The Ethics of Deterrence

Paul Bock

"May a nation threaten what it may never do? May it possess what it may never use?"

These questions, raised in the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter, state concisely the ethical dilemma with which Christians in various lands have struggled ever since the development of nuclear weapons. This paper will examine some German and Dutch Protestant documents that deal with the issue and then analyze the American Catholic bishops' pastoral letter. Some correlations will be made between these documents from the two sides of the Atlantic and from different confessions.

In the Evangelical Church in Germany there was an intense debate in the late '50s and '60s regarding the placing of nuclear weapons on German soil. The argument nearly tore the churches apart. In that battle the lines were drawn, to a large extent, between leaders in the Confessing Church or Barthian tradition who opposed the possession of nuclear weapons, and other church leaders who drew upon Luther's Two Kingdom theory and supported the maintenance of these weapons.

Karl Barth, a twentieth-century Swiss Reformed or Calvinist theologian, was instrumental in articulating the faith of the Protestants who opposed Hitler (i.e., the people who came to be known as the Confessing Church). Calvinists traditionally have made more direct applications of Christianity to politics than Lutherans have. Luther's Two Kingdom theory — that the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world coexist, but separately — applied Christianity more directly to personal ethics than to social ethics, and allowed a certain degree of autonomy to the state.

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The Confessing Church leaders, arguing from the belief in the lordship of Christ over all of life, insisted that the possession of nuclear weapons was totally incompatible with the Christian faith; to possess such instruments of destruction was a violation of God's creation. They did not argue as pacifists. They acknowledged the right of the state to have military and police forces. However, they argued that atomic weapons do not enable the state to assure justice and peace but only bring about the destruction of people within the land being protected as well as in other lands.

An eloquent exponent of the pro-nuclear weapons side was Helmut Thielecke. He argued that in a fallen world one cannot follow utopian schemes. Who knows if unilateral disarmament will prevent war? It may actually increase its likelihood. The Christian faith does not provide precise answers to political problems.

Near the end of that controversial period a document appeared which did provide a meeting ground and which has exerted a strong influence on religious peace statements in Germany ever since. Known as the "Heidelberg Theses," it was prepared in 1959 by the Atomic Commission of the Evangelical Research Center in Heidelberg.[1] Led by the noted atomic physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizacker, the commission drew upon a principle known in physics as complementarity to state that there is a place within Christianity for participants in the army as well as for conscientious objectors, for those who want multilateral disarmament as well as for those who want unilateral disarmament. According to the commission, the positions are complementary: one group is seeking to prevent capitulation to violence, the other is seeking to prevent capitulation to a dictatorial power. They share one aim: to prevent nuclear war and to establish conditions for peace. The meaning of complementarity was further clarified in Thesis 11:

> In an extremely dubious way, nuclear weapons do still keep a realm open within which people such as objectors to arms can enjoy civic freedom and live out their convictions without being punished for it. And the latter, as we believe, help in a hidden way to keep a spiritual realm open within which new decisions may become possible; who knows how quickly the defence of freedom, which is always threatened by lies, might not turn into naked cynicism without them.

While affirming that a nuclear war could not possibly fulfill the conditions of a just war, the commision stated in Thesis 8 that "the church must recognize that participation in the effort to secure peace in freedom through the possession of atomic weapons is at present a still viable Christian mode of procedure." It acknowledged the great risks in this approach, the need to avoid using the weapons, and the need to view their possession as a temporary measure. It thought in terms of a grace period during which steps should be taken toward establishing peaceful multilateral disarmament. Thus, in the future,

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[1] These theses appear in print in English on page 76–87 of the booklet, "The Preservation, Promotion and Renewal of Peace," available from the Kirchenkanzlei der EKD, Herrenhauser Strasse 2A, D-3000 Hannover 21, West Germany. They appear in print in German in Erwin Wilkens, *Christliche Ethik und Sicherheitspolitik* (Frankfurt: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1982), pp. 237–47.

possessing nuclear weapons would not necessarily be viewed as an option for Christians, but for the time being, deterrence is justified.

