

Nuclear Deterrence and Christian Vocation

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If there is, as I believe, a temporal mission for the Christian, how would it be possible for the terrestrial hope by which such a mission is quickened not to have as its most comprehensive aim the ideal of building either a better or a new Christian civilization? ... At each new stage in human history ... it is normal that Christians hope for a new Christendom, and depict for themselves, in order to guide their effort, a concrete historical ideal appropriate to the particular climate of the age in question.

Lecturing *On the Philosophy of History* in the United States in 1955, Jacques Maritain thus restated a theme he had elaborated in Spain in the high summer of 1934, 23 months before Franco's uprising. I shall argue that we should answer Maritain's rhetorical question, No: it is a philosophical and theological mistake to suppose, as he did, that the temporal vocation of the Christian—or the Christian's conscience in political matters—*requires* a 'comprehensive aim' such as the 'concrete historical ideal' of building a new or better Christendom.

In March 1955 the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, speaking in the House of Commons, used words which have survived as expressing the reality of the nuclear age, and the hope which has guided the masters of the age: 'safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation'. The West's new armaments, he said, would increase 'the deterrent upon the Soviet Union by putting her ... scattered population on an equality or near-equality of vulnerability with our small densely-populated island'—a vulnerability matched by that of the West's populations. The threat expressed by Churchill, to destroy Soviet populations by 'a crushing weight of nuclear retaliation', has remained the indispensable element in the deterrent threats and accompanying operational plans of the U.S., Britain, and France ever since.

The proposals which citizens of the U.S. and their elected representatives are invited to approve in relation to possible nuclear war have been stated, in detail, every January, February, or March for 25 years, by each Secretary of Defense in his annual report and funding request to Congress. These remarkable source records of strategic doctrine's evolution in details and constancy in essentials are supplemented by the ample records of the annual cross-examination of the Defense Secretary and his officials. All seem to have been overlooked by the U.S.

bishops in the preparation of their 1983 pastoral on war and peace, *The Challenge of Peace*.

The U.S.—in these documents which make proposals for adoption and approval by the U.S. public and by governments which, like the U.K.'s, agree to participate in carrying out U.S. strategic policies—includes in its strategic policy two threats: the threat to *city swap* (i.e., to retaliate against a Soviet city or cities in the event of Soviet attack on a Western city or cities), and the threat of *final retaliation*. Both threats appear—to take one example from scores—in Defense Secretary Harold Brown's 1979 report to Congress:

To have a true countervailing strategy, our forces must be capable of covering, and being withheld from, a substantial list of targets. Cities cannot be excluded from such a list, not only because cities, population, and industry are closely linked, but because it is essential at all times to retain the option to attack urban-industrial targets—both as a deterrent to attacks on our own cities and as the final retaliation if that particular deterrent should fail.

In drafting *The Challenge of Peace*, the U.S. bishops found 'particularly helpful', they said, a letter from the President's National Security Adviser, William Clark, and a sentence in Secretary Weinberger's report of January 1983. Clark wrote to the bishops: 'for moral, political, and military reasons, the United States does not target the civilian population as such.' Weinberger wrote: 'The Reagan Administration's policy is that under no circumstances may such weapons be used deliberately for the purpose of destroying populations.' But only four pages earlier Weinberger had stated what the essence of U.S. deterrence policy is: the maintenance of the assured capability of destroying 'those political, military and economic assets that they [the Soviets] value most highly.' A few days before the bishops adopted *The Challenge of Peace*, Weinberger wrote to the Senate Armed Forces Committee: U.S. Forces, he said, must 'be able to retaliate effectively against the full range of Soviet high value assets, regardless of the scope, duration, or intensity of the conflict.' And the first of these assets he listed was: 'their urban industrial society'.

I touch on these state papers because they illustrate some of the realities of the present relationships between Church and state. The Church's teaching against the countercity use of nuclear weapons is not accepted as a norm of national policy, but it affects the language in which the policy is, on appropriate occasions, presented. So, when addressing specifically Catholic audiences, in the months running up to the adoption of *The Challenge of Peace*, officials like Clark and Weinberger produced, respectively, such really duplicitous statements as: 'We do not threaten the existence of Soviet civilization by threatening Soviet cities', and 'The United States rejects a strategy which targets nuclear weapons against populations centers.' Other audiences, and other occasions, produced very different formulations.

Speaking in Oxford in 1984, Weinberger deployed the official justification for the Strategic Defense Initiative: its purpose will be to 'defend people instead of avenging them' as present policies propose; its weapons will 'go after weapons rather than people' as present weapons do. In his post-summit broadcast to the nation from the White House on October 13, 1986, President Reagan said that 'our only real defence' is still 'a policy of mutual destruction and slaughter of civilians.'

