

MORAL OBJECTIVES IN A NUCLEAR POLICY

The British Council of Churches has recently published a forty-page pamphlet entitled Christians and Atomic War, a discussion of the moral aspects of defense and disarmament in the nuclear age. A brief excerpt is reprinted below.

We must note with the gravest attention that it is at present the West that is in danger of threatening to be the first to use nuclear weapons, large or small, in certain circumstances, and this because of the situation it has allowed to arise. Just because these weapons, especially in the megaton range, represent the use of force and destruction out of all proportion to any human ends they might serve, a first duty is to work for policies that get the West out of this position with the utmost speed. The possession of megaton weapons is justified only if it is the sole practical means of inhibiting our adversaries from using them and so unleashing disaster on men; and until a system is devised to put this power out of the reach of international conflict.

Here we face our bitterest problem. In order to inhibit megaton attack, each side must have reason to believe that retaliation is a danger to be reckoned with. That means realistically that each must have the will to use these weapons in retaliation in the last resort. And although there are limits to what can be contemplated even in retaliation, to declare and define them is to run the danger of tempting the adversary to exceed them in the belief that by so doing he can secure all he desires. This appears to be a cardinal instance of a problem which cannot "be absolutely solved by any reasoning . . ." but instead a problem "to be suffered, to be lived with, to be controlled, to be mitigated, to be gradually reduced to some manageable proportions—to be completely overcome, if at all, only in the fullness of time." (Louis J. Halle in *Choice for Survival*.)

One important step in this process of control and mitigation seems clear. For the purpose of inhibiting the enemy from using his megaton weapons it is not necessary to be able to surpass him in frightfulness, but only to face him with the certainty of severe retaliation, sufficient to make the adventure too costly. It is not his destruction that Christians seek, but a restraint upon his power to destroy. If it remains technically necessary to ensure that a severe retaliation can be mounted after thermonuclear attack, this is still a smaller task than guaranteeing to match the utmost the enemy can do. To take a risk

of this kind holds out the prospect of some alleviation; a lowering of the temperature of mutual terror, a release of resources for more rational defense instruments, and so a reduction in the number of situations in which the West might have to choose between surrender and the use of H-bombs.

To take the road leading away from the West's present reliance on ultimate weapons may mean reliance for the time being on nuclear weapons in the smaller ranges, not because this is desirable but because it is an inescapable stage on the way, which may offer certain possibilities of reducing present danger. Yet however successfully the lower scales of armament were improved to reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons, the possibility remains that a conflict begun with rifles may extend in violence to the limit if one side or the other sees no other way of avoiding defeat. Again the democratic societies of the West, whose governments are responsible to whole populations, may find it more difficult than an authoritarian regime to switch on and switch off military operations. Christians in those societies can be a stabilizing influence, in the midst of fear and passion, to uphold the principle that military operations are directed to maintain the welfare of mankind and not to liquidate opponents of our will and purpose. That insight involves the insistence that the humiliation or unconditional surrender of the enemy must not be our intention, but simply the securing of his adherence to a just pattern of international behavior. So with any military operation must go clear and public definition of reasonable terms for the return to negotiation. The insistence on this may be one of the best things we can do to provide that if hostilities break out they do not quickly get out of control.

Another possibility exists to inhibit the rapid spread of hostilities from a minor exchange of fire to all-out bombardment. It is to make both military and psychological preparation to reduce the danger. If the public and the enemy know that a policy exists to limit rigidly the military response to an attack, and keep it proportionate to the threat offered, there is less chance that misunderstanding or panic will provoke an unintentional catastrophe. The existence of standing orders, however veiled their detail, aimed at confining military action as to targets and weapons as closely as possible, would if it were known, be a strong incentive to the enemy to exercise a like restraint, in view of present alternatives. And restraint is a major Christian objective.