

Must Christians Oppose Nuclear Weapons?

by Ron William Walden

On May 3, 1983, the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States voted the final draft of a national pastoral letter on war and peace in the nuclear age.¹ The document has received wide attention from politicians and the press, and it surely merits attention from American Adventists as well. It is an interesting contribution by an important group of citizens to a debate over public policies of surpassing moral importance. Further, it is a Catholic document, and Adventists have always paid close heed to what Catholics say about both morality and their own authority. Most of all, it provides an occasion to examine official Adventist responses to possible nuclear war.

Pastoral Letter on War and Peace

The American bishops begin their recent pastoral letter with a quotation from *Gaudium et spes*, and situate the letter at the

center of international Catholic teaching on nuclear war. Yet as American bishops they believe they have a special word to say. America is one of the leading nuclear powers, indeed the only one ever to have used the bomb. The bishops are pastors of Americans and so accept responsibility for forming Catholic moral action regarding nuclear weapons; they are themselves American citizens and so obliged by their public position to address a policy dispute having moral importance. Their contribution, they claim, depends not on any privileged position occupied by the church, but on

her religious nature and ministry. The church is called to be in a unique way the instrument of the kingdom of God in history. Since peace is one of the signs of that kingdom present in the world, the church fulfills part of her essential mission by making the peace of the kingdom more visible in our time (4).

The bishops offer a discussion of “both the religious vision of peace among peoples and nations and the problems associated with realizing this vision in a world of sovereign states devoid of any central authority and divided by ideology, geography and competing claims”(4).

They begin with a careful exegesis of the Bible’s teaching about peace, laying their emphasis on the notion of the kingdom of God in the Gospels and on the Pauline vision of peace and cosmic reconciliation brought

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about by the death and resurrection of Jesus. These are eschatological realities, which lie beyond the world and its history as we know them; yet in another way, the kingdom and the peace are present here and now, though partly hidden. Thus while the Scriptures "do not speak specifically of nuclear war or nuclear weapons," they "do provide us with urgent direction when we look at today's concrete realities"(7). They provide, in particular, a sort of chastened hope. Christians work for peace with hopeful confidence because of Christ's victory on the cross over the obstacles to peace; yet they work with sober realism because of human sin, which is already overcome through hope but still terribly present in affecting our world's history.

After their exegesis of the Bible, the bishops turn to doctrinal and moral theology. Here they are guided primarily by *Gaudium et spes* and also by the popes since Pius XII, during whose reign the nuclear age began. Echoing these, the letter emphasizes the positive nature of peace—peace is not the mere absence of war. It is built "on the basis of central human values: truth, justice, freedom and love." Moreover, such a positive peace is so important that the church teaches "a strong presumption against war which is binding on all." As for the Christian, he or she "has no choice but to defend peace . . . against aggression. This is an inalienable obligation"(8).

The difficult question is *how* to defend peace. In this duty, governments are in a different moral position from individuals. The bishops respectfully discuss individual pacifism, but they repeat traditional Catholic teaching which reaches back to St. Augustine in denying that governments can be pacifist. Indeed there are historical situations when a failure to take up arms is not morally permissible for a government. The bishops quote Pius XII:

Among the goods (of humanity) some are of such importance for society that it is perfectly lawful to defend them against unjust aggression. *Their defense*

is even an obligation for the nations as a whole, who have a duty not to abandon a nation that is attacked(9).²

The moral difficulty then becomes to identify the occasions on which a government may, or even should, go to war—given the serious presumption against war in Catholic teaching on the one hand and the state's right of self-defense on the other. At this point, the pastoral letter invokes the traditional Catholic criteria for a just war (9ff).

The review of just-war principles is clear enough, but not innovative. At the end of it, though, the bishops seriously question whether any nuclear war, indeed any policy of heavy nuclear armament, can satisfy the two criteria of proportionality and discrimination. "To destroy civilization as we know it by waging a 'total war' as today it *could* be waged would be a monstrously disproportionate response to aggression on the part of any nation"(11), the bishops write, adding this rhetorical question a few paragraphs later:

Do the exorbitant costs, the general climate of insecurity generated, the possibility of accidental detonation of highly destructive weapons, the danger of error and miscalculation that could provoke retaliation and war—do such evils or others attendant upon and indirectly deriving from the arms race make the arms race itself a disproportionate response to aggression?(12)

