore, no moral, military nor any other justification for either the variety or quantity of nuclear weapons in the world at the moment. But, equally, there is no reason why any one Super-Power or alliance should not independently reduce its weapons stocks by a very considerable percentage. To do so would not risk tempting any other nation to aggression nor fail in the State's duty of defence. The very term 'overkill capacity' shows that this is so. The policies of the UK and French Governments prove the same point. For if our tiny independent deterrent, or the only slightly larger one of France, are each sufficient to hold back a power as great as that of the Soviet Union, what possible need is there for such a gigantic nuclear panoply as that of NATO as a whole?

The proper mission of the Church to the secular State in this field seems to me to be that of encouraging the nations by wise practical advice to draw back from the brink. Only as they do this can there be scope for other peace-building measures, including those of justice for the world's poor, and of urgent programmes relating to resources and population. Ultimately we may hope to arrive at the outlawing not only of nuclear weapons but of war as such. To help initiate this process we need to put our whole weight of patient argument and loving concern behind two main immediate measures. First, a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, with its consequential freeze on the development of new weapons systems; and secondly, an independent *reduction* of nuclear weapons by the Western alliance, as large as may be without jeopardising a minimum but sufficient deterrent. This, I am sure, is in fact more practicable than negotiating balanced force reductions, and

more conducive to world security than repeated failures at the negotiating table. Moreover, by breaking the hypnotic spell of the arms race, it could transform the world's spiritual climate overnight.

For the reasons I have given, it seems to me that 'pacifism' alone can never be a sufficient Christian response in these matters. The world needs from the Churches both more and more individuals committed to carrying the cross of non-violence, and also understanding guidance of and support for the State when it ventures on the kind of course described above. It is, I hope and believe, along these lines that a Christian and human 'alternative consensus' will emerge in the next few years.

- 1 *The Church and the Bomb: The General Synod Debate* (hereafter referred to as *Debate*), CIO Publishing, London, 1983, p.4.
- 2 *Debate*, pp. 16-18.
- 3 *Debate*, p. 18.
- 4 *Debate*, p. 16.
- 5 *Debate*, p. 17.
- 6 Lk.21.28. This text was, for example, the theme of a contribution by Archbishop Antony Bloom to a theological consultation between representatives of the British Council of Churches and the visiting delegation of Soviet churchmen on the subject of "the Peace of God and the Peace of Man" at Addington Palace, January 11-12, 1983.
- 7 Mt 24.29 = Mk 13.25 = Lk 21.26.
- 8 2 Pet. 3.10.
- 9 Sydney Carter, 'Every star shall sing a carol', v.4.
- 10 *Debate*, pp. 8-9.
- 11 *Debate*, p.22.
- 12 The name Armageddon occurs in Scripture only at Rev. 16,16, where it is said to be a Hebrew word. The exact derivation has been much discussed. OT background for the general picture in Revelation is, however, not far to seek. In addition to eschatological battle-scenes such as Joel 3.9-16, there is a clear allusion to the destruction of Gog's horde in Ezek. 39 : cf. esp. Ezek. 39.17-20 and Rev. 19.17f.
- 13 For discussions of this theme with specific reference to nuclear weapons cf. The Rt Revd Dr Graham Leonard, in *Peace and the Bomb*, ed. Watson, London, 1983, pp. 10-14, and The Revd Richard Harries, 'The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence', *What Hope in an Armed World?*, ed. Harries, London, 1982, pp. 87-114.
- 14 Cf., eg Hague Convention (1899), art. 22; 23(e), and the corresponding clauses in the Convention of 1907; the Geneva Convention (1949) and Additional Protocol I (1977), arts. 50-58.
- 15 UN General Assembly, res. 1653 (xvi), 24.11.1961, and res. 36/100, 9.12.81.
- 16 *Debate*, p. 7.