

The Nuclear Dilemma: The Greatest Moral Problem of All Time

Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.



Eighth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture
on Ethics & Foreign Policy

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Introduction

The problem of the effect of nuclear weapons on the conduct of foreign policy entered early into Professor Hans J. Morgenthau's calculation of international relations. The six editions of his classic work, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, show the evolution of his thoughts. The bipolar post-World War II character of international relations became even more dangerous. It became more difficult to think in any nuanced way about U.S. foreign policy. Calculating the balance of power, the limitations as well as the skill of human beings in policy construction, became oddly irrelevant in the face of the crude threat of nuclear weapons and their capacity to obliterate the world. The unthinkable became the world's preoccupation. Hans Morgenthau was very wary of those who considered nuclear weapons as just another weapon, and he addressed this problem in *Science and Mankind* in 1972. He was clearly alarmed by such strategic writers as Herman Kahn (*On Thermonuclear War*) who advanced the notion that with proper defensive efforts (fallout shelters and all the rest) the casualties from nuclear attacks might be only a few million! Only nervous Nellies thought nuclear war was unthinkable. Toward the end of his life, Professor Morgenthau turned his attention to other costs of a nuclear holocaust, such as robbing mankind of the dignity of death.

In this decade, there have been attempts by many people and institutions, from the arms controllers to the Catholic Bishops, to face the reality of nuclear weapons. The morality of deterrence remains under attack in religious circles, and the moral problem has been raised and analyzed by such philosophers as Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University in his 1986 book *Nuclear Ethics*, as well as in publications and seminars on such issues by this Council. It remains central to serious thinking about the world's future. We appreciate the participation of all of you at this lecture.

Professor Morgenthau initiated this lecture series on Ethics and Foreign Policy in 1977; after his death in July 1980, the series was

renamed in his honor. Contrary to some impressions, his dedication to ethical problems in international affairs was profound; the ends, means, and consequences of foreign policy decision-making were much on his mind. He served on the board of trustees of this Council for about 20 years. His greatest concern about foreign policy in general and U.S. foreign policy in particular was that it would take on a crusading character, a national chauvinistic moralism, the opposite of what a moral foreign policy should be. He would not have been in agreement with another of our former trustees who in 1912 stated: "The day is not too far distant when three stars and stripes at three equidistant points will mark our territory: one at the North Pole, another at the Panama Canal, and the third at the South Pole. The whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as, by virtue of our superiority of race, it already is ours morally." The speaker on that occasion was William Howard Taft, in his role as president of the United States.

Today's speaker was a longtime friend and associate of Professor Morgenthau. He is perhaps best remembered as the distinguished president emeritus of Notre Dame University, a particular delight when your team is 8 and 0. Other notable accomplishments are: During his 35-year tenure, he vastly increased Notre Dame's operating budget, endowment, and enrollment; changed the governing board of the university from the Congregation of the Holy Cross to a mostly lay board of trustees; and opened the university to women students. His public service career has been no less distinguished. Father Hesburgh has held 14 presidential appointments, involving him in major issues, such as civil rights, peaceful uses of atomic energy, third world development, and immigration reform. Please join me in welcoming Father Theodore Hesburgh.

Robert J. Myers
President
Carnegie Council

The Nuclear Dilemma: The Greatest Moral Problem of All Time

by Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.

I would like to consider with you tonight what I believe to be the greatest moral problem of all time: the nuclear dilemma. It is a dilemma now almost 45 years old. The danger is that having lived with it this long without being annihilated, we may have become accustomed to having it around. The beast has continued to grow and has become infinitely more dangerous, but, thus far, not fatal to humanity.

Most of us were around when the beast was born. I am sure many have forgotten a prescient editorial that appeared in *TIME* magazine, August 20, 1945, within days of the bombing of Hiroshima. A section of that editorial was entitled, "The Bomb." I have tried several times to condense the editorial, but have decided finally to include it all.

The greatest and most terrible of wars was ending, this week, in the echoes of an enormous event—an event so much more enormous that, relative to it, the war itself shrank to minor significance. The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude. More fearful responsibilities, more crucial liabilities rested on the victors even than on the vanquished.

In what they said and did, men were still, as in the aftershock of a great wound, bemused and only semi-articulate, whether they were soldiers or scientists, or great statesmen, or the simplest of men. But in the dark depths of their minds and hearts, huge forms moved and silently arrayed themselves: Titans, arranging out of the chaos an age in which victory was already only the shout of a child in the street.

