

Speech by Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Chelmsford, on 20 February 2018 in the House of Lords Debate on the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading to Their Total Elimination

One of my predecessors, H.A. Wilson, Bishop of Chelmsford from 1929 – 1950, only ever made one speech in the House of Lords. Prelates nowadays tend to have more to say. This may or may not be a good development. Shortly after the Second World War, a motion was before this House on the subject of nuclear weapons. Drawing on Christian just war theory, he rose and spoke about how the use of nuclear weapons broke “one of the few conventions which civilisation had succeeded in setting up to mitigate the brutalities of war.”

In his memoirs he recalls how the speech was received. “Nobody took the slightest notice,” he said. “I sat down in dead silence. I was conscious that all the noble Lords considered that I had made an ass of myself. Probably I had. But the ass's burden no longer included an uneasy conscience.” I speak with a similar conviction, and perhaps a similar dread. I want to say, simply, that nuclear weapons are immoral, that they are a lethal extravagance, and that we must find another way.

Lord Patten spoke about sin: that we cannot go back to Eden. He is quite right. But, my dear brother, there is also repentance. What he says about nuclear weapons could also be said of chemical weapons. Yet we have succeeded in ridding the world of those to a certain extent. I am sure rogue people do rogue things. But we have made progress, and similar progress can be made with nuclear weapons.

The truth is that these weapons of mass destruction are also weapons of mass deception. They provide the illusion of security, while actually making the world less secure than ever. North Korea now joins the nuclear club. Who will be next? And do we really feel safe with Donald Trump's finger upon the button? And will we ever be told the truth about their cost, their unusability, their increasing detectability, their vulnerability to cyber-attack, the near misses and accidents that have happened over the years, and even the fact that there are military people today who now acknowledge their redundancy in the face of the security threats and military needs of a much changed world, or simply that if we have all these billion to spend on something we claim we will never use, how about a few more hospitals instead.

The world needs to find another way. And to do this the world needs to work together. Nuclear disarmament can obviously not just be left to nuclear states, but we do not join in the conversation. The impact of nuclear weapons, their threat, their cost and – God forbid – their use affects everyone.

The most hopeful sign of this happening is the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It confirms that the longstanding obligation to negotiate disarmament is an obligation under international law, and it is because of the failure of the nuclear armed states to make multilateral progress that the United Nations now rightly takes a more substantive role.

My Lords, the very first United Nations General Assembly took place in 1946 just across the Green from here in Central Hall Westminster. Its very first resolution focused on “the elimination from national armaments, (of) atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction”.

As I have said, since then some progress has been made. The UK has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Chemical and biological weapons have been banned. So have cluster bombs. We all patted ourselves on the back a few years ago when we banned cluster bombs. The moral arguments about nuclear weapons are just as compelling, if not more so; for to use a nuclear weapon is suicide as well as genocide.

In the coming years this conversation is going to take place on a wider stage. But our government, along with other nuclear states, has met the call for a wider involvement with the United Nations in disarmament with obstruction, veto and boycott. As supporters of international law, how can this be right?

Even, Lord Patten, if you are correct – even if people like me are well-intentioned and naïve – that does not stop us sitting down to talk with people about it. Yet we do not do that. The question before us is, I think, a simple one: when a majority of the world's countries are working within this UN framework to achieve non-proliferation and the ultimate goal of disarmament – multilateral disarmament – why won't we even engage with the process?

If we are so convinced that nuclear weapons are so helpful in keeping peace in the world, what have we to fear from discussion with those who think differently? Why can't we even, as Baroness Walmsley said, send an observer? Or is it the case, as I suspect, that in our hearts we know that we can never use these bombs, and therefore to own them and to perpetuate the myth of deterrence is a moral failure; and if it is right to say cluster bombs should not be manufactured or used, that they are immoral, but nuclear weapons could, in certain circumstances, be used, then – in my predecessor's words – we are breaking the conventions which have, through our understanding of just war that teaches any force must be proportionate, discriminate, able to achieve its aims of peace and a last resort, mitigated against the terrible brutalities of war, then he is also right that we put ourselves in a very weak position to lecture others.

But, my Lords, our presence at the table is requested. There is to be a United Nations High-level Conference on Disarmament in May this year. My simple question to the Minister is: Will we be there? And if not, why not?

Mark Twain famously said that it wasn't the bits of the Bible that he didn't understand that caused him a problem, but the bits that he did. Here is a saying of Jesus that is easy to understand: "Peace I give you. But not as the world gives peace." I speak for many churches and many people of faith in this nation, asking our Government simply to take part in the process.

+Stephen
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