

Reasoning about the Bomb

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A few days after the publication of the Church of England report, *The Church and the Bomb*, a Foreign Office spokesman replied to the suggestion that the Church has a duty to give a moral lead to the nation by saying that "giving a moral lead may be good for the conscience but it is not a valid proposition in the real world". A somewhat more elaborate version of the morality versus reality outlook occurred in Bernard Williams's talk on Channel 4 on 15 November (now published in *New Society*, 18 November). He said that something he called the Simple Moral Argument about deterrence works in the abstract but is useless for coming to any conclusions about how to live with nuclear weapons now we have them. It is the business of practical and political rationality to argue about what to do next. (Unfortunately, he went on to say, practical rationality soon breaks down amid the complexities of deterrence theory and we are left with scepticism as our only intellectual resource.)

It is a fact that the apparent divorce between morality and practical reason is brought into sharp focus by the issue of nuclear deterrence. To simplify the picture somewhat: against nuclear deterrence are to be found nearly all those who give priority in international relations as in personal relations to certain inviolable moral principles; in favour of nuclear deterrence – in some form at least – are to be found nearly all those who believe that moral principles must be subordinated to "reason" or "reality", especially in matters of security. Underlying the difference over nuclear deterrence are undoubtedly some fundamentally opposed value-choices at work, but also some fundamental confusions about the meaning of morality and practical reason. It is my belief that only a way of thinking which attempts to reconcile these categories – however difficult this may be – can hope to be straight about either of them, or about nuclear deterrence. It is possible that the Just War tradition – based as it is on a strong natural law doctrine – has enough resources to do this. And security and justice being ultimately theological matters, it almost certainly needs a theological context in which to do it, that is, a context of faith in a Creator and Redeemer.

The Church and the Bomb does approach the question in this way. It sets out what is by now the classical moral case against nuclear deterrence on the basis of Just War doctrine and makes the attempt to connect strategic thinking with Christian beliefs

about God and our place in the world he created. In fact, the exposition of the Just War case in Chapter 6 could scarcely be bettered for clarity and insight into the real meaning of the tradition. It must be said however, that those commentators who have isolated this chapter from the rest of the report as if it is meant to stand on its own as an abstract argument (the Simple Moral Argument approach) have misunderstood the moral force of the Just War categories and how they must be used in coming to conclusions. They do not offer watertight, logical and abstract arguments (which is, I guess, the sphere to which some people would like to confine morality) which are then available for everyone to “apply” to the “real world” as best he can. They receive their rationality – and hence their moral force – only from a well-understood human context, which for us now is a world-wide context. It is necessary to know about the nature and effects of the weapons, about probable targetting policies, about strategic doctrines, about the dynamics of the arms race, about the psychology of nations at war, about the interdependence of nations East/West and South/North. Such matters as these are essential material for understanding what the Just War arguments are now supposed to be doing. The report does, on the whole, make a good job of presenting relevant information in the early chapters. It is particularly informative and – so far as one can tell from the available literature – accurate about Soviet attitudes and about the paradoxes of deterrence theory.

The Just War criteria are what might be called the outer limits of rationality, beyond which acts of violence cannot be said to serve the common good of humanity. The report finds that three of these in particular could most probably never be observed in the use of nuclear weapons of any kind. First, those engaging in war must have a reasonable hope of success. What counts as success depends of course on the aims of the war, and assuming that any nation would now only make war in self defence, a doubtful outcome and a great deal of damage to itself would not necessarily make the defence unjustified. However, a nuclear war would most probably destroy whole nations – certainly Britain. The overwhelming weight of expert opinion is against the rationality of fighting any war with nuclear weapons, whether strategic or tactical.

Second, the evil and damage which the war entails must be judged to be proportionate to the injury it is designed to avert or the injustice which occasions it. It is argued that there is no reasonable human goal – neither the protection of justice, the construction of peace nor the preservation of freedom – which could possibly be achieved in a war involving strategic nuclear weapons. The same applies to all forecasts about the results of using tactical

weapons: even with “small” and accurate tactical weapons, “to achieve worthwhile results they will have to be either numerous or individually very powerful”. It has been demonstrated many times over that a vast number of civilians would perish in a nuclear battle in Europe, even if the targets were all military ones and all-out war were avoided.

Third, non-combatants must not be directly attacked. This is what is usually known as the principle of discrimination. Its aim is to preserve the lives of the innocent (a matter of justice) and to limit the damage of war as far as possible to those actively engaged in it. All nuclear weapons are weapons of mass destruction and – largely because of radiation effects – are indiscriminate in their very nature, causing genetic and other damage well beyond the area of their use to people not involved in the action. Moreover, there is always a very large number of people who would be killed by them – women, children, the old, the mentally handicapped – who are wholly innocent, no matter how innocence is defined in time of war.

