

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 34 · Number 3 · July 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

## *The world threat of nuclear weapons, and the church's role*

Tyler Wigg-Stevenson (USA)

Though a generation has passed since the end of the Cold War, nine nations still possess a total of 23,000 nuclear weapons, 95% of which belong to the U.S. and Russia. The inherent instability of this situation in the geopolitics of the post-Cold War era, compounded by the rise of terrorism as a strategy of global war, radically elevates the likelihood of use of nuclear weapons in the decades to come, with profound consequences for the entire world. This case study explores the nature of the danger and the possible outcomes, with special attention to the explicit effect that nuclear disaster would have on global missions and world evangelism.

### **I Overview and Context**

Nuclear weapons are the most destructive technology ever invented by humankind. Even a small nuclear fission weapon, such as the first 15 kiloton bomb dropped in 1945 by the United States onto Hiroshima, Japan, has the capacity to cause tens or hundreds of thousands of deaths. At the other end of the spectrum, there is no theoretical limit to the yield of a nuclear fusion weapon—it is bounded only by the ability of the planet to absorb the blast.

Since the dawn of the atomic age, Christians have sought to prevent the nearly unimaginable devastation that such weapons threaten. From a paci-

fist perspective, of course, the condemnation of nuclear weapons is not essentially different from that of any other weapon. But from a Just War perspective, the fact of nuclear weapons' unavoidable indiscriminateness would seem to prohibit them categorically as instruments of war.

Nevertheless, despite a deep antipathy toward the use of nuclear weapons, the totalizing conflict of the Cold War led many Christians—especially in the West—to place their faith (however reluctantly) in the bargain of nuclear deterrence as the only realistic way to ensure global security. Others advocated disarmament, saying that nuclear weapons were simply too dangerous to exist. It is worth observing here that the two positions, though tactically antithetical to one another, are both aimed at a shared goal: preventing nuclear catastrophe.

The decades of theological and ethical debate around nuclear weapons can hardly be summarized or resolved in this space. For the purposes of discussion, however, the point of Christian consensus around the morality of nuclear weapons would seem to revolve around the imperative of their non-use—as opposed to, for example, an absolutist and hermetic commitment to any particular nuclear posture like abolition or a strong deterrent. In terms of policy prescription, then, those postures that contribute to the

non-use of nuclear weapons can thus claim derivative moral authority.

In the present century nuclear weapons cannot be relied upon to do what they were asked to do in the last one—namely, prevent their use. In fact, there is a growing international consensus among security experts that the continued existence of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century will virtually guarantee their use, whether by accident, terrorism, or state-based conflict.

The reason for this is that as long as some nations insist on the unique security benefits of nuclear weapons, other nations will seek to acquire them. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has constrained the spread of nuclear weapons since 1970, but the confidence of non-nuclear weapons states in this voluntary agreement is crumbling. Their treaty obligation to renounce nuclear programs was bought with the promise of nuclear powers to disarm multilaterally: in other words, global nonproliferation is held together by the *telos* of a nuclear weapons-free world. But the resulting two-tiered system of nuclear haves and have-nots increasingly appears to be a permanent discriminatory norm—a continuation of twentieth century geopolitics that disregards the rise of East Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and the broader concerns of the global South and Majority World. This is not an unreasonable concern: how many citizens of nuclear powers understand their arsenals as a temporary quirk of history—as our treaty obligations have it—rather than a permanent guarantee of military supremacy?

The simple and obvious unfairness of the situation is one thing. However,

the practical crisis for our time is that there is no scenario in which the continued possession of nuclear weapons by some nations will not lead to their proliferation into the hands of many more nations, or non-state/terrorist actors, or both. This situation will in turn lead inexorably and inevitably toward their use.

As we consider this prognosis, the only historical precedent of nuclear attack—Hiroshima and Nagasaki—provides a poor basis for making future predictions. These bombs, however horrific, occurred within the context of a mid-twentieth century global conflagration. The same attacks in the midst of the relative peace of twenty-first century globalization—with the attendant advancements in technology and communication, and in which industrial war between major states is but a memory—defy imagination in terms of their extended consequences.

## II Three Possible Futures

Based on our present context, the following is a representative—though far from exhaustive—set of possible future scenarios.

### 1 Nuclear Terrorism

Terrorist groups are presently attempting to acquire a nuclear weapon or the material to build one from poorly-secured nuclear stockpiles, especially in Russia, which are vulnerable to theft or the black market. Further proliferation of nuclear technologies would make such acquisition almost inevitable. Once a terrorist group has a nuclear weapon, there is no technologically reliable way to

interdict the weapon or prevent its use.