As for the principle of discrimination, which holds that a "[j]ust response to aggression . . . must be directed against unjust aggressors, not against innocent people caught up in a war not of their own making"(11) the bishops quote *Gaudium et spes*:

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation (11).³

The bishops join the popes of the nuclear age in viewing the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as such an act; Paul VI called it a "butchery of untold magnitude."⁴

The bishops then turn from an exposition of Catholic doctrine to an application of it. Acknowledging that "[n]uclear weapons particularly and nuclear warfare as it is planned today raise new moral questions,"

they quote the remark of John Paul II at Hiroshima: "In the past it was possible to destroy a village, a town, a region, even a country. Now it is the whole planet that has come under threat" (13).⁵ The new situation constrains certain detailed moral stands based on Catholic teaching, all applications of two judgments which the bishops repeat in many ways: It is wrong for a nation to use nuclear weapons, and it is wrong for a nation to continue to possess (and threaten to use) them except under stringently limited conditions. "We must reject nuclear

war" (13); this is the consistent theme of the pastoral letter.

Yet the bishops add,

To say no to nuclear war is both a necessary and a complex task. We are moral teachers in a tradition which has always been prepared to relate moral principles to concrete problems. . . . But it is much less clear how we translate a no to nuclear war into the personal and public choices which can move us in a new direction . . . (13-14).

Nonetheless, the letter does attempt that translation. It takes clear moral positions on a large number of specific issues, offering

A Short History of Catholic Peace-making

In the Middle Ages, when the Roman Catholic church served as the moral tutor of Western Europe, it had special responsibility for matters of war and peace. From the time of Constantine, the church had sided with European governments. Often, the church owed its astonishing successes in christianizing Europe to its knack for making alliances with winning political rulers. Like other established churches, it did not often challenge the government's moral right to make war at all. Instead of pacifism, the medieval church promoted a variety of other strategies for peace, first substituting non-military solutions to conflicts, then, if war came anyway, lessening its barbarity. Thus there grew up a collection of Catholic doctrine defining the just war. The most famous principles of "just-war theory" provide that wars are morally allowable only when fought as a last resort, in self-defense, by properly constituted authorities of government, by methods which are not excessive but commensurate with the good to be achieved, and in such a way as to spare noncombatants.

After the Reformation the Catholic Church lost its special position in society,

and as an agency influencing public policy bent its main moral efforts to preserving or restoring its historic institutional privileges. The church became increasingly identified with backward-looking, conservative resistance to change. Accordingly, before the late 19th century, Catholic moral teaching about war and peace itself underwent very little change. Indeed, those principles which condoned wars waged by representatives of a traditional past were emphasized.

Beginning with Pope Leo XIII, however, the Catholic Church found itself in a dramatically altered position. It lost its long battle to play a role in world politics as an independent Italian state, and the rationale for its struggle to exercise temporal authority shifted; now the objective was not to be a sovereign state like others but to serve as a transnational moral agent independent of the nations. By 1929, when the technical sovereignty of Vatican City was conceded, the church had a new conception of papal responsibility. The 20th century popes have seen themselves as pastors rather than rulers. They have disentangled themselves sufficiently from alliances with particular European governments to exercise rather striking moral leadership in matters of war and

thereby a coherent, interesting contribution to the public policy debate. Stripped of many qualifications and of the details of argument, some of those positions are listed here:

1. No first use of nuclear weapons "on however restricted a scale can be morally justified" (15; see also 19).

2. The doctrine of deterrence, which justified the possession of nuclear arms by the United States on the grounds that they prevent a nuclear war, is only barely acceptable to morality. It is a complicated doc-

trine, which would have been almost unintelligible to previous generations of Catholic moral teachers. It can be justified only as a temporary measure, which achieves a "sort of peace" while true peace is built. Hence it must be conjoined with honest efforts for disarmament and must be strictly limited by the government's public renunciation of certain morally unacceptable forms of deterrence (16ff and *passim*).

3. American nuclear policy may never even threaten to strike civilian populations or other non-military targets, even in re-

peace, more or less supporting Wilsonian principles during and after World War I, and promoting disarmament between the wars.

Pope John XXIII continued and renewed this good record. His magnificent encyclical *Pacem in terris*,¹ calling for an effective international authority to keep the peace, served as the keynote for many peacemaking efforts of the 1960s. Paul VI, who succeeded Pope John, continued to command wide attention to his views, expressed most persuasively in the encyclical *Populorum progressio*,² and in his 1965 speech to the United Nations.³ Especially in the encyclical, the pope linked world peace to attainment of justice for the poor and establishment of equitable economic relations between industrialized and developing countries.

