
The Bishops and Peace, Or is it Necessarily a Sin To Build Nuclear Weapons?

by Eric Anderson

The American bishops' pastoral statement on modern war may be destined to be one of those famous documents, like *Das Kapital* and *The Origin of Species*, which everyone cites and almost no one actually reads. Certainly the average newspaper reader has learned little more than that the bishops want to "halt"—rather than "slow down"—the arms race, and that this brazen choice of words has been an embarrassing setback for the Reagan administration and for warmongers in general.

In fact, the bishops' pastoral letter has been so misunderstood that few people, even among "peace advocates," could identify which of the following statements come from the bishops' letter and which were made by admirers of Reagan's defense policy:

1. Informed realists in foreign policy establishments as pacifists should oppose aiming to kill bystanders with nuclear or conventional weapons: indiscriminate Western threats paralyze the West, not the East.
2. The Christian has no choice but to defend peace, properly understood, against aggression . . . Governments threatened by armed, unjust aggression must

defend their people. This includes defense by armed forces if necessary as a last resort.

3. Rejection of some forms of nuclear deterrence could . . . conceivably require a willingness to pay higher costs to develop conventional forces . . . It may well be that some strengthening of conventional defense would be a proportionate price to pay, if this will reduce the possibility of a nuclear war.

4. The fact of a Soviet threat, as well as the existence of a Soviet imperial drive for hegemony, at least in regions of major strategic interest, cannot be denied.

5. It is one thing to recognize that the people of the world do not want war. It is quite another to attribute the same good motives to regimes or political systems that have consistently demonstrated precisely the opposite in their behavior. There are political philosophies with understandings of morality so radically different from ours that even negotiations proceed from different premises, although identical terminology may be used by both sides.

6. Current American strategic policy is not compatible with at least three of the six 'just-war' guidelines. The policy contains no definition of success aside from denying victory to the enemy, no promise that the successful use of nuclear power would ensure a better future than surrender, and no sense of proportion because central war strategy in operational terms is not guided by political goals. In short, U.S. nuclear strategy is immoral.

Four of the above statements—numbers two through five—come from the bishops' letter. The first and last comments were made by prominent civilian strategic thinkers, men who have sometimes been caricatured as zany superhawks, "wizards of Armageddon."¹

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Anyone who has carefully followed the more extreme pronouncements of some "peace bishops," not to mention the Marxist ruminations of assorted Maryknollers and other members of the Catholic left, will be unprepared for the subtlety and moderation of the bishops' letter (*The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*). The letter simply does not preach unilateral disarmament, advocate illegal resistance (such as Bishop Hunthausen's notion that peace-lovers should refuse to pay half their taxes), or advise Catholics to quit working in defense industries. Indeed, despite their call to "halt" the arms race, the bishops are careful to avoid an explicit endorsement of the "nuclear freeze movement," not wishing, they explain, "either to be identified with one specific political initiative or to have our words used against specific political measures."²

Augustine not Gandhi

The bishops' letter approaches the issues of war and peace with a modesty and charity often lacking when sincere people attempt to make political applications of religious idealism. "We recognize," the bishops write, "that the church's teaching authority does not carry the same force when it deals with technical solutions involving particular means as it does when it speaks of principles or ends." It is possible, comments the pastoral letter, for decent people united in opposing an injustice to "sincerely disagree as to what practical approach will achieve justice. Religious groups are as entitled as others to their opinion in such cases, but they should not claim that their opinions are the only ones that people of good will may hold."³

Citing a variety of Christian sources, most frequently Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* and statements from several popes, particularly John Paul II, the pastoral letter carefully

describes the Catholic tradition on war. The bishops accept, they say, John Paul's observation that "in this world a totally and permanently peaceful human society is unfortunately a utopia" and his warning against "deceptive hopes" which lead "straight to the false peace of totalitarian regimes." They reject a peace that is merely the absence of war, pointing to a higher definition which includes harmony and respect for human rights. "In history," the bishops wisely add, "efforts to pursue both peace and justice are at times in tension, and the struggle for justice may threaten certain forms of peace." Drawing their wisdom more from Augustine and Aquinas than from St. Gandhi, the pastoral letter affirms the legitimacy of force in certain conditions, stating that "people have a right and even a duty to protect their existence and freedom by proportionate means against an unjust aggressor."⁴

