

# THERMONUCLEAR WAR AND THE CHRISTIAN

## Does Traditional Moral Theory Allow a Pre-emptive First Strike?

*Robert P. Mohan, S.S.*

The very title of this article seems to suggest a fundamental and irrevocable contradiction that exists between the harsh realities of contemporary warfare and the Christian way of life, built upon the primacy of love. Contemporary warfare has been determined by military necessity and weapons technology, and political policy and theory have had to a large degree to accommodate themselves to the harsh exigencies of twentieth-century survival.

There are two sentences which seem to suggest themselves in this discussion. One is from the first chapter of the gospel of Saint John: "In the beginning was the *logos*." The second is from Goethe: "In the beginning was the deed."

The contemporary world has accepted the primacy of the deed, not the primacy of the *logos*. Plato would probably call such a state of affairs anastrophe, an inversion of values—and so must the Christian moralist. We either live as we believe, or begin to believe as we live, and the Christian can never accept the latter alternative; and yet it is the peculiar mission of the Christian always to be out of step with his time. He must deal here with a problem that represents not the evolution of moral theory, but the evolution of military technique.

A Christian moralist may be a realist to the extent to which he has a viable moral theory that deals with actually existent situations—and certainly the relatively ineffectual contribution by Catholic moralists to the public philosophy is based, I believe, on technological ignorance rather than on unwillingness to face his world. The moralist who concerns himself with non-existent situations can be nothing more than an ineffectual ethical archaologist.

But the Christian moralist quite obviously cannot accommodate the *logos* to the deed if by such accommodation we mean the abandonment of the primacy of principle over deed. He cannot possibly fashion moral theory out of military expediency; and yet he must face the situation that military technology and political development have created. The

---

This article is adapted from an address which Father Mohan delivered at the Second Annual Conference on Christian Political and Social Thought held earlier this year at Georgetown University.

moralist, moreover, must understand the potentiality of that technology. His thought must not be dictated by weapons technology nor by national policy, although his thought must be cognizant of the reality in both orders. The "My-country-right-or-wrong" approach, supposedly a pure distillation of American nationalism, is a perversion rather than a reflection of patriotism, if by it we mean that the justice of our country's cause will not determine the ardor with which we support that cause. If we Americans are erroneous in judgment or perverse of will, we are just as wrong or as evil as anybody else. The moralist must insist with Christopher Dawson: "As soon as men decide that all means are permitted to fight an evil, then their good becomes indistinguishable from the evil that they are set out to destroy."

How does the Christian as a matter of fact meet this hostility between what he believes as a Christian and what he might be expected to do as a citizen-soldier in nuclear warfare? He can, of course, be either an enthusiastic pragmatist who feels that military scruple admits of no moral scruple, or a nuclear pacifist for whom all types of atomic war are unquestionably evil. I believe both solutions to be unacceptable to the Christian.

In growing numbers the pacifist counsels unilateral disarmament, depending upon a vague Gandhi-like resistance by which to conquer evil—although how evil is to be conquered is highly dubious. Moreover, to my knowledge Gandhi never adopted the theory of Akimsa that prohibited proportionate forceful resistance to evil. In the recent novel, *Advise and Consent*, one of the politicians dramatically proclaims that he would rather crawl on his knees to Moscow than be incinerated in an atomic holocaust. Philip Toynbee, Lord Russell, and Kenneth Tynan may not agree with the felicity of expression, but they would subscribe to the sentiment of the "Better-Red-than-dead" school. The pacifist protests vigorously that his is not an abject defeatism, that there is an alternative, but when pressed as to the nature of this alternative suggests only the corporate beneficent example of abstention from evil, from which a policy might be constructed.

It requires no profound knowledge of Soviet the-

ory and practice to see at once the high desirability and utter impracticality of such a solution. As much as we all recognize the desirability of peace and, conversely, the horror and the destruction of thermonuclear war—however limited—unilateral American disarmament in today's world would be an act of moral irresponsibility. Relevant moral theory, like politics, must be the art of the possible, and if it is not possible, it is not meaningful. The citizen does not have the privilege of defending his nation against unjust aggression; he has a moral obligation to do so. To practice the evangelical counsels is a high way of life for a man, if such practice does not run counter to his *de facto* obligations in justice. True patriotism, far from being emotional effervescence, is rooted in justice itself. Here we are, I will concede, at a moral impasse. What the nuclear pacifist considers a moral imperative, I consider in the light of accommodated traditional theory to be a sin against justice. I might add at this point that if unilateral disarmament is wrong, mutual disarmament, however effectively policed, is by no means a total answer to the war of conflicting ideology. Mutual disarmament merely removes one factor from a complex weapons spectrum.

