

The Ethics of Nuclear Weapons - Speech to the General Synod of the Church of England

8 July 2018

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One of my predecessors, the Right Reverend H.A. Wilson, Bishop of Chelmsford from 1929 - 1950 only ever made one speech in the House of Lords. Speaking in a debate on nuclear weapons just after the end of the Second World War, he said that the use of nuclear weapons meant "breaking one of the few conventions which civilisation had succeeded in setting up to mitigate the brutality of war." He was speaking about what is known as Just War theory, which doesn't mean justifying war, but *limiting war by the requirements of justice*.

Our present government says nuclear weapons are a deterrent, and that, so far, the deterrent has worked. But as a previous report to this Synod maintained and as the government concedes: "For deterrence to work there must a possibility that the weapons might be used."

But this motion calls them un-necessary and dangerous. Why? Because nuclear weapons are disproportionate and indiscriminate in their capacity to kill and destroy *by design*. And these are the very tests whereby Christians have discerned what force could be used. Bishop Bell bravely challenged the Allied saturation bombing of German cities saying it was "not a justifiable act of war." Why? For the same reasons. It was not minimum use of force, but maximum. What happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki fails the same moral test. Even today's so called 'low yield' weapons missiles would be devastatingly indiscriminate towards civilian populations, and the land itself, and the air we breathe. Their impact would not be constrained by national boundaries; no state could address the consequences. And some modern day Trident missiles could be as much as a hundred times more destructive than those dropped on Japan.

There are no circumstances in which they could be justifiably used. Yet they exist. They could be used. We are prepared to use them. Others want to procure them. Our holding onto ours only makes them seem more attractive to other nation states, often those with the most vicious and repellent governments. They want to sit at the nuclear table and enjoy the power and leverage it brings. Our nuclear deterrent has not deterred them from wanting the weapons themselves! The world gets steadily more dangerous. It is sheer good fortune, not good policy, that there has not yet been a nuclear conflagration. As Pope Francis has said, their possession is as immoral as their use. Therefore, the world must choose another path.

My predecessor said this: "The only sure preventive was the recognition of the law of God but unhappily the world was in such a state of spiritual bankruptcy that it was difficult to believe that such a remedy could be applied." Hopefully, the General; Synod of the Church of England won't make the same mistake.

In his memoirs he recalls how his speech was received. "Nobody took the slightest notice," he wrote. "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 should have despised myself for life if I had sat silent through that debate."

It is eleven years since this Synod discussed nuclear weapons. But this year, as we remember the 100th anniversary of the ending of the First World War, it is fitting that we turn our attention to

this most pressing of moral issues, for if we as Christians and as the established church of this land have nothing to say about making peace, then we are failing in our moral responsibility.

But why *this* motion at *this* time? Well, first of all the issue itself is as relevant as ever. 122 states have voted to adopt the Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons, and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons was awarded the Nobel peace prize last year. ICAN represents the hopes of a great mass of ordinary, but organised, people rather than those who lead them. And this is against the backdrop of a world where more nations are developing nuclear weapons capability, not less. Even if Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un's agreement does lead to the denuclearisation of North Korea, and this is something we all hope and pray for, it does not change the church's responsibility to seek peace, nor lessen our particular responsibility to encourage the British government – our government - to give added momentum to its efforts to control and ultimately prohibit the possession of nuclear weapons, for any hope of a genuine piece requires their elimination.

So this motion doesn't present the Synod with a binary choice between unilateral and multilateral approaches to nuclear disarmament, but rather seeks to give fresh impetus to the whole debate and to ask our Government to tell us what its plans are. The fact that it hasn't signed the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is for many of us hugely disappointing, but its failure even to engage with the process looks like complacency. Hence we call upon her Majesty's Government to reiterate its obligations under Article 6 of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it has signed, and tell us how it proposes to meet them. And what account is it taking of the overwhelming view of the non-nuclear states of the world? What does it consider is the place of nuclear weapons in a world where one of the main threats to our security is a determined fanatic getting onto an underground train with a home-made bomb in his duffle bag or driving a van onto a crowded pavement? And with the increase in cyber-crime across the world, exactly how secure are our secure systems anyway? Even some military leaders are now asking whether the huge expense of renewing Trident is relevant for the peace keeping challenges we face across the world and the security we require at home. If there is fifty? Sixty? Seventy billion pounds to spend on Trident (and let's be honest nobody really knows how much it is all going to cost) aren't their better ways of spending this money to secure our defence and to promote peace?

What we are voting for this evening is a new national debate about the retention and development of nuclear weapons.

We have reached international agreements about other indiscriminate weapons such as chemical weapons and cluster bombs. These agreements are based on established principles in International Law around the need for discrimination in conflict. So why can't we fill the gap in International Law and develop plans towards a world without nuclear weapons as well?

Then there is the question that this Synod raised back in 2007, the last time we debated this issue, namely, how can we argue that these weapons of mass destruction are vital for our security and the security of the world, that they are an effective deterrent that maintains peace, and then argue that no one else can have them for their own security.

All of us long for a world that is free of nuclear weapons. How could it be otherwise as followers of Christ? But whether our personal view is to seek unilateral or multilateral disarmament, we can all

vote for this motion. At the very least we can ask our Government to make good on the commitments it has already made and listen to the voice of the non-nuclear states.

Whenever a bishop, or for that matter a Christian gets up to speak on this subject there will be all sorts of people from all walks of life queueing up to tell us we are naive and that we don't know how the real world works and that this particular 'lesser evil' has preserved peace and stability. However, as Christians we hold on to a vision of peace that is more than the silence after the guns have finished firing and more than the stand-off before they've started. Our Scriptures tell us that in God's kingdom swords are turned into ploughshares, and, as we think back to the horrors of the First World War we also remember that Christmas Day in the trenches when rifles were turned into goal posts. Peace – the genuine peace this motion refers to – is possible, but it requires capacious vision, reconciliation painfully embraced and justice secured for every nation. And if it needs to be maintained by force or by threat, then it is not peace at all.

So in this motion we are not telling our government what to do, we are asking them to *stop telling us what they will not do* and work towards developing plans that will rid the world of the danger and expense of nuclear weapons. I look forward to hearing the views of Synod in this debate, for I know that this is not a place where speaking of peace is considered foolish or naive. Let us simply be guided by this: what would Jesus do? And I for one am happy to stand alongside my predecessor in making a fool of myself in the cause of peace.

St Francis of Assisi, another fool for Christ, said that you must “start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

Brothers and sisters, it is necessary that we say nuclear weapons, with all their indiscriminate power to kill and their terrible capacity to destroy the world itself, are wrong. It is possible to join with other nations, who do not have nuclear weapons, and work with them to reduce the ones we have and develop a road map for their complete elimination. Even if we disagree with the path offered by the Treaty for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons what possible justification can there be for not participating in the on-going discussions around the Treaty? As this motion modestly requests: please respond positively to these initiatives.

When we take these necessary and possible steps, what now seems impossible, a world without these weapons of mass destruction becomes, at last, a possibility.

+Stephen Chelmsford
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