In Holland, the synod of the Dutch Reformed Church issued a significant statement on atomic weapons in 1962.[2] While it asserted that Christians would not be able to answer to their consciences if they participated in a nuclear war, even if they did so on state command, the statement was ambiguous about the possession of nuclear weapons. It viewed their abolishment as impossible and placed hope in the possibility of overcoming the atmosphere of mistrust in the ministry of reconciliation, in the strengthening of the international order, and in a change of human mentality. Implicit here was also a kind of grace period. A definite stand on possessing these weapons was postponed in the hope that world conditions may improve.

In the late '60s and early '70s, the issue of disarmament was not in the center of attention, but in the late '70s and early '80s it came again to the fore. This time the churches in Holland took a more radical stand than before. For them the grace period was over. World conditions had gotten worse instead of better. Efforts to disarm had not stopped the proliferation of weapons. Furthermore, weapons were becoming more precise and more dangerous. There was talk of a limited nuclear war and first-strike weapons. The Dutch churches arrived at a new position. They called for a nuclear-free world, beginning in Holland. They viewed not only use of atomic weapons but also their possession as evil. In 1980, the Dutch Reformed Synod issued this statement:

> Religious freedom and freedom of speech are among the essential achievements of our society, for which we are thankful. We have no illusions about political systems from which we wish to remain free and which we fear. But as believers we can say: we can live with our Lord no matter what the political system may be. In no case does the defence of our freedoms justify basing our security on the possible destruction of everything dear to us and to our opponents and on an assault on the creation.[3]

At the same time, the debate raged again in Germany. A variety of peace groups, influenced by Dutch Christians and by their own leaders, argued that the grace period was over and that the time had come when nations should live without nuclear weapons. The peace groups received support from veterans of the early battle of the '50s, among them Professor Helmut Gollwitzer. His statement "Die Christen und die Atomwaffen," originally published in 1957, was reissued in 1981 with a postscript added.[4] In the postscript Gollwitzer stated that what he had written earlier had even greater validity in the 1980s than it had in the 1950s and added, "More and more Christians recognize that they must either believe as Christians or gain security through such threats of destruction, but not both at the same time." He claimed that service for peace with weapons was no longer as valid as service without weapons, that the

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[2] Laurens Hogebrink, "Hope against Hope in the Nuclear Age," *The Ecumenical Review* 33 (July 1981): 250.

[3] Ibid., p. 251.

[4] Helmut Gollwitzer, *Die Christen und die Atomwaffen* (Junchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1981), p. 52.

grace period had not been used constructively and had run out. German churches, he urged, must follow the example of the Dutch church which affirmed that it was time "to get rid of atomic weapons in the world, beginning with us, here and now."

As the influence of Dutch thinking was felt in Germany and as the arguments of Gollwitzer and others expressed in the '50s were being reasserted in the late '70s and early '80s, there was, of course, a strong reaction against them. One of the manifestations of this reaction was the emergence in 1980 of a new organization called Securing the Peace. It put great stress on the obligation to preserve the values of democracy by maintaining a strength equal to that of the Eastern bloc and affirmed that peace can be assured only with adequate security. Reacting against the organization, Live without Armaments, this group suggested that a call to abolish arms might encourage war rather than deter it. Weakening one side encourages the other side to engage in aggressive behavior. The commandment "thou shalt not kill" implies a duty to protect life, and one of the functions of the state is to protect human lives from enemies in and out of a country. Its statement recognizes that the basic problems of the world will not be settled by military actions but by creative political action. It maintains, however, that, in the meantime, a balance of military power, including nuclear power, is necessary to assure security.[5]

In November 1981 the Evangelical Church in Germany issued a study paper on "The Preservation, Promotion, and Renewal of Peace." [6] It did not take a definite stand on the nuclear arms issue, but it did recognize the need for groups within the church to listen to each other even if they disagree on the question of armaments, to work together in political action, and to lay the social and political foundations for peace in prayer and study. For some people it was a disappointment; for others it was all that could be expected of an official church body. A major church calling itself, a "Volkskirche" in a country crucial to NATO finds it more difficult to take a far-out stand than a church in a small country less crucial to the NATO defense. Furthermore, the groundwork for a radical statement had not been laid in Germany to the degree that it had been in Holland.