With the controlled splitting of the atom, humanity, already

profoundly perplexed and disunified, was brought inescapably into a new age in which all thoughts and things were split—and far from controlled. As most men realized, the first atomic bomb was a merely pregnant threat, a merely infinitesimal promise.

All thoughts and things were split. The sudden achievement of victory was a mercy, to the Japanese no less than to the United Nations, but mercy born of a ruthless force beyond anything in human chronicle. The race had been won, the weapon had been used by those on whom civilization could best hope to depend; but the demonstration of power against living creatures instead of dead matter created a bottomless wound in the living conscience of the race. The rational mind had won the most Promethean of its conquests over nature, but had put into the hands of common man the fire and force of the sun itself.

Was man equal to the challenge? In an instant, without warning, the present had become the unthinkable future. Was there hope in that future, and if so, where did hope lie?

Even as men saluted the greatest and most grimly Pyrrhic of victories in all the gratitude and good spirit they could muster, they recognized that the discovery which had done most to end the worst of wars might also, quite conceivably, end all wars—if only man could learn its control and use.

The promise of good and of evil bordered alike on the infinite—with this further, terrible split in the fact: that upon a people already so nearly drowned in materialism even in peacetime, the good uses of this power might easily bring disaster as prodigious as the evil. The bomb rendered all decisions made so far, at Yalta and at Potsdam, mere trivial dams across tributary rivulets. When the bomb split open the universe and revealed the prospect of the infinitely extraordinary, it also revealed the oldest, simplest, commonest, most neglected and most important of facts: that each man is eternally and above all else responsible for his own soul, and, in the terrible words of the Psalmist, that no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him.

Man's fate has forever been shaped between the hands of reason and spirit, now in collaboration, again in conflict. Now reason and spirit meet on final ground. If either or anything is to

survive, they must find a way to create an indissoluble partnership.¹

I have wondered what the author of that editorial would say today, 44 years later. We are still facing this greatest moral challenge of all time: What do we do about this monster that we have created, nourished, and developed to a point where its nefarious power today is literally a million times greater than in 1945? We all know that we are the first generation of humans since Genesis that can totally destroy the human species and make our beautiful planet uninhabitable.

It is difficult to express this in words. E. L. Doctorow, whose craft is words, tried to express it in Moscow recently when speaking to the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. His address was also entitled, "The Bomb."

The bomb transmutes matter into energy. It burns as the sun burns. It turns people into light. It turns their cities into radiant ashpits. It disintegrates the ordinary miracles of the diurnal world. And sentient life in a million beautiful versions, every moving shuddering birth, every egg wet baby, everything that walks gallops flies hops swims or opens in the morning, every pulse in the organic earthbody, is forever stilled. Life is profoundly and eternally humiliated. All music dies in the throat. All cries of ecstasy, all liturgy. The things we meant to say. . . . And all this is called *nuclear capability*. . . . Therefore, I offer for your consideration the idea that The Bomb is, before anything else, a staggering impiety, a profound theological offense.

What could be a greater theological offense than to throw God's beautiful creation back in His face? This must be the greatest blasphemy of all. How could we not see this in the depths of our consciences?

Still back in 1945, Albert Einstein, aghast at the results of his creative work in the holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, prophesied that the unleashed power of the atom would change everything except our mode of thinking and we would drift toward unparalleled disaster.

¹ "U.S. at War," *TIME*, Vol. XLVI, No. 8 (August 20, 1945) p. 19.

We have had our share of prophetic voices in the years since 1945, but somehow we have continued to drift. Even President Eisenhower, the greatest general in World War II, warned us in 1953 of the senseless drift toward disaster:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. . . . This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron. ²

Many of us warmed to this rhetoric. Some of us spoke whenever we could of the growing overhang of the nuclear mushroom cloud. But the nuclear arms race continued apace, growing like a malignant cancer, especially here and in the Soviet Union. We did it because they did it; they did it because we did it. As one Soviet official told me, your hawks nourish our hawks and our hawks feed your hawks. The doves (a pejorative word) do not really count.

The nuclear arsenal grew in numbers, megatonnage, new and more accurate systems of delivery, and now, in outer space. When most of these earlier concerns were voiced, we had few weapons, and delivery systems that required ten hours or more by slow-moving bombers. Now we have shortened the fuse to such a few minutes that we face the abysmal prospect of handing the future of the human race over to mindless, amoral, and let it be said, often faulty computers. Academician Velikhov once told me that what he feared most was not us, but our computers. He then added, "and ours are worse."

