

Conflict and faith: a personal reflection

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"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good..." Genesis 1, vv 1 – 31.

To those who read this, I confess that you are being used as a sounding board, because in writing this, and offering it to you, I am trying to work out for myself my own understanding of the use of war and its justification as a political tool. This is in the context of my own of my own religious faith and your participation is invited in any comments or criticism that you may offer.

Some years ago I was at a retreat in Glasgow when Fr. Gerry Hughes, the retreat conductor, in the opening session, invited those who thought that nuclear weapons had contributed to world peace to put up their hands. Of some thirty or so people present, I was alone in doing so. It felt a bit like being the subject in a H M Bateman cartoon. Whilst the weapons themselves are abhorrent, one may, nevertheless, consider them to have been effective in maintaining the peace of the Cold War out of the strategy known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) articulated by Robert McNamara. Serving in the British Army in West Germany during the Seventies, one was acutely aware of an imbalance of force as between NATO and the Warsaw Pact Armies, with the imbalance favouring the latter. Consequently, there was a perception that if a land war were to break out, the Western forces would probably have to revert to a first use of tactical nuclear weapons to prevent the Allies from being overwhelmed [Please note that this was simply speculation and chatter at a junior level, not military doctrine]. Had it happened, it could have been the first step in an escalating exchange leading, God help us, to MAD. The gravity of that threat, perhaps first tested during the Cuban Missile Crisis, arguably sustained the peace of the Cold War through the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties. It was called the balance of terror, but I have to say that I do not particularly recall living with such a sense and, besides, we were young. It is worth noting that this aura of threat did not prevent proxy wars, sponsored by the main protagonists, but I believe that it did prevent war in the core geographic territory of Europe, the "battleground" as between the principal potential combatants.

This paper arises from the question of what one says to a political leader such as the Prime Minister or a Head of State, when he has to make a decision concerning nuclear weapons, war and peace. Specifically, my concern arose from the current debate on the replacement of the Trident missile system with the next generation of nuclear weapons to make up the British Nuclear Deterrent. Mostly the position of people in the Church seems to be that Trident should not be replaced – Because it is deeply and horrifically violent; because the damage to the fabric of our world consequent upon its use cannot truly be imagined; because it doesn't work; because it is an evil thing; because it is not & cannot be independent; because renewal tends to undermine our stated position as signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (the NNPT); because it encourages nuclear proliferation as possession & therefore membership of the "nuclear club" may be

deemed attractive to other presently non – nuclear states, the NNPT notwithstanding. Furthermore, the weapon system is hugely expensive (necessarily so to achieve the deemed survivability that submarine launch gives) and the money could be much better spent on almost any other project to the much greater benefit of the populace, even mankind.

So when the Christian says to the Politician, “you must not renew our Nuclear Weapons Systems because, as well as the above, they are immoral and their possession, let alone their use, is contrary to God’s intentions for the world.” What does the Christian say when the Politician responds, “ That’s all very well for you to say, but I am the Politician and my primary duty as such is to defend this nation and the people in it and it is my perception that to properly fulfil that task, these weapons are necessary.” What then? Do I, who have no responsibility for that defence, have any right to try to impose my views on the one who does have that responsibility. Is my judgement better than his? Does my being a Christian (a) give my judgement extra leverage so as to “trump” his judgement? (b) give me greater wisdom than him? Is this some sort of category mistake, do the constructs of religion have no place in the field of politics, is it wrong to apply one to the other? The answer to that must be “no”, God has universal presence, universal authority.

Peace founded on terror is not true peace. Nuclear weapons do not prevent lesser wars which can be hugely destructive anyway. Deterrence really only works when there is some sort of balance between the combatants, balance of military capability, balance of civil infrastructure, of population, of economic capacity and potential and so on. Nuclear Deterrence relies on the perception that the deterring state has the capacity and the will to inflict unacceptable damage on the opponent. Whilst a state may have the capacity, the perception of will is much more difficult to gauge – so in a democratic society, the posturing of the Politician will be undermined if it can be said that there is a lack of political / popular consensus for the action. The nature and extent of the threat must also be made apparent. We used to send a gunboat to project power, now a Trident submarine slips down the Clyde, and perhaps that is sufficient menace, sufficient threat. Use of nuclear weapons starts at this point, long before any release, but only if any potential opponent thinks that the will exists to use them. Will has to be demonstrated, thus the sinking of the *General Belgrano* during the Falklands Conflict demonstrated the will of the British to maintain the exclusion zone around those islands and thus, the presence of a Royal Navy submarine within the exclusion zone constituted an effective deterrent to Argentine naval activity within that area. Deterrence, once established, is very useful, it can prevent further loss of life. A threat of nuclear war in that conflict, for example, would not have been credible because of the disproportionate nature of the threat, the imbalance of destructive capacity, force levels and so on. Nuclear deterrence would not have prevented the Falklands conflict.

How does the Politician demonstrate will in relation to the use of nuclear weapons? By detonating one. More realistically, perhaps by maintaining a system, keeping it operational at all times, having it manned by trained and professional personnel, training for its use, having it under his sole control, speaking about its role in the defence of the state when appropriate, paying for it. Arguably, all this we have in the UK, but against whom, now or in the future, is this a deterrent? If the answer is “No one”, then it is pointless at present, but if it is “We don’t know”, the prudent politician might reasonably think to keep it.