The Christian citizen must learn how to read official statements. In our book *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism*, Germain Grisez, Joseph M. Boyle Jr., and I include a detailed study of the British government's duplicity about its wartime bombings, a duplicity consciously aimed at satisfying leaders of religious and humanitarian opinion while leaving operational policy just as it was.

The intention of a military attack is not *defined* by the targeting of the attack. One's intent is defined by what one chooses to do, or seeks to achieve through what one chooses to do. Consider, for example, the intent in a city swap.

Even in a limited nuclear war, the destruction of a single city or a few cities might be needed to dissuade the Soviets from repeating an attack they had made against a Western city or cities. The Soviet city selected for destruction might well contain military personnel and installations; the targeters might well select some such installation for the aim-point or desired ground zero—just as the targeters of Hiroshima selected a point alongside the army encampment there. But *all* those killed in the attack would be killed for a reason having nothing to do with their status as combatants or noncombatants. All would be killed simply as people present in a city to be destroyed for the purpose of showing Western resolve and deterring further Soviet attack.

No one killed in Hiroshima was killed as a combatant; no Japanese civilian was killed as a mere 'side effect' or by merely 'collateral damage'; *all* were killed as inhabitants whose mass destruction would shock Japan out of the war. No one killed in a city-swapping duel would be killed *as* a combatant; all would thus be killed *as* noncombatants—i.e., as innocents. Everyone threatened in the threat to carry out such 'limited nuclear options' as city swaps is threatened as an innocent. The term 'as' which I have been stressing is the word which introduces the description which identifies the morally significant intent of the threatened attack.

Similarly, *all* those killed in the execution of the threat of final retaliation, even members of the Soviet leadership and armed forces, would be killed simply *as* surviving members of Soviet society upon which the West, having then *nothing left to lose* (i.e., nothing remaining to be defended), would be imposing the now threatened 'unacceptable losses'. Some of those killed would no doubt be war criminals who might have been tried and executed for horrific war crimes against the West. But the West's threatened final retaliation does not propose to destroy such persons *as* war criminals, or as military personnel still engaged in unjust military operations

against the West. For the threat of final retaliation is to be carried out only after the West has lost what it went to war to defend. When a war has been lost, it is over. And when it is over, there are neither combatants nor noncombatants. There remain only criminals, who cannot be justly killed without a trial, and the innocent. The threat of final retaliation is a threat to kill them simply as Soviet people. In Weinberger's and Reagan's homely language, final retaliation would avenge people rather than defend them; it will go after people rather than weapons; it is the enduring underpinning, now as in the mid-1950's, of a policy 'based on the threat that if they kill our people, we'll kill theirs,' as Reagan put it in 1985.

I have used the term 'innocents' in the sense of Christian teaching, as summed up by Richard McCormick S.J. in 1967 in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*:

It is a fundamental moral principle unanimously accepted by Catholic moralists that it is immoral directly to take innocent human life except with divine authorisation. 'Direct' taking of human life implies that one performs a lethal action with the intention that death should result ... Non-combatants are in this sense innocents and enjoy the immunity of the innocent from direct attack.

As Pope John Paul has said, 'the whole tradition of the Church has lived and lives on the conviction' that 'there exist acts which are always and everywhere in themselves and of themselves illicit,' (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1985) para. 17) and that among those acts is 'the direct killing of an innocent person' ('Address to Moral Theologians', April 11, 1986). 'Direct', in this tradition, means no more and no less than: intended, as an end or as a means. The deaths threatened and proposed to be imposed in city swaps or final retaliation would be fully intended as part of the plan to impose on the Soviets limited or unlimited losses of things they value most highly, including the lives of their population. City-swapping and final retaliation are therefore acts which, whatever the circumstances, are utterly excluded from Christian life.

The choice to do such acts—the intention, the willingness to do them—this too is excluded from Christian moral life. For in the Ten Commandments and in the words of Jesus, the Church has always found confirmation of the rational principle that *what it is wrong to do it is wrong to intend*: what makes one worthy or unworthy is what proceeds from one's heart; voluntary anger and lust, even without issuing in deeds, are morally evil (e.g., see: Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21; Matt. 5:22, 15:17; Mark 7:18–23; Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* I–II, 74,1). The willingness now, to do a great wrong if certain conditions are fulfilled, is a seriously wrongful choice, even if one might, when the conditions are fulfilled, repent of one's choice and choose not to carry it out.

But perhaps we should regard the deterrent as a bluff, or convert it into a bluff? Few save Christians ever seriously advance this notion. Suggestions which sound rather different, such as that the whole system is 'mere

possession' without any determinate intention, or is no more than 'keeping open our options', turn out on analysis to include the notion that it is or could be a bluff, a threat which is not backed up by any corresponding intention, choice or willingness.