In all honesty it should be said, as it often is not, that we introduced most of these new systems first, with the Soviets quickly following suit. For example, we had the atom bomb in 1945, they in 1949; we the intercontinental bomber in 1948, they in 1955; we the jet bomber in 1951, they in 1954; we the H-bomb 1952, they in 1953; they beat us by one year to the intercontinental ballistic missile in 1957. We introduced photo-reconnaissance from satellites in 1960, they in 1962. We initiated submarine launched missiles in 1960, they in 1964.

² Speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 16, 1953.

We launched the solid fuel ICBM in 1962, they in 1966. They beat us to the anti-ballistic missile, albeit a crude one, in 1966; ours came in 1974. We were first to initiate multiple re-entry vehicles in 1970; they did likewise in 1975. These are the dates for testing and/or deployment. Obviously, the arms race accelerated at each new step.³

There were some more strong warnings while all this was happening. The Russell-Einstein Manifesto of 1955 that gave birth to the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs is worth citing: "... a war with H-bombs might quite possibly put an end to the human race." The manifesto concluded with another strong statement regarding our choice between cosmic good and evil: "There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal, as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity and forget the rest."⁴

There were also many religious appeals during this period to nuclear morality and sanity, including some of my own, but they went largely unheard and unheeded. About a quarter of our scientists and engineers worldwide were engaged in the macabre arms race. What caught the headlines were the war games spokesmen.

Fred Kaplan, in his book *The Wizards of Armageddon*, portrays the efforts of the intellectuals and scientists who have analyzed American nuclear policy while rotating between the Departments of Defense and State and the national think tanks on the East and West Coasts. After almost 400 pages of record, he concludes:

They performed their calculations and spoke their strange and esoteric tongues because to do otherwise would be to recognize, all too clearly and constantly, the ghastliness of their contemplations. They contrived their options because without them the bomb would appear too starkly as the thing that they had tried to prevent it from being but that ultimately it would become if it ever were used—a device of sheer mayhem, a weapon whose cataclysmic powers no one really had the faintest

³ *Toward a New Security: Lessons of the Forty Years Since Trinity* (Cambridge: Union of Concerned Scientists, 1985) p. 22.

⁴ "The Russell-Einstein Manifesto," in *We Can Avert a Nuclear War*, eds. William Epstein and Lucy Webster (Cambridge: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, Publishers, 1983) pp. 164-66.

idea of how to control. The nuclear strategists had come to impose order—but in the end, chaos still prevailed.⁵

Somehow in the early 1980s, a wider moral consciousness began to emerge here in America and around the world. It almost seemed like a case of spontaneous combustion, a bit late, but welcome. I recall walking across the campus after a lecture on what would happen if a one megaton bomb exploded over South Bend. I looked around at the beautiful fall scene, students hurrying to and from class, the trees resplendent, peace and beauty and vitality everywhere I looked. Then the reality of the nuclear threat: whether by malice or accident, suddenly, in a blinding flash of light, all of this would be gone. Everything gone. Everywhere. It was like a religious conversion. Everything I had been working on—human rights, economic and social development in the Third World, immigration and refugees, higher education worldwide—all irrelevant in a flash. No human beings; no human problems. Only a void. I decided then and there to put highest priority on this primordial problem.

I suspect that this happened to many others in the early 1980s. The physicians organized worldwide, 150,000 under Dr. Bernard Lown of Harvard and Dr. Chazov, now minister of health for Russia. This led to an unusual U.S.-USSR Nobel Prize for Peace. Lawyers and businessmen organized against nuclear war. There was even MEND: Mothers Embracing Nuclear Disarmament. Dozens of peace groups, local, national, and international, either appeared anew or were revitalized.

The International Council of Scientific Unions, the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science all produced strong resolutions calling nuclear war “an unprecedented threat to humanity” that must be avoided at all costs. In addition to the effects of blast, heat, and radiation, a new horror, nuclear winter, was introduced. Dr. Bernard Lown said it best:

We can and must instill a sense of moral revulsion to nuclear weaponry and the Orwellian term “deterrence,” which is but a sanitized word of indiscriminate and colossal mass murder. Our goal should be the widest conditioning of an anti-nuclear instinct

⁵ *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983) pp. 390–91.

as potent as hunger. Moral arousal, I believe, will help tilt the perilously balanced scale in world affairs toward survival.