For as long as we inhabit the world that we do, the pragmatist within me says “keep them”. Yet I cannot ever imagine a situation in which they would be launched. Assuming no first strike by the UK, if these weapons are ever used against us, defence based on deterrence will have completely broken down and a response in kind will be pointless. But still we fear walking out unarmed, especially we fear the acquisition of nuclear weapons by “irrational” states, ones that don’t appear to conform to accepted norms, ones that are inimical to us and our friends.....North Korea, Iran. Nuclear deterrence is meaningless in the face of international terrorism.

So what is their point now? And anyway, this is not about what is rational, is it? Isn’t it about faith and belief in a good and generous God?

My issue is not simply with nuclear weapons, but with the use of war itself. Arguably nuclear weapons are simply at one end of the spectrum of weapons available to the Politician (ultimately it is he, of course, and not the General, who dictates the scale and direction of the war) and war as such is simply at one end of the spectrum of tools available to the Politician.

Should Christians have anything to do with war? Wars of aggression, wars of conquest are not lawful. Self defence (that includes our neighbours too) is permissible. For many centuries, the doctrine of the Just War has permitted Christians to engage in, or participate in, war. This thinking is founded on the writings of Augustine of Hippo (and others), who wrote “for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable, and that the soldiers should perform their duties on behalf of the peace and security of the community.”

(essay on *Christianity and War* by R. John Elford, from *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, Ed. Robin Gill, 2001, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; p. 178).

One might say in passing that these words could also have been written by Machiavelli or von Clausewitz and whilst the first part of that quote is rather open ended, the second part is not dissimilar from some words found in the section on Avoiding War in one of the Vatican II documents: “Those who are serving their country in the armed forces should regard themselves as servants of the people’s security and liberty. While they are fulfilling this duty they are genuinely contributing to the establishment of peace.” (*Gaudium et Spes – Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, page 95– The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, London, 2004.) . So if the Church says it is OK, what’s my beef?

It is a curious thing, the practitioners of the art of war, at least in the British Armed Forces, can display qualities which we would have no difficulty considering to be Christian: courage, discipline, self sacrifice, bravery, compassion, loyalty, and so on. Within the Armed Forces there is a powerful sense of community, of comradeship which we all miss when we leave. The bonds that go with this identity are very strong. When Francis mounted up to march against Perugia, he was drawn by the chivalric idea of the knight, of courtly conduct and courtesy. That remains an important and potent strand in the culture of the British Armed Forces today.

Just war requires certain criteria to be satisfied and, provided that these criteria are met, and continue to be met, my understanding is that most mainstream

churches would say that it is not inconsistent with the Christian faith for someone professing to be Christian, to go to war. This is the nub of my difficulty. How is it possible to profess faith in Jesus Christ and go to war? The God we worship is the creator God, the God whose Son taught us to love our neighbours and even our enemies because to do these things is pleasing to him and elevates us into a condition of likeness to him. By what authority do we derogate from these commands? Where is it given to us to qualify love? I know we do, every day in our lives most of us do that to some extent, with St. Paul we also say, “for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” (Romans 7, v19) Paul also said that we should obey the civil authority or words to that effect, but the demands of conscience must qualify his teaching.

Perhaps it is too easy (too facile?), to challenge war from a Christian / pacifist point of view. One can always say whose justice? – Victor’s justice. Even without that, how does one bring the concept of justice into that of collateral damage, for all the people so carelessly killed, the innocent, for the productive land contaminated, for the precious infrastructure, the economy of a nation, destroyed. For humanity’s ancient artefacts, evidence of who we are, stolen or grubbed out.

War too readily gets out of control, objectives are not achieved (or perhaps only at very great cost), weapons systems are brought into use which had not previously been intended (Apache helicopters in Libya). The duration of operations becomes protracted, as does the commitment required to sustain them as in Afghanistan and the War on Terror. Mission creep takes place and we lose sight of the original objective. With the best will and the best troops in the world, atrocities happen, and that will always be the case. And the innocent and the poor will suffer, always, always. But that matters only to the extent that their suffering becomes a story on world news and has an impact on the pursuit of the military/political objective. For when we, as the electorate of a sovereign state, give our assent to the use of war as a political tool, we are giving our personal affirmation to all that follows. We cannot dilute our personal share of the consequences, our personal responsibility. If our Politician leads us into war, and we somehow concur, we cannot wash our hands of the outcome.

War is about the exercise of power, it is about compelling our opponent to do our will and when we have such compliance, we may have peace & the war can be brought to a conclusion. Within the parameters of the laws of war, casualties, and damage to infrastructure, are not a consideration, except to say that they are a more or less unfortunate, consequence of the action. They are that which brings the opponent to make peace.

So whilst everyone agrees that war is not good, it is nevertheless a serviceable tool in the hands of the Politician – it can be useful in exceptional circumstances and it is not cynical to say so, merely recognition of a fact. Is that an acceptable position for a Christian? Does the Christian simply ask that all the Just War boxes are ticked and if so, who affirms the action – the press, our politicians – in light of recent controversy, is that satisfactory?

Surely that is not enough. We live in the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom which we are building & in doing so we are sharing in the work of the Holy Spirit. I cannot believe that that work includes war and all that follows from it. If we want war to end, if we want to stop adding the names of dead Service Personnel to the Remembrance Sunday Roll, along with the list of the latest conflicts, we have to actually do something about it. We are called to be a prophetic voice in our time,

and I think that that means leading people away from what is, into the future of God, of the Kingdom. And that means somehow wrestling with our natural, combative condition and our selfishness, and our inability to obey the Great Commandments, and try to drag ourselves and the rest of humanity into the time of justice and peace which we believe lies waiting for us to harvest.

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