The American President or the British Prime Minister could personally be bluffing. A few others could be. Most who participate in the system *cannot*—i.e., logically cannot—be bluffing; for they have done their part, now, in making the execution of the threat possible, but have no part in any eventual execution itself: Congressmen and MPs; those who build and arm silos and submarines and missiles and bombers, and those who transmit the never-ceasing flow of information to the underground or airborne command posts; none of these can be bluffing.

They may hope the President or the Prime Minister is. They may hope that those who would execute the deterrent on the day will turn out to have been secret bluffers, or dissidents who will disobey orders. They have no ground whatever to judge that this President or any President has been bluffing. And they have solid reason to anticipate that the military and hardware in silos and submarines will prove reliable on the day. But the crucial point is: *they* themselves cannot be bluffing, but can choose only to do, now, or not to do, now, their bit for the effecting of the proposal, the maintenance of the system, the performance of the vast and ongoing public act.

The act goes under the name 'deterrence', and has deterrence as its motive, but is defined, publicly and unambiguously, by its visible capacity to carry out the official *proposal*, the officially stated intention or willingness, to impose unacceptable losses in city swaps and/or final retaliation. That is the proposal and intention in which one participates, whatever one's reluctance and whatever one's hopes or even expectations, when one voluntarily does one's bit for the deterrent.

The conclusion seems inescapable: the nuclear deterrent is not acceptable to Christian consciences and cannot in the foreseeable future be transformed into an acceptable form of deterrence.

The deterrent is a public act, which comes to be in and through many individual choices which propose that act, accept proposals to adopt it, participate in it, or in some other way support it. Everyone's fundamental responsibility is: not to choose or do anything which itself adopts, participates in, or supports that public act or any of the subordinate acts by which it is sustained. Because the public act includes, essentially, a proposal no one should ever adopt, one must never accept any invitation to support the deterrent or to help, however reluctantly, to bring about its continuance.

This basic negative responsibility has far wider implications than one might at first think. For Western deterrents underpin all the many policies and acts (military, political, economic, etc.) which Western nations could not rationally maintain or perform in the face of Soviet challenge, if they could not adequately deter Soviet power. Thus, the Western nations' deterrents are necessary means for their pursuit of the ends of all those other

policies and acts. But persons who rationally choose one means to an end also intend all the other means they know they must choose to enable their chosen means to attain that end effectively. So: well informed and rational citizens of the U.S., Britain, and France who judge nuclear deterrence wrong will see that they cannot adopt, participate in, or support *any* national policy or act which presupposes that balance of power with the USSR which their nations need and use the deterrent to maintain, even policies and acts morally good in themselves and perhaps urgently needed.

May one pay all one's taxes, or should one withhold the part one calculates corresponds to the proportion of total government expenditure which goes towards readiness to execute those wicked proposals? The answer, I think, is that taxes must not be withheld unless such withholding meets all the criteria for legitimate civil disobedience: openness in one's violation of law, nonviolence, ready submission to legal penalties. Our taxes are paid into a consolidated fund; payments are not earmarked for a particular governmental project. So one can *intend* that one's tax payments be spent on worthy projects which one is morally bound, as a citizen, to support, and merely *accept*, as an unwanted side effect, that some portion of these payments will be diverted to immoral purposes. Moreover, no one can reasonably judge that the withholding of tax payments will in any way affect the amount spent on the nuclear strategic system; the authorities give every sign of regarding the maintenance of that system as a high priority. So it is morally certain that the only effect of withholding one's taxes will be that other citizens will have to pay more, and/or that worthy projects which one has a duty to support will suffer.

What about voting? If one sees the immorality of the deterrent, may one vote for any Member of Parliament other than a unilateralist? It seems to me that one certainly *may* vote for candidates who support the deterrent. One does not share in the guilt of the deterrent merely by voting for a candidate who supports its immoralities, provided one is doing so in order to prevent the election of candidates who support morally similar policies and who are less suitable in other respects, or who support other immoral public policies, such as the funding of abortion.

I have touched on a few actual or possible *negative* responsibilities of citizens. *Positive* or affirmative responsibilities are, as always, harder to specify in general terms, and will vary from citizen to citizen. But the general positive responsibility of all citizens who recognize the deterrent's immorality, is to take such opportunities as their prior responsibilities permit to bear witness to their alienation from their nation's deterrent policy.

In many cases one's opportunities will be very limited indeed. And in any event, one's expression of alienation should be responsible. For example, one should be alert to the grave risks created by 'peace' movements which advocate unilateral disarmament but fail to acknowledge, steadily and clearly, that a side-effect of doing what they advocate might well be Soviet domination. Electorates that adopted a unilateralist policy without clearly recognizing Soviet domination as a quite possible outcome would probably

backslide if that outcome became manifestly imminent. And then their clamour for nuclear rearmament might well precipitate war and holocaust.