President Eisenhower predicted that there will come a day when the people will generate such a mighty popular ground swell for peace that governments will be forced to get out of their way. Such a day is no longer remote for it is beckoned by the unleashing of the deepest forces embedded in humankind when threatened by extinction.⁶

While all this was happening, what were the two superpower governments doing? Posturing mainly. For a detailed report on what was happening here during President Reagan's first term, read Strobe Talbott's *Deadly Gambits*, published in 1984. The most important human problem of all time was not being addressed constructively by the president, not by the secretaries of state and defense. It was addressed by their under secretaries, both hawks, and each determined to checkmate the other in a personal vendetta. Thank God, the United States managed to survive Richard Burt vs. Richard Perle. The USSR officialdom was doing no better, with the rapid turnover of their gerontological leadership. Fortunately for us, the summits of Geneva, Reykjavik, Washington, and Moscow lay ahead. Then would come the first slight turn in the road toward unparalleled disaster. But for the moment, despite all the clamor for peace, we were in deep trouble.

Leslie Gelb put it well in a March 4, 1984 article in *The New York Times*:

There seems to be a habit of mind developing among Soviet and American officials that the problem cannot be solved, that technology cannot be checked, a combination of resignation and complacency. They have gotten used to both the competition and the nuclear peace. Mankind may not survive on that alone.

As all of this was going on, the religious groups, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, burst into new life and vital activity—often to the consternation of our government and sometimes to the dismay of the more conservative members of the flock, the “my country right or wrong” variety.

⁶ *IPPNW Report*, Vol. I, No. 2, Boston: International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, June 1983, p. 15.

I can best report on the activities of the American Catholic hierarchy, who spent several years producing what is, in my judgment, their best pastoral letter: *The Challenge of Peace, God's Promise and Our Response*.⁷ As the chairman of the drafting committee, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin observed in a talk at Notre Dame:

Today, the stakes involved in the nuclear issue make it a morally compelling urgency. The Church must be involved in the process of protecting the world and its people from the specter of nuclear destruction. Silence in this instance would be a betrayal of its mission. . . . the premise of the letter is that nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy constitute a qualitatively new moral problem.

In scientific words, the nuclear threat is a quantum leap in the age-old contest of good versus evil.

In drafting the letter, the Bishops were confronted with another unusual challenge. Not only were the Bishops facing the quintessential moral problem of our time, but in their field of reference, there were practically no theological moral precedents. They used the only two possible theological precedents available: the theology of pacifism, and the theology of just war. Both were admittedly of little help. First, pacifism as a theological posture going back to pre-Constantinian times refers more to a highly idealistic individual Christian stance than to a moral imperative of a nation committed to the effective defense of its people. Even Gandhi had his doubts about the efficacy of passive non-violent resistance against the Nazis in the Second World War, and today nuclear weapons pose an even greater threat.

The Augustinian theology of a just war was promulgated in the days of bows and arrows and spears—hardly comparable to ICBMs, MXs, cruise missiles, and all of their numerous counterparts. Augustine lived in a day of hand-to-hand combat, not when hundreds of millions of people can be annihilated in a few minutes by the pushing of a single button.

The Bishops used what they possessed in the area of moral principles and came close to admitting that the key just-war principles of discrimination (not killing innocent civilians) and proportionality (not using force of greater magnitude than the good to be achieved in

⁷ United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1983.

justifiable defense) are practically meaningless as applied to nuclear war. When nuclear weapons are used, there can be no discrimination between armies and innocent civilians. The nuclear force employed is so great that it is useless to talk of proportionality—it is by its very nature of too great a magnitude—a million times greater than Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One Trident submarine has eight times the total destructive power of World War II.

Going beyond the just-war principles of proportionality and discrimination, the Bishops' conclusions are clear, courageous, and to the point. 1. Initiation of nuclear war at any level cannot be morally justified in any conceivable situation. 2. Limited nuclear exchanges must also be questioned, since they may not be controllable. (They may escalate.) 3. No nuclear weapons may ever be used to destroy population centers or civilian targets. Even if the target is military or industrial, the principle of proportionality would rule out targeting it if the civilian casualty toll would be too great. 4. Deterrence policies are morally acceptable only on a strictly conditioned basis. They must not be an end in themselves, but a step toward realistic and progressive nuclear disarmament. 5. Immediate bilateral and verifiable agreements to halt the testing, production, and deployment of new nuclear weapons are supported, followed by deep cuts in the nuclear arsenals of both superpowers.

