

NUCLEAR WAR AND CATHOLIC TEACHING

The following is excerpted from an essay by E. I. Watkin, the noted British Catholic philosopher, which is published in the summer issue of CROSS CURRENTS. Mr. Watkin's essay was originally published in England by James Clarke & Co., Ltd., in the volume MORALS AND MISSILES: CATHOLIC ESSAYS ON THE PROBLEM OF WAR.

It is often argued that in the modern total war there are no longer any non-combatants. The entire citizen body on one side is, they tell us, mobilized in a united war effort against the entire citizen body on the other. Were this the case such total war, by the mere fact of refusing civilians non-combatant status, offends against the stipulation that a just war must respect the lives of civilians. But it is obviously absurd to maintain that children, the infirm and the aged are in any sense combatants. Yet they are just as liable to be slaughtered by nuclear weapons as the most combatant sections of the population, soldiers or munition workers.

In face of this evident relevance, this irrefutable condemnation, to argue that the traditional criteria of just war are no longer relevant is patently false. Never before has their relevance been so clear, their application so easy. For the non-fulfillment by any war employing nuclear weapons of three criteria of the just war is more obvious than it was or could have been in many, if not most, wars of the past. Certain evil outweighing possible good, no reasonable prospect of victory for either combatant, the employment of immoral means—these certain characters of a war fought with nuclear weapons are evident breaches of three traditional conditions of justifiable war. Any intelligent man can judge of the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of these conditions and reach a certain decision.

The criteria of a just cause and a just intention and the impossibility of achieving justice by pacific means have in most cases been more or less doubtful in their application; were they to decide the moral issue the private citizen could therefore be reasonably advised to accept the decision of his government on a matter as to which he is hardly capable of reaching a decision, though to do so admits the government's claim to be judge in its

own cause, a claim inadmissible in any legal system. But it requires no knowledge inaccessible to the private citizen to be aware of the certain violation of the three above-mentioned conditions of just war by the nuclear war for which the antagonistic power blocs are arming.

In fact, the weapons employed need not be nuclear to incur the condemnation of immoral means. Any indiscriminate massacre of civilians, as for example by our area bombing of German cities in the last war, is immoral, not to be justified by the justness of war aims. If indeed such wholesale slaughter of the innocents—and on a scale immeasurably greater than Herod's—be not immoral, morality has no meaning. No conduct can be moral or immoral. Catholics who, confronted by this obvious relevance, put forward the plea that the revolutionary conditions of modern war have rendered the traditional criteria of the just war obsolete do so for no better reason than that their obvious relevance condemns out of hand what unhappily the majority of Catholics, for patriotic motives or fear of Communist rule, are prepared to condone.

Many are deterred from opposing nuclear weapons by the fact that the Communists from evil motives encourage the agitation against them. But it should scarcely need argument that the approval and support of evil men from evil motives in a particular instance cannot render moral conduct immoral, nor can their disapproval render immoral conduct moral. If the devil himself for some end of his own should be opposed to a murder, I may not therefore commit or condone it. The attitude therefore of the Communists has no bearing on the moral issue with which we are concerned. It must be judged solely on its merits.

Many, I fear most, Catholics are persuaded that the evil of worldwide subjection to Communist governments is so great that the employment of *any* means indispensable for preventing it, even the worldwide slaughter and ruin of atomic warfare, is justifiable. Their plea, however, affirms nakedly that an end sufficiently good justifies any means whatsoever. And this contradicts flatly a fundamental moral principle inculcated by reason and approved by Catholic ethics. Moreover, it surrenders to Marxist Communism by accepting implicitly

its fundamental materialism. Those who urge it agree, however unintentionally and unconsciously with the Marxists that material force is more powerful, therefore in the last resort more real, than spiritual; the sword of atomic weapons can decisively and finally defeat the sword of the spirit.

If this were true, matter thus more powerful than spirit, it would not be easy to maintain that the ultimate and fullest reality is spirit, is God. Indeed, though they do not, like the Marxist, deny God's existence, these Christians have little faith in His action. They cannot believe that, if in obedience to His law they refuse to resist Communist aggression by flagrantly immoral means, by wholesale massacre and mutilation of the innocent, and even if He should permit the Communists to conquer the world, He can or will enable His servants to win by spiritual weapons victory over a materially triumphant foe. The historic victory of the Cross, though the center of their religion, seems to them irrelevant to the realities of the contemporary situation, something which cannot be continued, in a sense repeated, today. They cannot be persuaded that the victory of faith, which overcomes the world, can overcome the Communist world.

May it not be that God is inviting us to meet and defeat the challenge of modern materialism and confident secularism in all its forms, not only Marxist, by a supreme act of faith in His Omnipotence which renounces methods of warfare conscience plainly condemns?

That the Pope has not forbidden and, for powerful reasons, in all probability will not forbid Catholics to cooperate in any way with nuclear warfare or participate in any war which employs it is in truth a scandal, a stumbling block. But it is the scandal not of the Papacy but of an overwhelming Catholic majority too completely enthralled by a false patriotism or at best lacking in

faith or fortitude to obey the prohibition. In any case how illogical are the non-Catholic critics who condemn Catholics for servile obedience to the commands of ecclesiastical authority and the Pope for not issuing a command which would be met by disobedience on a colossal scale.

Are Catholics therefore left without guidance on this urgent moral issue of nuclear war? Certainly not. As I have sought to show, canons of just war, doubly entrenched in reason and ecclesiastical tradition, unequivocally condemn all wars involving—as nuclear warfare must—massacre of the innocents. If Catholics will not obey them, they are unlikely to obey a Papal prohibition. Those Catholics therefore—and thank God, as the appalling efficacy of nuclear weapons progressively and rapidly develops, their numbers are increasing—who are convinced that it is under any circumstances utterly immoral to participate in any way in the preparation, still less in the employment, of such weapons or in any war which employs them have no excuse for refusing to implement their conviction in the fact that no Papal decree has forbidden them to employ, prepare or cooperate with such warfare. For they possess the evident support of principles traditional in the Catholic schools, principles moreover which are determined by a dispassionate use of reason unclouded and undeflected by the emotions aroused by nationalism or by particular sympathies, antipathies or interests.

A war likely to produce more evil than the good to be achieved by victory—unjustifiable.

A war without prospect of victory for the just combatant, because nuclear warfare has made victory impossible for either—unjustifiable.

A war in which immoral methods are employed—unjustifiable.

No directives could be clearer, more cogent than these. It is for us to obey them.

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