At the same time, the pastoral letter unequivocally condemns some ways of waging war, even "defensively": "Just response to aggression must be discriminate; it must be directed against unjust aggressors, not against innocent people caught up in a war not of their making." The bishops point out that new forms of warfare, especially "revolutionary," guerilla wars, and nuclear war, create new circumstances in which application of just-war doctrines is very difficult. They oppose any use of nuclear weapons, even to strike "enemy cities after our own have already been struck," but are willing for the United States' short-term possession of nuclear weapons, as we wait for a world government to engineer disarmament. The bishops call their position "strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence." A critic of this position, Norman Podhoretz, comments: "But if it is immoral to use nuclear weapons under any circumstances (even in retaliation for a nuclear attack), they might just as well be renounced unilaterally for all the good they do even as a deterrent or a bargaining chip."⁵

In the face of an ongoing, complicated debate among the experts, the bishops are willing to sound a slightly agnostic note on civil defense and limited nuclear war. Like President Reagan in the thicket, they call for "an independent commission of scientists, engineers and weapons experts" to figure out if current or possible civil defense plans "offer a realistic prospect of survival." The authors of the letter say they are "highly skeptical" about limited nuclear war theories, but content themselves with stating: "The burden of proof remains on those who assert that meaningful limitation is possible." In the meantime they do not want to hear any talk about "winning," or "surviving," or even "waging" a nuclear war.⁶

The pastoral letter eschews "romantic idealism about Soviet intentions and capabilities," and, indeed, offers its views with refreshing candor. "Americans need have no illusions about the Soviet system of

repression and the lack of respect in that system for human rights," the bishops observe. Though our own system has its flaws, "the facts simply do not support the invidious comparison made at times even in our own society between our way of life, in which most human rights are at least recognized even if they are not always adequately supported, and those totalitarian and tyrannical regimes in which such rights are either denied or systematically suppressed." The bishops concede that religious freedom and freedom of speech which make possible *The Challenge of Peace* simply do not exist in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe—an admission neither the *Adventist Review* nor the General Conference administration would publicly make.⁷ Yet the bishops avoid the darkest reflections on the Soviets, such as the powerful evidence of wholesale violations of the arms-control agreement on chemical and biological weapons

Adventists and the Nuclear War Issue

The Catholic Church is not the only one speaking out on nuclear war. Adventists also are becoming more vocal on this major religious and political issue.

Last spring, the Loma Linda University Ethics Department and the Loma Linda University Church jointly sponsored a symposium on the medical and ethical implications of nuclear war. This spring, an Adventist pastor was one of the three organizers of an evangelical symposium on "Church and Peacemaking in a Nuclear Age," held in Pasadena. David Bunker, a member of the pastoral staff at Fresno Central church in California, planned the three-day conference with two fellow students from Fuller Theological Seminary.

The conference was supported by a broad coalition of sponsors, and speakers

represented the range of viewpoints on the nuclear issue today—from the hawkish Reagan policy, to the more moderate "nuclear pacifist" position (which accepts that war is inevitable but opposes use of nuclear weapons), to the more staunchly pacifist view advocated by Mennonites and Quakers.

Of the 1400 delegates at the conference, the Adventist representation was small. However, says Bunker, "Knowledgeable Adventists are trying to convince people in their churches that this is an issue we all need to think about. Although few Adventists participate in activist politics like lobbying and demonstrations, Adventists should realize that nevertheless they are already involved in nuclear politics—through voting and taxes—and that it's up to them to act on their convictions."

("yellow rain" in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia), or the implications of the Bulgarian connection in the shooting of the Pope.

Though the bishops' statement is sometimes guilty of trendiness, it is also thoroughly unfashionable in at least one respect—its unequivocal belief that the concern for human life expressed in the peace movement is directly related to the abortion issue. You can imagine the typical *New Yorker* reader sighing at the "tasteless moralism" of the following: "Millions join us in our no to nuclear war. . . . Yet many part ways with us in our efforts to reduce the horror of abortion and our no to war on innocent life in the womb, killed not indirectly, but directly."⁸ So far, most admirers of the pastoral letter have found it convenient to ignore this section of the document.