•

If the pacifist's solution is untenable, there remains only the possibility of accepting a morally permissible kind of limited-war theory such as has been suggested by General James Gavin, Paul Nitze, Henry Kissinger, Raymond Aron, and the late Thomas E. Murray. This is not to suggest that limited war means the same to all people. The limitation involved may refer to geographical area, type of targets, the number of participating nations, the specific military objectives to be sought or, perhaps most important, the kind of weapon to be employed.

As I have said, I am not considering here the possibility that any Christian moralist would seriously attempt to justify an all-out, no-holds-barred, thermonuclear war, although it is by no means irrelevant to consider the possibility of a limited conflict developing into such a war.

The indiscriminate slaughter of thousands of civilians, be these Americans or Russians, would not be unthinkable, but it would be immoral. I mention this word "unthinkable" here because it has been used so often—even by people who should know better—to describe atomic warfare. The psychological reluctance to consider the appalling destruction of nuclear warfare dismisses neither its possibility nor the obligation of every citizen in this nation of considering such an eventuality. One may indeed dis-

agree, for instance, with Professor Kahn on his conclusions, but it is strange to find so many people objecting to his unemotional discussion of appalling destruction. There is a difference between twenty million and forty million dead, and to cite the fact is not to imply an irreverence for life, as if the consideration itself constituted a species of blasphemy. To try to fit the frightful possibility into an intelligible context is neither to suggest the feasibility of such warfare, nor is it to assume a cavalier and suicidal militarism.

There would seem to remain two essential points which demand discussion. Is limited war for the Christian morally possible and militarily feasible? It is not my intention nor competence to discuss military feasibility, although such feasibility will indeed be relevant to moral permissibility.

The second question is: Does traditional Catholic theory have to be substantially modified to accept the limited war theory? We have here a very interesting situation, because it is not merely a question of considering the morality of what is militarily probable, but the military and political feasibility of what is morally justifiable. As others have commented, as the destructive potential of weapons increases, discrimination in warfare tends to decrease. Limited warfare, at first glance, then would seem to be progressively impossible. Does not the area affected even by tactical use of thermonuclear weapons of megaton capacity exceed the destruction caused by strategic bombing that many found so objectionable in the last war?

To talk meaningfully of the principle of the double effect is to remember the element of proportionality by which evil must be incidental to the accomplished good. The principle of the double effect is not as Dr. Gordon Zahn calls it, a "principle which is fast becoming a moral slide rule by which almost any act of war can be justified." But it is unquestionably true that the principle of the double effect cannot be applied to condone mass murder when the destruction of military targets is rather incidental to the destruction of populated areas. An appeal to the principle of the double effect to justify mass destruction can indeed be an appeal to the ridiculous.

•

I am not, however, prepared to agree with others who say that most of the enemy's non-combatants are cooperating in aggression and are therefore a legitimate object of violent repression. Neither would I agree that to be destroyed the city of the unjust aggressor would have to be specifically a large industrial or military complex.

Too stringent an interpretation of limited warfare unnecessarily limits the defender to a mode of defense which is equivalent to capitulation. Faced with this dilemma many would agree with Fr. John Ford who stated categorically that if all-out war *were* the alternative, "I would consider that we had arrived at the point where absolute moral imperatives were at stake, and that the followers of Christ should abandon themselves to Divine Providence rather than forsake these imperatives."

But have we arrived at such a point if we take measures to spare the civilian population while destroying Soviet property—even such property as is not directly connected with military effort? The immorality of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the destruction of innocent people, not the destruction of Japanese property. We are all familiar, of course with the argument that such bombing shortened the war, and we are inclined to have an emotional sympathy with any measure capable of shortening prolonged fighting. The point I should like to make is that I think the cities in question could have been destroyed had the civilian population been given the notice and time to evacuate.

It may be objected that it is militarily naive for us to name specific cities to be destroyed—but is it? Any reasonably accurate intelligence service can ascertain the chief sources of industrial, cultural, or military strength of a potential enemy power. It is improbable that the citizens of Winslow, Arizona, or Snohomish, Washington, fear a missile attack as much as the citizens of Detroit, New York, or Washington. It may be that an actual potential aggressor, anticipating our moral scruples, would forbid citizens to evacuate a given city. But in the practical order, our enemy is not only uninhibited by moral conviction, but is probably cynical enough to suspect, and not without cause, that we will not be inhibited by moral conviction either.