What about the morality of possessing the weapons for the purpose of deterrence? The argument against it in the report is the straightforward one that it is immoral to threaten to do, under some future circumstances, what it is immoral to do. Two possible – and frequently encountered – ways of sidestepping this conclusion are well disposed of in the report: these we may call the Bluff Theory and the Stability Theory. The Bluff Theory tries to maintain that it would be possible to base deterrence on bluff; that we do not know for certain that the people in charge would press the button when the time comes; that we may therefore make a valid moral distinction between the intention to use the weapons in combat and the intention to deter with them. While the former may not be acceptable, the latter certainly is. This argument is, as the report says, a fantasy. If there were an ultimate bluff, everyone connected with preparing the weapons would have to be kept out of the secret and indoctrinated into accepting that their eventual use may be justified. Bluff could never be a national policy. And it would be morally and spiritually corrupting of those who propagated the policy and of those who were willing to hide behind the evil intentions of others without taking responsibility themselves. Besides, everyone knows that NATO is willing to be the first user of nuclear weapons if sufficiently provoked.

As for the Stability Theory, we put our money on that for so long during the 60s and the 70s that it is less surprising that people still cling to it. It is said (still, by the Ministry of Defence) that nuclear deterrence is very stable and likely to continue so indefinitely – so long as a rough balance of forces is maintained. Each

side is learning more about how it works all the time. This is manifest nonsense, and the report spells out why: proliferation, the increasing possibility of accidents as systems get more complex and "hair-trigger", the temptations to pre-emptive strike in situations of great international crisis, the steady emergence of "war-fighting" weapons and the mentality to go with them. The US Administration has begun to think seriously in terms of planning, fighting and winning a "protracted nuclear war" (see the article by Theodore Draper, "Open Letter to Weinberger" in the *New York Review of Books*, 4 Nov 1982 and also the book by Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush and Nuclear War*). The search for "credibility" and the consequent willingness to fight wars with nuclear weapons reveals one of the fundamental contradictions of deterrence. So too does the quest for a "nuclear balance". It is an unattainable goal as continuous technological innovations wipe out yesterday's security advantage. It will not be long before the Soviet Union is deploying its own cruise missiles against us. The process of rapid innovation based on worse-case forecasts of what the enemy might be doing began with the development of the first atomic bomb in the 40s and has continued ever since. It is a permanent feature of deterrence. It is continuously destabilising and there is no foreseeable rational end to it.

In order for deterrence to be morally acceptable it would need to be resistant to these kinds of corruption. Then we would be in the curious position of declaring our willingness to commit a great crime in order that such a crime may not be committed. This would be a pure moral paradox which (in the imaginary world where such things can occur) would be tolerable – indeed, unavoidable. But it does not exist. The illusion that it does exist is perhaps necessary to those who want to confine morality to a sphere well separated from the real world of political necessity. It would seem to justify our threatening to do something which flatly contradicts moral principles. We would seem to be having our moral principles and our "rational" policy at the same time. But it is a false solution, which has to ignore history.

So the Bluff Theory and the Stability Theory are weak arguments for the moral acceptability of nuclear deterrence. They do not stand up to the facts. Are there any stronger arguments? There certainly are some strong starting points for pro-deterrent arguments which are often side-stepped by people arguing against it. Stronger pro-deterrent arguments usually begin by pointing out that we are confronted by two facts that we cannot wish away, namely:

- 1 We cannot now go back on the invention of nuclear weapons and even if nuclear disarmament were to happen a rapid recon-

- struction of weapons for use in a war would always be a threat;
- 2 Mankind is incorrigibly prone to war and there is nothing which leads us to suppose that it will not continue to be a threat to the survival of nations which are not adequately defended.

This means that the moral question must centre upon how we are now to live with the knowledge of nuclear weapons. Any policy which leaves the way open to conventional war between major powers risks world-wide devastation on an unprecedented scale as well as the probable use of nuclear weapons by the side which manages to keep them secretly or reconstruct them first.

The upshot of the argument is that nuclear deterrence is a necessity in the present world. Even though it is not one hundred per cent safe, it certainly prevents catastrophic war and loss of life. It is, in fact, the lesser of two evils. The latest exponent of this type of argument is Keith Ward in his review of *The Church and the Bomb* in *The Tablet* of 6 November. The style of argument is consequentialist and is one way of trying to overcome the morality/rationality division. The moral and the rational are supposed to coincide in the policy which is calculated to involve the lesser evil. Since it admits that deterrence could break down and the weapons have to be used, the moral coherence of the argument must finally rest upon one assertion: that it could be justified to use nuclear weapons as a last resort, that is, it could be *rational* to do so, rather than to accept the alternative (invasion, loss of freedom, destruction of national institutions . . .). But even this is not sufficient as it stands. What also has to be faced is the possibility of an all-out nuclear war, involving complete destruction of the nation which begins by replying to aggression in this way. There can be no guarantee that such a war would stop at an early stage of nuclear use. So the risk of complete destruction too must be seen as in some sense a rational one to take. Whether it is a big or a small risk is strictly speaking irrelevant.