Some have reasonably judged that their positive responsibilities extend to acts of witness intended to make manifest the moral lawlessness of the deterrent—legitimate civil disobedience. They have acted, with a symbolic purpose, to break what the magistrate calls the law of the land concerning trespass etc. Given that the deterrent is wicked, all those laws and institutions which directly protect it are unjust just to the extent that they do so protect it. That is to say, the law of trespass and of criminal damage to property is morally suspended just insofar as that law stands in the way of actions reasonably undertaken for the purpose of directly impeding wickedness. Even in circumstances where there is so little prospect of success that the use of significantly destructive force is unwarranted, it cannot, I think, be said that either the State or any particular person can claim to have a right that the laws of trespass etc., to the extent that they protect the instruments and practices of wickedness, be regarded as morally binding by those who wish to impede those activities, or who wish to symbolise their willingness to impede them if they could.

In sum: Christians, whether (as I am) reaching their own verdict now, before any eventual verdict of the Church against the nuclear deterrent, or following that verdict if and when it comes (I know not when), are still to consider how their choices bear on their nation's common good. But they will do so knowing that they can make no choice which participates in or itself supports a policy which, though indispensable for securing that common good against terrible disruption and damage by foreign, unjust, and anti-Christian forces, is simply excluded from Christian life because murderous.

And they will do so without holding before their mind's eye any 'comprehensive aim' such as Maritain's building of 'a new Christendom'. As an *ideal*, such a civilization is an appropriate object of contemplation. But utopias are no appropriate objects of striving. And as a *goal* of practical reasoning, deliberation, and hope, I cannot see how it could ever be other than utopian. And if it could, its attainment in our era is blocked by such massively present obstacles that it has now no proper role to play in the practical reasoning of any of us about his vocation. Of those obstacles, the most massive is the fact I have been dwelling upon: the vicious threats to city-swap and to inflict a crushing final retaliation are indispensable to resisting subjugation by the superpower we confront and cannot overcome.

If one dismisses from one's practical reasoning all 'comprehensive aims' defined in terms of future states of affairs as broad as 'a new Christendom', one in no way stultifies that reasoning or frustrates the responsibilities which such reasoning seeks to identify and fulfil. It is a philosophical error to suppose (as Maritain did) that practical reasoning is impotent unless guided by such envisagings of far-reaching future states of affairs.

Perhaps I have said enough to indicate the conception of vocation which I believe the faith proposes to us. In this conception, the Christian is called to co-operate in the Father's work of creation, the Son's of redemption, and the

Spirit's of sanctification. The public life of one's own political community is certainly one field of such co-operation. But our life, for each one of us, must be spent on a small detail of the great edifice the divine persons are building. That edifice is not a new Christendom. Society and polity are never identical with the Church. Only the Church has a comprehensive goal—the Kingdom of God, which is not of this world, though it is in this world that its materials are assembled and the divine construction of it mysteriously begins.

As the Second Vatican Council teaches, the good fruits of our nature, and of any chosen efforts we do in obedience to the Lord's command, will be found again in the Kingdom of truth and life, holiness and grace, justice, love, and peace. Any choice that authentically honours those goods thus goes to build up that Kingdom, even if the choice results in, or accepts, some loss of those goods as states of affairs (see *Gaudium et spes*, 39). The choice to reverence human life, for example, by refusing to participate in public or private choices to destroy it, is thus a choice which is material of the Kingdom and has real and truly lasting effects even when worldly wisdom understands it only as a choice of 'greater evil'.

The horizon of worldly wisdom is limited to the future of whichever worldly society or state one happens to be concerned for; such 'wisdom' is guided to its commitments by a principle of *bias*, generating mere rationalizations which pose as calculations of greater good and lesser evil. But there is a specifically Christian ethics because there is a specifically Christian horizon—the Kingdom and its building up by choices to follow in the way of the Lord Jesus—a horizon which relativizes every ethic that measures choices by their aptness to preserve or secure any temporal state of affairs.

The vocation to heal the world's weaknesses, wounds, and sickness certainly encompasses active participation and, for some, leadership in the public affairs of one's particular polity. But it is of the essence of the nuclear age, for as far ahead as any can see, that mastery in polities such as those of the U.S., the U.K., and France will go to those who are willing to devastate the innocent in adversary nations. So, in all such polities, a Christian's vocation can now no longer include what it once could, a share in executing the supreme policies of national leadership; nor can it any longer include the vocation, honourable in itself, of forcibly resisting the nation's adversaries, if those credibly threaten the cities of one's own nation or its allies.

A mere accident of technology has indeed radically changed the relationship between Church and State in the forum where that relationship has its central reality and role: the conscience of the individual Christian. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Catholics came to see themselves, by and large, as the best of good citizens. Giving up on that will be hard indeed.

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