The centerpiece of recent Catholic teaching on all these topics, however, is "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," often called simply *Gaudium et spes*, which the Second Vatican Council passed in 1965.⁴ Given the problems faced by any group trying to write a joint statement, it is remarkably unified and yet full of clear, specific moral teaching about hard issues. In its treatment of war,⁵ the Constitution states that the most recent developments in weapons technology and geopolitical relations pose a genuinely new set of moral problems. Although Catholic bishops do not often admit that important morals might have changed, the Council wrote that today we are obliged "to undertake a completely fresh reappraisal of war."⁶

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Acta apostolicae sedes*, 55 (1963) 257-304. (This serial is hereafter cited as *AAS*.) English translation in *The Pope Speaks*, 9 (1963) 13-48.

2. *AAS* 59 (1967) 257-299. *The Pope Speaks*, 12 (Spring 1967) 144-172.

3. *AAS* 57 (1965) 877-885. *The Pope Speaks*, 11 (1966) 47-57.

4. *AAS* 58 (1966) 1025-1120. English translations of *Gaudium et spes* (along with the Council's other documents) are most readily available in Austin P.

Flannery (ed.), *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 903-1001; and in Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Corpus Books, 1966), pp. 199-366. The Flannery edition is somewhat preferable.

5. *AAS* 58 (1966) 1100-1107. Flannery, pp. 986-993. Abbott, pp. 289-297.

6. *AAS* 58 (1966) 1103. Flannery, p. 989. Abbott, p. 293.

taliation after our own cities have been struck (15).

4. Present American strategic policy, while it does not intentionally target Soviet civilian centers, is still morally unsatisfactory because

even with attacks limited to "military" targets the number of deaths in a substantial exchange would be almost indistinguishable from what might occur if civilian centers had been deliberately and directly struck. . . . [S]uch a strike would be deemed morally disproportionate, even though not intentionally indiscriminate (18).

5. Since it is exceedingly doubtful that any nuclear exchange short of total war could occur, political leaders should be urged to "resist the notion that nuclear conflict can be limited, contained or won in any traditional sense" (16; see also 18).

6. Only a "sufficiency" of nuclear weapons to deter aggression is morally permissible; "the quest for nuclear superiority must be rejected" (18).

7. "Destabilizing" weapons systems and policies are not acceptable—and the bishops discuss several: systems most useful in a first strike, policies which blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear war, plans for "winning" a nuclear exchange or fighting a protracted one, certain short-range nuclear weapons, and others (18).

8. Governments must negotiate with imagination and good faith for disarmament. The bishops explicitly support certain proposals now pending, including the unratified SALT II treaty (20; see also 17).

9. The American government (and the Soviet, too) must undertake some risky first steps in disarmament, even in the absence of treaties, to encourage a constructive response from the other side (20).

10. International institutions, such as the United Nations, must be strengthened at the expense of contentious nation-states (22–25).

11. Public opinion, especially in the democracies, must be mobilized to hold the leaders of government to a moral course (14). Social agencies which mold public opinion, including the churches, cannot

morally remain inactive with regard to nuclear policy (22).

The Bishops' Conception of Their Audience and Task

Naturally, the bishops regard their specific recommendations as having different kinds and levels. For one thing, some positions rely on a particular technical analysis which may be subject to empirical error which does not threaten the broad principles of moral theology. For instance, the bishops recommend removal of "short-range nuclear weapons which multiply dangers disproportionate to their deterrent value" (19). The weapons in the American arsenal which best fit that description are the Pershing 2 missiles and cruise missiles which the administration plans to deploy in Europe this year. Yet whether these weapons multiply disproportionate dangers is precisely what is in dispute in the technical analysis. The bishops acknowledge that their specific recommendation on the weapons the U.S. expects to put in Europe is open to challenge if their technical analysis is wrong. But such analysis cannot challenge the nontechnical, moral principle of noncombatancy.

For another thing, some of these moral problems suffer from a novel, nearly insane, oddity. The best example is the doctrine of deterrence. Given that it is immoral to use nuclear weapons, some ask, how can it be moral to possess them at all, even in order to prevent the other side from using them? Yet in this crazy world, others contend, it has been only the threat of mutual slaughter that has prevented mutual slaughter, and the best proof of the morality of deterrence is that for over 30 years it has worked; there has been no nuclear war yet. The pastoral letter openly agonizes about this dilemma, reports various contending positions among the bishops themselves (19), and goes on to take a reasonably clear stand of its own. Deterrence, properly limited, is acceptable as a

temporary step towards disarmament. (See the whole discussion, 16–19 and *passim*.)