The study paper notes that the Heidelberg Theses of 1959 view the possibility of Christian support for possession of atomic arms as only tentative, insisting that during the grace period steps must be taken to reduce the necessity for nuclear weapons. It points to the growing number of Christians in Germany who believe that the grace period has run out and that the arguments for possession of atomic arms are no longer valid. It acknowledges that many people are looking to the church to take such a stand. It suggests that the church needs to express penitence for not having done enough to create conditions for peace during the past two decades and points to the urgent need for more effective political action. It recognizes that many people oppose the NATO decision of 1979 and expresses understanding for those who take this view. It also

[5] "The Preservation, Promotion and Renewal of Peace," pp. 40–41.

[6] Ibid.

points out the ambiguity of the situation which prevents a clear-cut stand by the church. "Neither atomic armaments nor the abstention from atomic armaments assure peace. Both options are filled with great risks that are difficult to weigh against each other." In the past two decades no significant progress has been made toward a peaceful world order that can operate without a balance of terror. "Thus," says the paper, "even today, 22 years after the Heidelberg Theses, the church must recognize that the participation in the effort to secure peace in freedom through the possession of atomic weapons is at present a still viable Christian mode of procedure" (p. 58).

The paper sees no way to resolve the debate over military strategy which divides Christians. Instead, it calls for intensive efforts to use political means for creating a world situation in which meaningful negotiations are possible, also suggesting that the idea of taking calculated one-sided steps toward disarmament deserves careful consideration.

The Evangelical Church in Germany is made up of Lutheran, Reformed, and United (Lutheran and Reformed) bodies, the smallest being the Federation of Reformed Churches. In 1981 the Reformed group took a position quite different from that of the rest of the Evangelical Church in Germany. It declared that the possession of nuclear weapons is incompatible with the Christian faith.

Is the grace period over? Has the time passed when a Christian can work for peace while endorsing the possession of nuclear weapons? For the official Dutch Reformed Church, for the pacifist-oriented unofficial peace groups in Germany, and for the Federation of Reformed Churches the answer is yes. For the official Evangelical Church in Germany and for the conservative unofficial peace groups in Germany the answer is no.

The agonizing debate will continue. Christians in Europe will continue to struggle with the crucial question: "How much longer can a Christian affirm that a nuclear war cannot be a just war, and at the same time rely for his or her security upon the possession of weapons of mass destruction?

The same question has been confronted in the United States, and in the past few years very directly by the American Catholic bishops. Debates similar to those in Europe took place in preparation of the pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and our Response." [7]

Prior to the preparation of the letter, the basic question about the ethics of deterrence was raised in the pastoral letter "To Live in Jesus Christ," issued by the bishops in 1976. It said, "As possessors of a vast nuclear arsenal, we must also be aware that not only is it wrong to attack civilian populations, but it is also wrong to threaten to attack them as part of a strategy of deterrence." [8] Reference was made to this letter by Cardinal John Krol in his significant testi-

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[7] One of the places where the pastoral letter can be found is in "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," *Catholics and Nuclear War*, Philip Murnion, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 245–338.

[8] Thomas Shannon, *What Are They Saying About Peace and War?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 37.

mony on the SALT II Treaty given before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1976. The cardinal said,

> The moral judgement of this statement is that not only the *use* of nuclear weapons but also the *declared intent* to use them in our deterrence policy is wrong. This explains the Catholic dissatisfaction with nuclear deterrence and the urgency of the Catholic demand that the nuclear arms race be reversed. It is of the utmost importance that negotiations proceed to meaningful and continued reduction in nuclear stockpiles, and eventually to the phasing out altogether of nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction.
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> As long as there is hope of this occurring, Catholic moral teaching is willing, while negotiations proceed, to tolerate the possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence as the lesser of two evils. If that hope were to disappear, the moral attitude of the Catholic Church would almost certainly have to shift to one of uncompromising condemnation of both use and possession of such weapons.[9]

Here, as in the European documents, there is the suggestion of a grace period. If certain steps are taken, deterrence can be tolerated as the lesser of two evils. But there is also a threat. If such steps are not taken, the church may change its position and oppose both the use and the possession of atomic weapons.