When one considers the broad sweep of the pastoral letter, minimal requirements are asserted as binding on Catholics. Rather than declaring a final word on a perplexing and complex matter, the Bishops made it clear that it was meant to be a first word. The pastoral letter calls for discussion by Christians and others, and it modestly attempts to place the resulting public discussion in a framework of reason and faith. I was particularly impressed by the Bishops' call for charity and civility in the discussions that would inevitably follow. Finally, the Bishops offer a vision of humanity transcending its differences to avoid nuclear holocaust.

All of this is reminiscent of where we began with the *TIME* editorial: the working together of reason and spirit, the ultimate challenge of good and evil to a world united in its humanity, though separated in so many other ways. The nuclear threat may indeed finally bring humanity together in ways impossible short of an invasion from outer space. Here, we are all equally threatened from inner space.

I promised to report what I decided to do following my quasi-conversion on that fall afternoon. No one can do everything, but each

of us can do something. In view of the growing ground swell of revulsion and deep moral concern that was burgeoning in the 1980s, I persuaded Franz Cardinal Koenig of Vienna to join me in convoking an international group of scientists and religious leaders to make common cause against nuclear war. It would be the first time we had worked together since Galileo. I believe the Holy Spirit was with us when we first gathered on the top floor of the Intercontinental Hotel in Vienna on a cold, blustery January day to elaborate a program. We read in Genesis of the Spirit hovering over the waters. We really needed Him hovering that day. I opened with a question to Soviet academician Yevgeny Velikov, "Will you work with us?" He immediately answered, "Of course. We are both working for peace. We can't do that by just talking to fellow scientists."

We had additional meetings in Europe, plus one in Japan, bringing together scientists from all of the nuclear states, and others, plus religious leaders from all of the world's religions. We met in Vienna several times, in London, three times in Rome, and at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Italy. There has been an extraordinary commitment to common themes and programs for action.

Time permits only a brief taste of the declaration unanimously approved by the delegates of scientific academies from 36 nations, hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and greeted by the Holy Father in Rome. Six academies were from the Soviet bloc. Here are a few disconnected sentences taken from the five-page declaration:

Science can offer the world no real defense against the consequences of nuclear war.

It is the duty of scientists to help prevent the perversion of their achievements and to stress that the future of mankind depends on the acceptance by all nations of moral principles transcending all other considerations.

All disputes that we are concerned with today, including political, economic, ideological, and religious ones, are small compared to the hazards of nuclear war.

... humanity as a whole ... must act for its survival. This is the greatest moral issue that humanity has ever faced, and there is no time to be lost.⁸

On January 13, 1983, the main scientific framers of this declaration met with world religious leaders in Vienna. The religious leaders, after studying and discussing the scientists' declaration, unanimously declared:

What faith impels us to say here in Vienna must be fortified by the hope that it is possible to build a world which will reflect the love of the Creator and respect for the life given to us, a life certainly not destined to destroy itself. We join the scientists in their call for urgent action to achieve verifiable disarmament agreements leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons. Nothing less is at stake than the future of humanity.

I believe that Freeman Dyson caught the spirit of these discussions in the opening pages of his Gifford Lectures, although he was not to my knowledge referring to them directly:

In recent years, science and religion have come more and more into alliance through their common striving for peace. ... Scientists have written a great deal about nuclear strategy, but nothing we have written is as thoughtful as the Pastoral Letter on War and Peace ... which the Catholic Bishops of America hammered out and issued to the world in 1983. This letter is indeed a challenge, a challenge to us as scientists as well as to everyone else. It expresses a fundamental rejection of the idea that permanent peace on earth can be achieved with nuclear weapons. It challenges scientists to put our skills to work in more hopeful directions ... leading to peace and reconciliation rather than to a precarious balance of terror.⁹

Let me return to Hans Morgenthau with whom we began. In 1955

⁸ "Declaration on the Prevention of Nuclear War," *Science*, Vol. 218, No. 4571 (October 29, 1982) pp. 448-49.