The relative moderation of the bishops'

letter *The Challenge of Peace* owes a good deal to the intervention of European prelates, including the Vatican hierarchy. In a meeting in Rome, January 18 and 19, 1983, the Vatican secretary of state and other church leaders reminded leading American bishops that they must carefully distinguish between the church's teaching authority and their own prudential judgments on practical matters. The Americans were told that "there is only one Catholic tradition: the just-war theory" and advised not to elevate the pacifist position to the status of a separate-but-equal "double tradition." The Vatican insisted that the assertion "peace is possible" in an earlier draft of the pastoral letter "expressed not a credal judgment but a mere conviction" which should not be read into scriptural statements about the future kingdom of God. Cardinal Casaroli drew attention to the fact that Pope John Paul has warned against the twin dangers of

Adventist students on college campuses are acting on their convictions by joining the newly-formed Adventist Peace Network. The organization was initially formed at Pacific Union College last school year in response to the "Call for Remnant Peacemakers" statement that came out of the 1982 Loma Linda University symposium.

According to Norman Wendth, a professor of English at PUC and one of the Network's founders, the organization will explore the biblical and ethical basis for nonviolence and the political wisdom of this mode of response. Wendth says the Adventist Peace Network sees its purpose as educating Adventists and providing opportunities for them to participate in practical peacemaking activities.

At Pacific Union College in 1982-83, the Network organized a variety of activities, including a voter registration drive, a weekly study-discussion group, a

spring film series, and a week of programs called "What About the Russians." In addition to two film showings and the playing of a simulation game that asks participants to decide whether to use nuclear weapons first at the outbreak of World War III, the week featured Ray Hefferlin, chairman of the physics department at Southern College, who described his experiences while living in the Soviet Union under the auspices of a National Academy of Sciences exchange program.

At Loma Linda University, Julie Rauls, a graduate student in physiology, initiated the second chapter of the Adventist Peace Network. Others have expressed interest in sponsoring Network activities on the La Sierra campus and at Walla Walla, Union, and Columbia Union Colleges. Winona Winkler Wendth, a co-founder of the PUC chapter, is coordinating the formation of new chapters. She can be contacted at the Learning Center, Pacific Union College, Angwin, CA 94508.

nuclear conflict and the loss "of the independence and freedom of entire peoples," and urged the Americans to keep both threats in mind as they thought about peace. He added that many people believe that the best practical way, for now, to avoid these two dangers is by possessing "a sufficient deterrence (i.e., in fact, today, a nuclear deterrence)."⁹

Unilateral Mental Freeze

To say that *The Challenge of Peace* is much better than it might have been is not, of course, the same as calling it a profound or distinguished treatment of war and peace in the modern age. As a statement on the art of keeping peace, the pastoral letter deserves no more than a C+. Even as a discussion of the specific moral dilemmas of nuclear war, the bishops' letter is often disappointing. If a student asked me for a clear introduction to the moral issues involved in "deterrence," I would recommend several secular sources above *The Challenge of Peace*, including Andrei Sakharov's letter from exile (published in *Foreign Affairs*) and Albert Wohlstetter's recent essay "Bishops, Statesmen, and Other Strategists on the Bombing of Innocents."

The basic problem with the bishops' letter is the "freeze"—the unilateral mental freeze that they have imposed upon themselves. For the majority of bishops, it seems, all the important facts about nuclear weapons technology and strategy remain basically unchanged from 20 years ago. (As Wohlstetter writes, "With few exceptions, even the most thoughtful consideration of the morality of nuclear threats have been frozen in the technology of the late 1950s and specifically that of nuclear brute force.")¹⁰ It is as if the bishops have staggered out of a time warp, clutching copies of *On the Beach*.

Most people have the vague notion that nuclear weapons are yearly becoming bigger and more indiscriminate in their ex-

plosive potential. In fact, the most important development in atomic weaponry over the last two decades had been a revolution in accuracy which has led to smaller and more precise weapons. In raw megatons, the United States' arsenal is today one-fourth of what it was in 1960. At the same time, our most accurate missile, the cruise, is approximately 150 times more accurate than typical late 1950s monsters. This means that certain modern missiles can successfully attack specific military targets without raining death on hundreds of square miles. As a recent editorial in London's *The Economist* commented, "an all-out nuclear war would kill more people than any previous war; but an SS-20 attack against military targets could leave Western Europe helpless with fewer casualties than there were at Passchondaele or Stalingrad."¹¹

In other words, a suicidal all-out super-power exchange may not be the only (or the most likely) nuclear danger we should fear. As nuclear weapons become more accurate and more controllable, the possibility increases that their use may appear rational in a particular situation. Most important, the United States risks having an ineffective, noncredible "deterrent" if our only response to any enemy use of nuclear weapons, no matter how localized (e.g. against a naval task force) is old-fashioned "massive retaliation" against civilians. In short, many of the old assumptions and definitions require rewriting in the face of technological changes.