The 1976 statement and the Krol testimony contributed much to the thinking of the bishops on the ad hoc committee which worked on the recent pastoral letter. One of the issues debated was how much of Krol's testimony should be used in the pastoral letter. Whereas all of the drafts included some of his testimony, the second draft included much more of it, including the "lesser of the two evils" statement and the explicit threat that the Catholic Church would have to shift its position if the above-mentioned conditions were not met. These two statements did not appear in the final draft.

One can understand why the explicit threat may have been dropped from the final draft. The implications of declaring that in the future the church may oppose the possession of nuclear weapons are great in regard to discipline and pastoral care within the Catholic Church. They were spelled out by John Deedy, a Catholic writer:

> What if the hierarchy as a body condemned nuclear weapons as immoral? Would young Catholic men and women then be morally free to serve in the Armed Forces? And what of Catholics already in the service, a number placed by one source as 40% of those in uniform? Would they be expected by the bishops to lay down their arms, or fight only with conventional weapons? What of Catholic officers who fly bombers or work on nuclear submarines? Would they be expected to resign their commissions and quit the service?
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> The questions are not irrelevant, for the responses affect everyone — the national family, and friend and foe around the world.[10]

Nevertheless, there is an implicit threat in the final document. Stating that deterrence is tolerable only if certain conditions are met implies that there may come a time when it may no longer be viewed as tolerable. The pastoral letter states:

> In preparing this letter we have tried, through a number of sources, to determine as precisely as possible the factual character of U.S. deterrence strategy. Two ques-

[9] Ibid., pp. 41–42.

[10] John Deedy, "Crosiers into Plowshares," *Theology Today*, July 1982, p. 172.

tions have particularly concerned us: 1) the targeting doctrine and strategic plans for the use of the deterrent, particularly their impact on civilian casualties; and 2) the relationship of deterrence strategy and nuclear war-fighting capability to the likelihood that war will in fact be prevented.[11]

Reflecting upon the questions, the bishops arrived at a strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence but declared, "We cannot consider it adequate as a long-term basis for peace."

The bishops developed criteria for judging deterrence and on this basis made these specific evaluations:

1. If nuclear deterrence exists only to prevent the *use* of nuclear weapons by others, then proposals to go beyond this to planning for prolonged periods of repeated nuclear strikes and counter-strikes, or "prevailing" in nuclear war, are not acceptable. They encourage notions that nuclear war can be engaged in with tolerable human and moral consequences. Rather, we must continually say NO to the idea of nuclear war.

2. If nuclear deterrence is our goal, "sufficiency" to deter is an adequate strategy; the quest for nuclear superiority must be rejected.

3. Nuclear deterrence should be used as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament. Each proposed addition to our strategic system or change in strategic doctrine must be assessed precisely in light of whether it will render steps toward "progressive disarmament" more or less likely.[12]

The document exhibits a sense of urgency and makes reference to something like a grace period. "There is an urgent moral and political responsibility to use the 'peace of a sort' we have as a framework to move toward authentic peace through nuclear arms control reductions and disarmament." [13]

In further applications of the criteria, the document makes a number of specific recommendations as to what can and cannot be supported.

In developing the idea of a strictly conditional moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence, the bishops were very much influenced by statements of the second Vatican Council and of the Pope. Vatican statements are quite clear in denouncing the bombing of cities and in calling for multilateral disarmament. They are, however, less precise on the question of possessing nuclear weapons for deterrence. For instance, Vatican II stated, "Whatever one may think of this form of deterrent, people are convinced that the arms race, which quite a few countries have entered, is no infallible way of maintaining real peace among nations." [14]

It was not easy for the bishops to follow papal teaching because of a difference in emphasis in some of the papel addresses. In a speech at Coventry Cathedral in Great Britain on 30 May 1982, Pope John Paul II said, "Today, the scale and horror of modern warfare — whether nuclear or not — makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations. War

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[11] "The Challenge of Peace," no. 177.

[12] Ibid., no. 188.

[13] Ibid., no. 189.