Furthermore, the specific stands the bishops take bear different relations to the different parts of the tradition of moral teaching on which they draw. For example, some stands rest directly on principles of generally human morality (“natural law”) and so recommend themselves persuasively to all right-thinking people of good will. An example of this is the clear condemnation, based on the principle of noncombatant immunity, of the intentional, strategic policy of targeting cities. By contrast, the call for all Catholics to work for peace is based on specifically Christian doctrine. “Peacemaking is not an optional commitment,” the bishops write. “It is a requirement of our faith” (30).

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The pastoral letter explicitly sets out to reach two goals:

to help Catholics form their consciences and to contribute to the public policy debate about the morality of war. These two purposes have led Catholic teaching to address two distinct but overlapping audiences. The first is the Catholic faithful, formed by the premises of the Gospel and the principles of Catholic moral teaching. The second is the wider civil community . . . (3).

The twin purposes and two audiences of the letter account in part for its complexity. Some of what the bishops write is, they acknowledge, subject to legitimate dissent, even from Christians: “On some complex social questions the church expects a certain diversity of views” (3). Other parts of the letter are reassertions of “universally binding moral principles” (2), the bishops claim, and so are not open to the same kind of disagreement, even from nonbelievers.

In summary, then, the letter offers the

spectacle of a group of Christian pastors wrestling publicly with a moral issue and striving to exercise leadership. On the whole, they succeed in three ways. First, they offer a morally serious argument which has a complexity commensurate with the complexity of the problems they treat. The letter is not a simple fiat, relying on the sheer authority of episcopal office. It is a complicated tissue of reasonings and conclusions which seeks to persuade, not to compel. Second, the letter takes clear moral positions in spite of its complexity. There is something simple here—not the argument, not the detailed application of it, perhaps, but the clear call for a “moral about-face.”

The whole world must summon the moral courage and technical means to say no to nuclear conflict; no to weapons of mass destruction; no to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and no to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender (30).

Finally, the bishops are true to their tradition. They extend it, to be sure, for they know that nuclear weapons pose moral problems unknown to tradition; but they imaginatively draw on the riches of their historic spiritual storehouse.

Comparison With Adventist Response

So far, there has been no official Adventist statement about nuclear weapons quite like the Catholic pastoral letter. Adventist church officers usually remain silent about such issues. I am struck by the fact that the Catholic bishops, in taking an institutional stand on nuclear war and peace, openly faced—and rejected—some of the same reasons which Adventist leaders might proffer for not doing so.

For example, a few Adventists say that American nuclear policy is not a religious issue but a trendy, perhaps ephemeral, political fad. The church, they say, should not be involved in politics. The Catholic bishops

said the opposite: "Faith does not insulate us from the challenges of life; rather, it intensifies our desire to help solve them precisely in light of the good news which has come to us in the person of Jesus, the Lord of history" (1).

A recent short statement in the *Adventist Review*⁶ did acknowledge that nuclear war and peace was a moral issue worthy of the attention of religious people. But it went on to say that Adventists should engage the issue as individuals, not as a group. This too is the reverse of the tactic taken by the Catholic bishops, who were writing in their institutional capacity as officials of a religious group.

In defense of official Adventist silence, it is sometimes urged that the technical issues or the moral reasoning involved in judging such an issue is so complicated that it would confuse the Adventist message. I can remember a General Conference official saying in conversation during the Viet Nam War that the church offers no official judgment of such conflicts "because that would get us all involved with just-war theory." Others now suggest that the technological and geopolitical complexities of nuclear policy exceed the competence of church officers, who should "leave it to the experts." But the church does take official stands, often based on complex reasoning, with respect to very technical moral and religious questions. It does not leave the issue of smoking to individual Adventist epidemiologists. Is not nuclear war a threat to the temple of the Holy Spirit at least equal to smoking? And again the Catholic bishops offer a counter-example; even after conceding and discussing the complexities, they managed to make clear, simple, and rather eloquent statements about nuclear war.