⁹ Freeman Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions* (New York, Harper & Row, 1988) pp. 12-13.

he wrote an article entitled "Reflections on the State of Political Science" that is today of considerable relevance to how we answer the challenge of a nuclear age. I can only quote a few disparate sentences, but they will give you the flavor of his theme, which is consonant, I believe, with all that I have been saying here tonight.

It must suffice here to state dogmatically that the object of the social sciences is man, not as a product of nature but as both the creature and the creator of history in and through which his individuality and freedom of choice manifest themselves.

... political theory as an academic discipline has been intellectually sterile, and it is not by accident that some of the most important contributions to contemporary political theory have been made not by professional political scientists, but by theologians, philosophers and sociologists.

This branch of political science, which we call empirical theory, reflects in theoretical terms upon the contemporary political world. The political world, however, poses a formidable obstacle to such understanding. This obstacle is of a moral rather than an intellectual nature.

A political science which is true to its moral commitment ought at the very least to be an unpopular undertaking. At its very best, it cannot help being a subversive and revolutionary force with regard to certain vested interests—intellectual, political, economic, social in general . . . it becomes also a political threat to the defenders or the opponents of the status quo or to both.

A political science which is mistreated and persecuted is likely to have earned that enmity because it has put its moral commitment to the truth above social convenience and ambition."¹⁰

Not being a political scientist, but a theologian concerned with the political scene, I will now offer some simple propositions.

1. Nuclear war is suicidal for the human race, no matter who starts it. No second chances.

¹⁰ Hans Morgenthau, "Reflections on the State of Political Science," *The Review of Politics*, Vol.17, No.4 (1955) pp. 441-47.

2. To have 10,000 nuclear warheads aimed at us, positioned on accurate delivery systems hooked up to computers, with an equal number aimed at the USSR, is sheer idiocy on both sides. I think that both President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev agree.

3. The six or seven new nuclear delivery systems (especially cruise missiles) now in various stages of development and deployment are idiocy squared.

4. The elimination of short range nuclear systems in Europe, agreed upon at the Moscow summit, is the first sensible reduction since 1945 and should be commended as an initial move in the right direction.

5. The proposed 50% reduction will give both the Soviet and American military heartburn—which of the lethal toys to discard? We have to persuade and involve them in this endeavor because it can't be done without their support. They too know in their hearts that nuclear weapons are fundamentally unusable. Even discarding 50% still leaves us both facing Armageddon.

6. The most difficult final move, which will have to involve the British and French as well—will be going from 50% to zero. Even to say "going to zero" gives all the strategic planners on both sides more heartburn, so they just write it off as idealistic, utopian, and impossible. If it is possible to eliminate the threat of nuclear death, do not tell me that doing it is impossible! If we created this monster, we can lay him to rest. That will not leave us with a perfect world. It will at least give us a chance for survival in the face of other imminent threats: greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, pollution of the oceans, tropical diseases that affect hundreds of millions of people, world hunger, and overpopulation, to mention a few. Even without nuclear weapons, we will not enter the next millennium without problems.

Can we do it, reduce to zero? I think the young people would say, "Why not?" Maybe, just maybe, our 44 years of survival despite the nuclear arms race have convinced us that war has come to a dead end. No winners anymore. This is the time for all the world to declare that war is no longer a means to solve human problems on this planet. What a way to enter the new millennium! Impossible, improbable, unlikely? Well, let's just try it. I believe we will have the vote of the younger generation, in all the nations of the world. Don't take them lightly. They are soon to be in charge.

I think the younger people, who want peace, work, marriage, and family—not the end of it all—will appreciate the words of Freeman Dyson toward the end of his Gifford Lectures:

If a political arrangement is to be durable, it must pay attention both to the technological facts and to ethical principles. Technology without morality is barbarous; morality without technology is impotent. But in the public discussion of nuclear policies in the United States, technology has usually been overemphasized and morality neglected. It is time for us now to redress the balance, to think more about moral principles and less about technical details. The roots of our nuclear madness lie in moral failures rather than in technical mistakes.¹¹

The Bishops' pastoral letter has a wonderful appeal for hope which we so much need today: "Hope is the capacity to live with danger without being overwhelmed by it; hope is the will to struggle against obstacles, even when they appear insuperable."¹² At the risk of overusing Dyson, whom I admire greatly as a scientist (less as a theologian, which he admits to not being) may I quote one last time from the conclusion of his wonderful book, *Weapons and Hope*:

