



30 April 2014

Dr. William F. Vendley
Secretary General

Elements of a Moral Case for Nuclear Disarmament

There is a growing multi-religious moral consensus for total nuclear disarmament. This concern has been at the heart of *Religions for Peace* since its founding in 1970.

Let me offer a general comment about the ways many religious communities engage in moral discourse. Religious moral discourse tends to proceed on two levels: One is the **normative** level and the other can be termed the **pastoral** level. Let me illustrate with an example from the Jewish tradition: The Ten Commandments. One of them states: “Thou shalt not kill.” It makes no exceptions. It doesn’t say that thou shalt not kill except when it is inconvenient or except in certain circumstances. It is categorical. It states an unvarnished, unqualified obligatory norm. And yet we know there are exceptions in many religious traditions. At times killing, for example in self defense, has been recognized as defensible, the “least worst thing,” and therefore so to speak “allowed,” even though it is fraught with moral contradiction. What’s key here is that the so-called pastoral level—the tragic exceptions that arise when goods conflict—is never elevated to becoming the norm. It is never in itself elevated to being a “good.” The categorical norm “Thou shalt not kill” holds under every situation and therefore, killing, even if it deemed tragically justified, is never a good, always a kind of moral failure.

With this simple comment as a background, let me make the following few points that lead I believe to a moral case against the possession of nuclear weapons:

- Use of nuclear weapons: It is beyond the pale. Nuclear weapons are intrinsically **indiscriminate**, they fail the various so called just-war requirements of **proportionality** in that they inflict massive damage and they violate humanitarian norms. Therefore, the use of nuclear weapons is immoral. Like the commandment that I used as an illustration, use of nuclear weapons is categorically immoral. This is true even if a state was to be attacked with them. Using them in return would be utterly immoral.

- Nuclear deterrence: Is it moral to deter a nuclear attack by having weapons capable of inflicting a devastating counter attack? Recall, the pure argument is not even about using these weapons, it is simply about having them as the credible potential to use them. Several points seem essential:
 - Deterrence does not mean threatening other nations with nuclear weapons or imposing one's national will on others by threatening them with nuclear weapons. The offensive threat of nuclear weapons is completely beyond morality, as one is threatening indiscriminate and non-proportional action.
 - But what about pure deterrence? Let me acknowledge that there are a diversity of religious views, ranging from a proscription against deterrence to a limited acceptance of it. Let me speak of the latter. Increasingly religious traditions are recognizing that there can be only a reluctant, limited and temporary acceptance of deterrence, and only within the horizon of all nuclear states' vigorously prosecuting their commitments to eliminate nuclear weapons. This may correspond to what I described as the pastoral level of religious moral discourse. Buddhists might describe it as the employment of "skillful means." The point is that deterrence is not a good in and of itself. It cannot be made normative. It is objectively morally disordered. Deterrence represents a form of gross moral failure that can be at best tolerated while states resolutely and methodically disarm themselves. Failure to commit to concrete steps to disarm, failure to enter in good faith with other states to disarm, is a profound moral failure. It *de facto* presents deterrence itself as normal, as a norm, when in fact it is morally grossly disordered. Let's be honest, the inaction of nuclear states regarding disarmament is tantamount to elevating deterrence to be the *de facto* norm. This is morally disordered.
 - Maintaining nuclear weapons. Two points seem important
 - I have already mentioned the moral incoherence of elevating deterrence to the status of a norm. This moral incoherence is grave and damages both those who hold these weapons and those who feel threatened by them.
 - We also have to look at accidents. Is it moral to re-new and maintain weapons of mass destruction, when there is a real statistical probability of accidents? Probability and time unfortunately work together. The more time, the greater the probability for accidents. Such accidents involve the same

factors of indiscriminate and massive death and damage already mentioned. What right do we have to subject others or even ourselves to such risks?

- This leads me to my last point on the question of the morality of the possession of these weapons. Both ancient and many modern forms of moral argumentation revolve around the reality of self-contradiction. We use our intelligence, wills, and industry to advance knowledge and human flourishing. Are we to use our intelligence, wills and industry against themselves? Is not this a massive self-contradiction in which we subvert ourselves to undercut the conditions of possibility of our own existence? Do we have the right to impose collective suicide? Do we have the right to impose even the slow cancerous suicide of the contradiction of deterrence that eats away at the conditions of possibility for our humanity? Are we to numb our moral sensitivities, subvert our intelligence and hijack our industry so that we can accept the abnormal as normal? Intellectual and moral coherence demands that we reject this path of self-contradiction.
- Finally, let me suggest that we need to update our concept of security and that this updated notion of security can help us to frame again the imperative for nuclear disarmament. In 2006, 800 religious leaders gathered in Kyoto, Japan, for the 8th World Assembly of *Religions for Peace*. Together, they advanced a notion of shared security. Yes, we need state security, because the integrity of the border must be respected. But that is not enough. Yes, we need human security, because the well-being of people within borders must be honored. But, that too is not enough. Today, we need to advance and implement Shared Security. Your well-being is mine. We are no more secure than the most vulnerable among us. This is true in practical terms. For no one is immune from the threats of nuclear weapons. It is also true in moral terms, because all of our religious and other great moral traditions recognize that we are obliged, indeed, we truly live when we are in relationship with, cooperating with and caring for the other. Is this possible? Religions—each in their own way—would give us the strength to say “yes.” And, what is the alternative?