The bishops see very little of this. Their statement ignores entirely such crucial weapons innovations as the "neutron bomb" (enhanced radiation warheads) and advanced anti-ballistic missile systems, both nuclear and non-nuclear, earthbound and space-based. (Not mentioning the neutron bomb is particularly inexcusable because its inventor, Samuel Cohen, is a voluble fellow who has written widely and perceptively about the strategic and moral implications of his invention.)

The refusal of *The Challenge of Peace* to think seriously about rational and responsible planning in the light of new weapons is fundamentally a political decision, I suspect. The basic theme of the bishops is that the only just war is one of proportionate means, a war that excludes calculated, indiscriminate attacks on civilians. A Christian citizen could wholeheartedly accept this principle and yet reject the remedies the bishops support: a halt in modernization of U.S. missiles, a commitment to "No Use, Ever," and an ultimate reliance on disarmament and world government.

A more practical way for the United States to avoid a third global war in this century—and that's the real objective, not halting the arms race—would be to build a

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policy that never uses nuclear arms to counteract conventional weakness, never allows potential foes to assume the West is too weak to resist aggression, never threatens insane and unlikely actions to "deter" an enemy, and never loses sight of the primary obligation to protect the lives of Americans. Such a policy would see a *onesided* arms race as the greatest threat to peace and institute an immediate emphasis on "counterforce" weapons and civil defense, accepting arms reduction efforts only if they truly entailed both sides having equal arsenals.

Sound familiar? Needless to say, the bishops don't intend to endorse Reagan's policy or even recognize it as one alternative that Christians could accept. But if the Reagan approach is wrong, the pastoral letter never convincingly shows us why.

Too often the bishops mar their discussion of the problems of war and peace with

simplistic liberal platitudes. (The demon "Legion," I suspect, goes by the name "Cliché," too.) Two of their most essential clichés are these:

1. *America's nuclear weapons are a ruinous expense that robs the poor.* The real temptation of nuclear weapons is their relative cheapness, their ability to deliver "more bang for the buck." Strategic nuclear weapons are a small part of the U.S. defense budget, about one-eighth of the huge expenditure required for the conventional defense of Europe. In 1981 the total U.S. expenditure for nuclear forces was \$16.7 billion, compared to \$26 billion on just two welfare programs (food stamps and aid to families with dependent children). The truth is that the federal government, even when run by "uncompassionate" Republicans, spends far more helping the poor than in building nuclear weapons. It is bad arithmetic and pure demagoguery to assert otherwise.

2. *Arms control is the most important part of our foreign policy.* "The trouble with disarmament," wrote the head of the League of Nations Disarmament Commission in his memoirs in 1973, "was (and still is) that the problem of war is tackled upside down and at the wrong end . . . Nations don't mistrust each other because they are armed; they are armed because they distrust each other." The bishops seem totally unaware that in practice arms control has often had disappointing or even disastrous results. For example, the limitations on naval weapons negotiated in 1922 and 1930 probably made war more likely, not less. As former arms negotiator Eugene Rostow writes, "The post-World War I arms-limitation agreements . . . helped bring on World War II, by reinforcing the blind and willful optimism of the West, thus inhibiting the possibility of military preparedness and diplomatic action through which Britain and France could easily have deterred war."¹² The pastoral letter also fails to adequately recognize the virtually impossible obstacles to "verification" posed by totalitarian regimes and closed societies.