This lesson, not to give up hope, is the essential lesson for people to learn who are trying to save the world from nuclear destruction. There are no compelling technical or political reasons why we and the Russians, and even the French and the Chinese too, should not in time succeed in negotiating our nuclear weapons all the way down to zero. The obstacles are primarily institutional and psychological. Too few of us believe that negotiating down to zero is possible. To achieve this goal, we shall need a worldwide awakening of moral indignation pushing the governments and their military establishments to get rid of these weapons which in the long run endanger everybody and protect nobody. We shall not be finished with nuclear weapons in a year or in a decade. But we might, if we are lucky, be finished with them in a half century, in about the same length of time that it took the abolitionists to rid the world of slavery. We should not worry too much about the technical details of weapons and delivery systems. The basic issue before us is simple. Are we, or are we not, ready to face the uncertainties of a world in which

¹¹ Dyson, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

¹² *The Challenge of Peace, God's Promise and Our Response*, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1983.

nuclear weapons have been negotiated all the way down to zero? If the answer to this question is yes, then there is hope for us and for our grandchildren.¹³

¹³ Freeman Dyson, *Weapons and Hope* (New York, Harper & Row, 1984) pp. 312-13.

Discussion

Question: I read the Bishops' pastoral letter with great interest and I have tried to use it in teaching, but I find some places that are very difficult to deal with. One of them you quoted, and that is the discussion of deterrence, in which deterrence is acceptable only as a transient mechanism for an eventual disarmament on both sides.

That begs the question, and I wonder if you would clarify it for me. Let's say the Soviets launched an attack against the United States—this is a very remote eventuality—and they targeted missiles, so that we couldn't respond. They would kill several million people, but they would not kill hundreds of millions of people. What would be the morality of responding to that attack with the missiles we have left, and targeting the Soviet population?

Father Hesburgh: The question being asked, really, is: Did the Bishops fudge on deterrence? If I could read their minds, I would say that they were seeing deterrence as a situation in which we were trying to avoid the possibility of attack by saying to the Soviets, "If you attack us, we'll respond. And you'll be dead, all of you. We may be dead, too, most of us, but we'll do it." Is that a moral thing to do? Of course not. The hope is, of course, that they don't attack us and we don't have to obliterate them.

I have to say that the bishops fudged in saying, "This can only be a temporary state of affairs in humankind," because no one can justify the killing of hundreds of millions of people, even if many of our people have been killed.

They were trying to say: "We can only give a conditional moral agreement to this situation if we are trying to remove the situation by removing the bombs that make it necessary."

Both President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev have said they want to cut strategic weapons by 50 percent. There will be the wildest objections to that by all the nuclear planners on both sides. The military, as I said, will have heartburn because they won't know

where to begin. Do you destroy the navy's submarine missiles, do you destroy the air force's bombers, or do you destroy the new cruise missiles which are devilishly accurate, but slow? Where do you begin?

The Bishops had a reprise recently when they went over the question again. They seemed less and less in a mood to say deterrence is even conditionally admissible because so little progress had been made. Then, with the INF treaty, people began to get a little hope that we were going to start moving downward.

Question: Have you given any thought to the fact that making weapons is very profitable, and so why cut down drastically?

Father Hesburgh: Actually—and this is one of the ironies of fate—nuclear weapons are much cheaper in the long run than conventional weapons. You need few nuclear weapons because they are so devilishly powerful. We have a superabundance of them at the moment, which is idiocy.

The problem with the cost of weapons is that nuclear weapons take up a much smaller proportion of our defense budget, maybe 20 percent compared to 80 percent for conventional weapons.

Question: I'm thinking of delivery systems, so I would expand the definition from just warheads.

Father Hesburgh: They would be included here. Take a cruise missile, for example. If you want to fire a cruise missile from Omsk to New York and hit the Statue of Liberty, just to get us out of killing human beings, you could ask, "Where do you want to hit it, in the head or in the feet, or even at the belt?" A little ram jet engine can do that, no big deal. Nothing much more than one of the four we have on our intercontinental passenger planes. It doesn't move very fast, it's not supersonic, it only goes about 500 miles an hour, but it goes over the surface so that it can follow the contour of the land and miss radar, which can't see through hills. So the thing may take a while to get here, but if you fire 1,000 of them, at least one will hit exactly. It's like navigating from a photograph. And that's not a very expensive system. On top of that, they are almost impossible to verify because you can carry them around in a pickup truck.