Many Adventists also say that official attention to social issues is a distraction from the church's main corporate task, which is evangelism, a distinctively other-worldly and spiritual job. To be sure, if the church involves itself with public policy, the danger of co-optation and distraction exists. Agita-

tion for nuclear disarmament is often part of a vaguely leftist political agenda, which is not identical with the church's own agenda. Other Christian groups, perhaps Catholics most of all, have occasionally compromised their Christian distinctiveness by uncritically joining political movements, of both the left and right. To confront this problem, the pastoral letter repeatedly explains the uniquely religious motives and theological roots of the stands it takes. And in the end, the bishops do come up with a distinctive position, with clear links to their special tradition, differing from the call for a nuclear freeze on the one hand and from the policies of the Reagan administration on the

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other. This time, the bishops were not co-opted.

The lesson for the Adventist Church is, I believe, the importance of re-examining what its mission is. Is it simply to grow by making more folks Seventh-day Adventists? Is that what evangelism means? Or is it also to promote another kind of spiritual growth guided by the Gospel, inward and intensive instead of outward and extensive, both among Adventists and in others who may hear the message without joining? If soul-winning construed as numerical growth is the only goal, what distinguishes that from mere institutional self-aggrandizement? Most of all, if the church as a body has nothing specific to say to the world about peace, how can it claim to evangelize? It is precisely the Gospel, the "evangel," which says that God loved the world and that peacemakers are the blessed.

Why cannot official Adventism, like the Catholic bishops, use its distinctive tradition

to say a word of Good News about peace and nuclear war? Like the scribe of the kingdom "who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old,"⁷ Adventist leaders could refurbish the "blessed hope" which lies at the heart of our historic message. That world-denying eschatology could be paired with a truly blessed hope, a world-affirming vision of a human community at peace. Then the reason for fleeing the world as it is would be love of the world as it may become. The radical judgment upon the institutional arrangements of the present age would not be expressed in silent, self-righteous flight, but in detailed, positive suggestions about alternative arrangements, offered with courage, modesty, and clarity, and in radical faithfulness to the age to come. Only if judgment is linked to faithfulness, the negative to the positive view of the world, can Adventism's tradition of world-denial avoid self-righteousness, self-aggrandizement, and finally, moral cowardice.

Another side of the Adventist tradition offers just such a positive vision of the world to match its eschatology's world-denial. This is the Sabbath. The Sabbath celebrates God's own judgment that everything he made was very good; it proclaims that he himself so loved the world that he gave his Son. Surely this means that everything in human power must be done to save the earth, this splendid creature of God, from destruction by human weapons. What could be a more deeply religious task? And

to compare great things with small, there are parallels with Adventist health reform. The basis of health reform is the conviction that the human body is good, both as a marvelous creation of God and, re-created, as the habitation of God's own Holy Spirit. So the body is worthy of the most meticulous and radical reforms of health habits and even dress. Surely Sabbath-keepers, who proclaim that the whole world is good, should propose Gospel reforms, no less meticulous and radical, of the world's terrifyingly unhealthful political and military habits.

In the Adventist past are models for decisive official action. In the 1850s Americans in some churches denounced proposals for abolition of slavery with the same language now used about proposals for nuclear disarmament. They called abolition a political issue, a distraction from the church's real task, a church-dividing question, empirically complicated, a question best left to individual moral decision alone. But not the Adventist pioneers. Under Ellen White's leadership, they took a clear stand against slavery, even denying slave-holders membership in their congregations. In retrospect, all else seems temporizing failure of nerve, even institutional self-seeking, on the part of the churches. In the future, I believe, the American Catholic bishops will not be subject to such reproaches with respect to nuclear arms. But how will official Adventism of the 1980s fare in the judgment of history, or of heaven?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The text is most easily accessible in *Origins: NC Documentary Service*, 13 (1983) 1-32. Citations in this article are in parenthesis, referring to the page numbers in *Origins*. Superscript numerals are for the Notes and References which follow.

2. The quotation is from the pope's Christmas Message of 1948, in *Acta apostolicae sedes* (AAS) 41 (1949) 1-15. The bishops supplied the emphasis.

3. The Council's text is in AAS 58 (1966) 1104,

and Flannery, p. 990. The bishops use the Abbot edition, p. 294.

4. World Day of Peace Message, 1967.

5. Address to Scientists and Scholars (25 February 1981), sec. 4. The whole text is in AAS 73 (1981) 420-428 and *Origins*, 10 (1981) 621-623.

6. Bert B. Beach, "Adventist and Disarmament," *Adventist Review*, Volume 160, No. 16 (21 April 1983), p. 4.

7. Matthew 13:52.