The effects of even a single bomb would be catastrophic almost beyond imagination. Consider a study of the effects of a single nuclear weapon smuggled by shipping container into the port of Long Beach in Southern California: 60,000 immediate deaths; 150,000 radiation victims, most of whom would die with injuries untreated; 320 square miles poisoned by fallout and rendered unlivable for a generation; 6 million evacuees from the surrounding area; one trillion US dollars in immediate damages.

The broader impact of such an attack would also probably include mass panic and exodus from urban centres in the United States and its allies, as well as the immediate cessation of all global commercial traffic in an effort to interdict any other weapons. The most significant consequence of this response would probably be the decimation of wealth-generating economies and the charitable sector alike. For this reason, a nuclear attack—even if the blast and fallout remain relatively localized—would leave no corner of the world untouched, and would probably have a disproportionate effect on the poorest of the poor.

## 2 Regional Nuclear War

The tension between India and Pakistan, exacerbated by the contested territory of Kashmir, brings the threat of rapid escalation of any conflict between these two nuclear powers, at any time. For example, an attack on Delhi from a terrorist group based in Pakistan, if significant enough, could provoke a retaliatory incursion from

Indian forces onto Pakistani territory. Pakistan, utterly outmatched in terms of conventional forces, might well use a tactical nuclear weapon to prevent the invading Indian army from sweeping through the country. The resulting exchange could easily kill millions.

In addition to the immediate human costs, which would be unfathomable in countries with such densely populated urban areas, new weather modelling studies demonstrate that even a 'limited' exchange of fifty nuclear weapons would send massive amounts of soot into the stratosphere. This would initiate a rapid cooling that would shorten the growing season worldwide, resulting in global famine.

It is also worth stating simply here that in such a scenario, the extended effects are unimaginable: the global economic consequences of a devastated India; the reaction of the eastern neighbour, China; the effects on the poorer neighbours in Southeast Asia.

## 3 Global Zero

It is not possible to uninvent nuclear weapons, but because fissile (bomb-grade) material can be made only through a massive industrial effort, it is possible to effect a verifiable ban on the development or possession of these weapons. Politically speaking, a narrowing window of opportunity presently exists to initiate the process of eliminating and abolishing all nuclear weapons worldwide—a state called 'global zero'.

Three expert-level proposals currently exist for how to do this: one from four senior statesmen from the United States, with global endorsements; one from Global Zero, a worldwide initia-

tive of security experts and civil society; and one from an international commission led by the governments of Australia and Japan.

Though there are certain differences between each proposal, the essential recommendations of each plan are the same. The immediate first steps would include cooperative, security-enhancing measures undertaken by the nuclear weapons states and nuclear-capable states, as well as a demonstrated leadership commitment from the United States and Russia, who possess the vast majority of the global nuclear stockpile. The subsequent process would require practical steps to enhance the security of all nations, a global ban on all nuclear testing, attention to inflammatory regional conflicts, the technological and diplomatic implementation of a verification regime

### III Theological Framework

One does not need Christian faith to be morally horrified at the prospect of nuclear conflict. However, the Lausanne Movement's concern for the 'whole gospel' bears significantly and particularly on any Christian considering the nuclear issue. Some key theological loci for further investigation include:

#### 1 Global catholicity

The proliferation of nuclear weapons marks the first historical instance of human technology having a global capacity. In this sense they are the natural offspring of the second World War, and the parent of every complex global problem that looms on our horizon

(e.g., climate change, economic globalization, mass human migration, pandemic disease, etc.). These crises are significant for Christians because they are at once familiar—being direct descendents of Cain's fratricide—and unique, given that the rock that killed Abel is now clutched by billions of hands, and its shadow obscures the entire globe. Such crises also require new modes of thinking: each threatens the vital interests of each and all nations, but none can be addressed adequately with a twentieth-century, zero-sum vision of national welfare. Instead, they require the development of a broader understanding of cooperative security.

The pattern of this present age is characterized by the rise of transnational interests competing for political, economic, and social power. The implicit question to the church in this situation regards the meaning of our orthodox catholicity. What does it mean to be a global institution concerned with a not-yet kingdom in which humans flourish individually and corporately to the glory of God? As we seek to formulate a position and course of action regarding nuclear weapons, therefore, we might regard the issue not as an isolated evil, but rather as one manifestation of a multi-faceted phenomenon that represents the triumph of globalized human technique.