Somehow, we have to begin with those weapons that are ultimate, that make war impossible because nobody survives it. Then we have

to say, if nuclear war is unthinkable, why not say at this stage of our development that conventional war, any war, is unthinkable as a rational solution to political problems?

I've been in a number of discussions on finding intelligence in outer space, and everybody seems to agree that if we ever make contact the first question we are going to ask is, "How did you survive the discovery of nuclear power?" That is the problem we are now wrestling with. I don't think we can solve it with dollars and cents and budgets and profits. We have to say, "This is insane. This is irrational. This is about as bad a corner as human beings could paint themselves into." We just have to get out, and we have to get out without thinking of the cost or even of the profit. We just have to get out.

Once we have gotten out of this box, which may have brought us to the brink and shown us how irrational war itself is with modern weapons, even conventional, then we have to say, let's get rid of war altogether. Let's go into the new millennium clean.

Question: I would agree that war is certainly an irrational solution to problems, but I have heard Hans Morgenthau say at the University of Chicago that those who expect rationality in international affairs are being irrational.

We have just seen Iran and Iraq behave irrationally for seven years and take a million lives in the process. The hope that one can by preaching or by moral example persuade humanity to "behave rationally" and do away with war, seems to me frail.

Similarly, with regard to nuclear weapons, the problem is not the destruction of nuclear weapons, as you have said. The problem is, why nuclear weapons in the first place? Until one can do something about the causes that led to nuclear mines in Germany, nuclear artillery shells in Korea, let alone intercontinental ballistic missiles, whether land-based or sea-based—until one can do something about those concerns and those factors, our hopes also are frail.

Father Hesburgh: I think the question is, is the elimination of war an empty hope? I guess I'm an optimist and my best answer to your question is, I do hope it's possible to get at the causes of distrust, to create a world that reflects more peaceful acceptance of differences than the one we have now.

I'd like to give you an example that would have seemed totally bizarre to me a year ago—and yet, it's something that happened. As an

old philosopher, I remember the argument, "*Contra factum non data argumentum*": There's no argument against a fact. Recently, at a conference in Moscow at the Foundation for the Survival and Development of Humankind, Archbishop Petirim said to me, "Why don't you offer Mass in my little chapel here tomorrow morning?" We were meeting in the Chancery. I said, "I'd be delighted." I'd never said Mass in a Russian Orthodox church before.

At the end of the meeting that Saturday evening, I mentioned to the group that Archbishop Petirim had asked me to offer Mass the next morning. I said, "If any of you would like to come, you're perfectly welcome, but don't feel that this is an invitation that you have to R.S.V.P. to."

I expected a few of the Americans, none of them Catholic, to come, and they all did. But then the Russians started to arrive. Here's the head of the Academy, here's the head of the space program, here's Andrei Sakharov puffing because he took a wrong turn on the steps. To my astonishment even the translators came, because they had been in the room the night before and they felt they were invited too. We had a marvelous Mass, very simple, as simple as it could be. I had to preach on a rather curious gospel because under the new dispensation since Vatican II, we are supposed to have a homily at every Mass, even though brief. The gospel that Sunday was about the Apostles coming to Jesus and saying, "There's a fellow over there curing people in your name and he's not part of our team. You'd better close him down, get rid of him. He's an interloper." The Lord said something very simple: "If he's not against us, he's for us. Leave him alone."

I said to my Russian friends, "I translate that in my own very simpleminded way as 'Good is where you find it,' and I have to tell my Russian friends here that I find great good in this country. You just got through celebrating the agony, if you want to call it that, of 1,000 years of Christianity in Russia. I went to a church last night and it was full of Russian people singing and praying, and much more fervently than I have seen in the great capitals of Europe, where people have largely quit going to Church—or praying out loud at least. I don't want to judge what they do in the quiet of night. But the fact is, you people have had your faith go through a real crucible of torture and agony and suppression. It may well be that Russia may someday bring to the rest of Europe a new faith and a new sense of hope and prayer."

If you want a far-out hope, that's a pretty good one. But I said it on the spur of the moment, I hope with the help of the Spirit, and they

were all delighted. One of them came up afterwards and said, "I'm 60 years old and I've never been to Mass in my whole life. It gripped me right here."

Well, if you can hope for that, I think you can hope for almost anything. I am enough of a confirmed optimist, I hope for everything.