Adventists and Pronouncements on Peace

What are the implications of *The Challenge of Peace* for Seventh-day Adventists? Especially those Adventists who wish their church would rise above wedding rings and financial scandals to “bear prophetic witness” on more important matters such as human freedom, earthly justice, and peace? I am not a bishop, but I am at least a primate, and I’ll venture a “prophetic witness” of my own. The experience of the Catholic bishops in preparing this pastoral letter sug-

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gests to me both the vital necessity of an independent lay journal like *Spectrum* and the basic good sense of General Conference leadership in avoiding “politics.” The bishops are doing a job best handled by the laity. If the bishops have sometimes stumbled in their efforts to separate complex procedural matters from abiding moral principles, they have only themselves to blame. As C. S. Lewis observed years ago:

People say, “The Church ought to give us a lead . . .” But, of course when they ask for a lead from the Church most people mean they want the clergy to put out a political programme. That is silly. The clergy are those particular people within the whole Church who have been specially trained and set aside to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live for ever: and we are asking them to do a quite different job, for which they have not been trained . . . The application of Christian principles, say, to trade unionism or education, must come from Christian trade unionists and Christian schoolmasters, just as Christian literature comes from Christian novelists and dramatists—not from the bench of bishops getting together and trying to write plays and novels in their spare time.¹³

There are times when the clergy have an obligation to rouse an ethically lethargic

society, to point out principles which are being ignored. But in the case of the nuclear arms debate, the job of representing Christian ideals is already being done by laymen—congressmen, journalists, scholars, and military strategists. *The Challenge of Peace* is a modest achievement—but I’d rather hear an argument between Senator Mark Hatfield, evangelical layman, and Professor Michael Novak, Catholic layman.

At their utopian worst, the bishops should be a warning to Adventism’s educated elite, many of whom are weary of a sterile other-worldliness and may face the danger of going from one extreme to another. If we merely secularize the Christian doctrine of the Second Coming (what historian Eric Voeglin calls “immanentizing the eschaton”), we risk greatly impoverishing our faith.

Liberal Adventists want their church to abandon (or “creatively” recycle) such “delusions” as Millerism and Uriah Smith’s prophetic scheme. But do they offer as substitute anything more than the hackneyed offscourings of secular optimism? If you think 19th century interpretations of the King of the North and the sixth trumpet a bit dubious, wait until you meet today’s reigning millennial fatuity: global peace and justice built upon a supercharged United Nations!

America’s Catholic bishops dream, they say, of “a substitute for war,” brought about by a “global body” with the ability “to keep constant surveillance on the entire earth,” to “investigate what seems to be preparations for war” by any nation, and to “enforce its commands on every nation.” (Somehow, this entity will have its immense power “freely conferred upon it by all nations”!)¹⁴

Uriah Smith—Adventist liberals might reflect—would not have been taken in by this dream. His premillennialism sometimes led him astray, into rigid pessimism and cocksure warnings, but at least it taught him to suspect concentrations of power, to recognize the potential for tyranny in

schemes of world unity, and to repudiate facile dreams of earthly peace. A solution to the problems of peace built on the ideals and practices of the majority in the United

Nations' General Assembly, Smith would certainly tell us, is more likely to be a threat than a promise.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The sources for the six statements are: Albert Wohlstetter, "Bishops Statesmen, and Other Strategists on the Bombing of Innocents," *Commentary*, June 1983, p. 15; United States Catholic Conference, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," (in *Origins: NC Documentary Service*, May 19, 1983), pp. 8, 21, 23-24; Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne, "Victory is Possible," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1980, p. 17.

2. *The Challenge of Peace*, p. 32 (fn. 85).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8, 9.

5. Norman Podhoretz, "Appeasement By Any Other Name," *Commentary*, July 1983, p. 28.

6. *The Challenge of Peace*, pp. 21, 15-16.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

9. Michael Novak, "The Bishops Speak Out,"

National Review, June 10, 1983, pp. 676-78. See also *The Economist*, Feb. 5, 1983, pp. 19-22.

10. Wohlstetter, "Bishops, Statesmen, and Other Strategists," p. 23.

11. *The Economist*, Feb. 5, 1983, p. 11. *The Economist* is probably referring to recent exchanges in the *London Times*, in which Brian Crozier pointed out that SS-20s equipped with one or two kiloton warheads "could knock off all of NATO's installations, with zero radiation, and blast limited to a radius of 250 meters." Crozier, "Challenge and Response," *National Review*, Feb. 18, 1983, p. 168.

12. Cited in Barbara Tuchman, "The Alternative to Arms Control," *New York Times Magazine*, April 18, 1982, p. 98; cited in Podhoretz, "Appeasement By Any Other Name," p. 28.

13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1952), pp. 64-65.

14. *The Challenge of Peace*, p. 30.