[14] "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," no. 81, Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), p. 295.

should belong to the tragic past, to history; it should find no place in humanity's agenda for the future." [15]

However, in his message to the United Nations Second Special Session on Disarmament, there is a different emphasis: "In current conditions, 'deterrence' based on balance, certainly not an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a more progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion." [16]

It appears that the United Nations address was more influential on the bishops' pastoral letter, especially on the final draft. The letter spells out the conditions under which deterrence could be morally acceptable as well as those under which it would not be acceptable.

Looking now at the documents on both sides of the Atlantic, we can make some correlations.

1. All of them contain the concept of a grace period. It is presumably difficult to tell whether deterrence retards or hastens war, but it is viewed as an option for a period of time. But that time has to be used for lessening of international tensions.

The idea of a grace period was used by the Europeans long before it was used by the American Catholic bishops. It was voiced already in the late '50s and early '60s; and some people, especially in Holland, are saying that the grace period is over. The conditions for tolerating deterrence have not been fulfilled. The time has run out.

2. All documents demonstrate an awareness of the ambiguity of the situation. Deterrence provides a balance of power, a mutual threat, a kind of stability. Yet it is a potential source of nuclear war. The Christian faith provides a perspective but it does not determine when the dangers of deterrence outweigh the potential benefits. This calls for careful calculation — and even then there is uncertainty. On the one hand, most documents recognize the right of nations to defend themselves. On the other hand, they recognize that certain defensive policies can be destructive for the defenders as well as for their opponents. A German document expresses it clearly: "Neither atomic armaments nor the abstention from atomic armaments assure peace. Both options are filled with great risks that are difficult to weigh against each other." [17]

3. In the discussions, multilateralists debate with unilateralists. The American Catholic bishops see dangers of destabilization in any truly unilateral proposal for disarmament. Their intention is to reinforce the nuclear threshold in the deterrence theory and practice in language that cannot be coopted by

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[15] John Paul II, Homily at Coventry Cathedral, 30 May 1982, in *Origins* 12 (1982): 55.

[16] John Paul II, "Message at U.N. Special Session 1982," no. 3 quoted in "The Challenge of Peace," no. 173.

[17] "The Preservation, Promotion and Renewal of Peace," p. 58.

either the advocates of unilateral disarmament or the partisans of a "limited" nuclear war. The official German document exhibits the same caution.

Unilateralism is strongest in Holland. One might argue that a small country can take such a stand more readily than a large and strategically important country such as West Germany, which is on the front line of the Iron Curtain and at the heart of the NATO defense, and certainly more readily than a country like the United States, one of the two superpowers. Were a major church body in the United States to take a unilateral position, it would be a matter of great consequence. Yet the Catholic bishops' letter does not rule out that possibility in the future.

4. Establishing a grace period for improvement in the international situation demands the setting of criteria regarding expectations during that period. These criteria are more clearly stated in the Catholic bishops' letter than in the European documents. The bishops' letter labels as unacceptable policies which increase the likelihood of use of atomic weapons, seek nuclear superiority, retard disarmament, or intend actions in violation of the just war theory (e.g., the bombing of civilian population). The European documents call for steps toward disarmament and for relaxation of international tension.

5. Yet on both sides of the Atlantic, churches face the problem of stating clearly the conditions under which they will no longer support deterrence or will consider the grace period as ended. In Europe the grace period has lasted over thirty years. To the Dutch, it is over. To the Germans — at least officially — this is not self-evident. Yet their criteria are quite similar. One wonders now if the American Catholic bishops, even with their clearer set of criteria, will be able to determine when the grace period is over, when support of deterrence must be withheld. It is highly unlikely that all of the criteria will be fulfilled in the coming years.

Can one assume that the failure to fulfill the criteria will lead the Catholic bishops to take a different stance, or will the Americans, like the Germans, be unable to change their stance when it comes to a show-down? Will they again have to say, "We need stability before we can denounce the possession of weapons"? These are very real questions. One can see why the explicit threat of the Krol testimony was withdrawn from the final form of the pastoral letter. But did this take the teeth out of the document? Some think that it did.

The ambiguity of ethical reflection is clearly revealed in the deterrence dilemma. There is, though, no escape from wrestling with it.