#### 2 Fidelity in suffering

A nuclear incident would introduce massive suffering into the world, potentially disrupting the entire global order for any foreseeable future. And, despite our best efforts and fervent prayers, I believe that a prudential

evaluation points to such an event being likelier to occur than not. The question of how the church might respond in this situation is far from answered, but it could be determinative for our global work and witness.

In the wake of catastrophe, the church must match our words with deeds by caring for the stricken, serving sacrificially to help restore order and build peace, and standing firmly against responses that violate Just War parameters. We must also be prepared for the fact that one of the most profound casualties of nuclear conflict will be foundational systems of order and meaning; in such an environment the church will be uniquely challenged to articulate the gospel, salvation history, or the sovereignty of God in a meaningful way. History is replete with sobering reminders—like the German National Church's ready complicity with the Third Reich, with its devastating effect on the integrity of the faith in Germany—that nominal Christian faith is no reliable predictor of fidelity in the midst of crisis. This awareness should urge us toward preparation as best we can.

### 3 Just War and the foreseeable failure of nuclear deterrence

Assuming that the Just War tradition represents the most permissive framework for a Christian justification of force, a categorical prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons under Just War criteria (discrimination and macro-proportionality) arguably permits their possession only for the purpose of deterrence—a position similar to the 'strictly-conditioned moral acceptance' of deterrence arrived at by the

US Catholic bishops in their 1983 pastoral letter, 'The Challenge of Peace'. But this acceptance depends upon the viability of nuclear deterrence to prevent a greater evil of nuclear attack. If, as this case study suggests, the mechanism required to sustain deterrence (possession of nuclear weapons by some actors) will lead inevitably to the condition (proliferation) in which deterrence fails (possession of nuclear weapons by undeterrable non-state actors), what does this mean for the moral evaluation of this strategy? Should even the possession of nuclear weapons be denied Christian sanction? What should/would this mean in particular national and regional contexts?

### 4 The effects of nuclear weapons

As described above, even one nuclear bomb would result in massive human, environmental, and financial loss. This phenomenon begs for articulation in a framework concerned with the sanctity of life, stewardship of creation, and care for the poor. The elevated threat of nuclear terrorism also calls for a renunciation of nuclear apocalypticism—the biblically unjustifiable conviction that nuclear weapons are God's ordained instruments for the eschaton—and a refocus on the theological ramifications of permitting/being complicit with the release of such sorrow and death into the world.

### IV Role of the church

The nuclear issue has a profound ethical aspect, but because nuclear weapons are the exclusive province of nation-states, it is not one in which the

church may take direct action—unlike, for example, development or relief. Nor can such weapons simply be moralized away. As we chart the faithful course, then, attention must be paid to the roles that the church should play in the nuclear arena. The following five areas might be pursued simultaneously as a framework for developing practical responses.

*Prophetic:* Witnessing to God's sovereignty and salvific work in Jesus Christ through proclamation about nuclear weapons that is biblically faithful to the best of our discernment, regardless of its strategic political impact.

*Judicial:* Participating in public discussion and debate about nuclear weapons and analyzing policy proposals, as one stakeholder whose bottom line is the moral good and human flourishing to the glory of God, rather than any particular political, military, or economic interest.

*Activist:* Employing the unparalleled global infrastructure of churches to promote a position of Christian fidelity on the nuclear question, and disciple congregants as Christian citizens in this regard.

*Pastoral:* Caring pastorally for political and military leaders who exercise authority in nuclear matters, and help-

ing them to exercise Christian faithfulness in their particular contexts.

*Irenic:* Facilitating 'Track II' diplomacy, whether: direct Christian engagement with state powers; opening space for discussions and relationship-building outside of national diplomatic restrictions; or peacebuilding in regional conflicts that are obstacles to nuclear security (e.g., Kashmir, the Middle East, etc.).

## Conclusion

Though the potential threat of nuclear weapons remains far from the lived realities of most Christians worldwide, even one nuclear incident would be a world-historical event, to which no-one could pretend indifference. It would have profound consequences for Christian work and witness worldwide.

Moreover, the best prudential analysis points to the fact that history is moving toward just such an event, though the details are of course unknowable. Regardless of the capacity in which Christians engage the nuclear issue, then, it is critical that engagement happen—lest we find ourselves unprepared and silent in the face of such disaster—so that in this segment of human affairs, like all others, we would seek faithfully to bring honour to the Lord.