For the purpose of the argument, let us for the moment step over the stumbling block of indiscriminate killing and think about the issue of proportionality, for that is what the argument is about. It is claimed that the use of nuclear weapons – even involving the risk of all-out nuclear war – would be *proportionate* to certain goals, such as defence of our freedom. We are back with one of the Just War categories. In a consequentialist view of morality it is really the only one which matters. Now there clearly is a strong element of relativity about the proportionality rule: high stakes, especially national defence, would justify greater collateral loss of life. However, there comes a point when the bounds of reason are crossed. And the bounds of reason in this matter are also the

extreme limits of moral tolerance. It is rational – in the strong sense of congruent with the common good of humanity – to accept that there are limits to calculations of proportionality in war. And it is irrational – in the strong sense of contrary to the common good of humanity – to suppose there are not. It is, in fact, clearly irrational to participate in an action which could result in the destruction of whole nations – let alone the human race. It was pointed out many years ago by Walter Stein that nuclear deterrence involves a precise reliance upon a future willingness to go beyond the limits of proportionate force if sufficiently provoked. To do something totally irrational, in fact. We are not, after all, speaking of the sufferings of a nation undertaking a heroic defence. No heroic defence is possible with nuclear weapons, only first strike and retaliation. We are talking of a nation beginning – or continuing with – a series of acts which could very rapidly result in the complete destruction of its own people, a large part of the rest of humanity and bring the world to ruin. “The issue” as the report says, “is not whether we will die for our beliefs, but whether we will kill for them” – and not merely kill, but annihilate populations on a vast scale, with long-lasting social, environmental and genetic effects which are strictly speaking incalculable. There are degrees of destruction then for which no conceivable justifying purpose could be advanced – that is, no human interest of any kind. It cannot be rational or moral to be ready to cause such destruction for any purpose.

What about the risk of catastrophic conventional war if nuclear weapons are abandoned? What sort of risk is it? Is there really any moral sense in balancing it in the scales against the risks of nuclear weapons we have been discussing? The truth is that conventional war too can easily overstep the bounds of rationality and morality – as it did many times leading up to the use of the first atomic bombs in 1945. It was the corruption of conduct which made the use of those bombs acceptable. We can agree then that total war with modern conventional weapons is not an acceptable moral option either. It never has been. It too would cross the bounds of rationality and morality, even if not in the sudden dramatic way of nuclear war. But there are significant differences. There are at least ways of using conventional weapons which do not nullify the entire purpose of any war – to bring about some state of the world in which a future just peace is possible. It is also possible to deploy a conventional defence which is unprovocative, which cannot be said of nuclear deterrence. It is a question of a strategy which does leave some rational and moral choices and one which does not. It seems clear then that the “lesser of two evils” argument for nuclear deterrence is untenable, once it is looked at

closely. It is not rational to undertake the calculations which it proposes. A coherently rational and moral approach can only use principles such as *The Church and the Bomb* uses.

As for the positive recommendations of the report – especially the steps in Britain’s unilateral renunciation, they appear to me to be entirely sensible and not nearly so destabilising and hopeless as the “modernisation” programmes now in progress at Greenham Common, Molesworth, Upper Heyford, Faslane and elsewhere. While weapon-power is treated as if it were the sole determinant of security, the neglect of the other peace-keeping factors will eventually frustrate deterrence. Then the more deadly the weapons in our possession, the more destructive will the war be when it comes.

Finally – and fundamentally – it is a theological issue. The chapter in the report on theological considerations starts rather far back, with a general treatment of the relationship between ethics and gospel. The result is a disappointing failure to connect with the questions of strategy. However, the concluding chapter is more focussed and makes it clear that a willingness to mar irreparably God’s creation in the name of security is “quite simply to side with the anti-God forces of evil”. It seems to me that reliance on weapons of absolute destructive power is an offence against faith even before it is an offence against morals. It is a practical atheism, replacing final trust in the Creator God with final trust in what the Bible calls “the work of men’s hands”. And the creation of ultimate human enemies – which is required in order to justify the possession of ultimate weapons – cannot in any sense be reconciled with the Gospel of Christ. It is the pretence of the sovereign state to absolute power embodied in these weapons which is the source of both the irrationality and the atheism.

- * *The Church and the Bomb*. The report of a working party under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Salisbury, published by Hodder and Stoughton and CIO Publishing, 1982, pp 190. £4.50.