The evacuation of a city in time of war, of course, brings enormous hardships to those evacuated, but these hardships can hardly be considered equivalent to unquestionable destruction within the confines of a large population center under thermonuclear attack. We have no mandate to put ourselves out of existence by limiting ourselves to the extinction of the Russian soldier, while our adversary concerns himself with the extinction of our cities and civilians. While I would agree with Paul Ramsey that we must exclude a policy of counter-people retaliation, I do feel that the policy of counter-force must be expanded to include an aggressor nation's property.

A limited war theory that would limit us to the destruction of military personnel and military prop-

erty would place us in a position where our security and survival would be placed in serious jeopardy. The late Thomas E. Murray spoke of the balance between morality and security as the forgotten equation.

We must not forget to be vigilant against the sacrifice of morality to achieve security, but we are similarly obliged to be solicitous for security, if what we say with moral reference to that security is to mean anything. The day may come when the alternatives may be such that the Christian has to forsake security, but I do not believe that that hour has as yet come. The two scorpions in that bottle (as the great powers have been described) may indeed destroy each other or they may work out for the first time in history a precarious but effective deterrence. Oddly enough, this deterrence is based not on mutual power but on mutual vulnerability.

This indeed is a highly precarious deterrence, but it may prove to be an effective one. When easy choices do not exist, we have no alternative but to choose among the difficult ones.

I am also quite reluctant to write off the value of the deterrence effected by military power, although like any Christian I wish that armaments were not necessary; but mere velleity must yield here to exigent choice and thermonuclear weapons are among the unpleasant facts of life. We have heard much about the essential inefficacy of adequate weaponry as a deterrent. We are told that deterrence has never worked and that inevitably we will use instruments of violence if we have instruments of violence in our possession. I find these arguments pessimistically deterministic and quite unconvincing, for the simple reason that we are dealing here with an incalculable.

We perhaps can count the failures of our policy of deterrence, but we cannot count the triumphs. No one except the potential aggressor himself can say how often he has been deterred by the power of his intended victim. Only the aggressor can say how effective the military preparedness of his enemy has been in restricting the aggressor's attacks. It seems much more realistic to consider weakness a greater invitation to aggression than strength.

We are dealing today with an enemy who understands well the idiom of power and who has inadvertently become bourgeois enough to prevent the work of his people from being destroyed.

It is for the political scientist to tell us how our adversary moves into every power vacuum, how cleverly, as in the case of Cuba, he uses the absence of power to provoke the powerful—knowing that un-

less he is outrageously excessive, he will be secure in his weakness. This is an inverted power argument, but it is most effective. Power has many forms and Communism understands them.

The specter that haunts the dreams of the limited war theorist, however, will continue to be the possibility of a confrontation by an adversary who uses weapons the Christian may not use in a manner in which the Christian may not morally use them. The Christian remembers that Aquinas, Vitoria, and Suarez demand that the benefits of strife must not be outweighed by the havoc that strife will bring, and he sees that the future may bring a weapon which, in a moment or in a month, will make this earth a wasteland. Perhaps he thinks of some kind of a super cobalt bomb which the late Professor Einstein thought quite capable of eventually destroying all life on earth or a toxin similar to botulinus which we are told is unimaginably virulent. We may indeed be edging forward toward the ultimate weapon. We may indeed witness in the near future a new power breakthrough, and although the limited war theorist may console himself in the fact that it may be licit to make a weapon that it is not licit to use, he finds little comfort that the possibility of its use may not in some future year become the dreadful reality.

The difficulties of the limited war theory are, quite obviously, great. But, it seems to me, the difficulties of the nuclear pacifist and the secular pragmatist are insoluble.

There remains the question of traditional moral theory and its modification in today's world. In its essentials that theory has well been outlined by Alfred Vanderpol, John K. Ryan, John C. Ford, Francis Connell, John Courtney Murray, and Joseph C. McKenna.

When I speak of traditional doctrine, I am thinking basically of Saint Thomas Aquinas' well known treatment in the fortieth question of the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologica*, and of the consequent contributions of Vitoria, Suarez, Cajetan, Molina, Banez, Bellarmine, Sylvester, and deLugo.

This teaching in its essence asserts, first of all, that the warring nation must have a right intention; that war must be declared by legitimate authority; that the action, be it punitive, or preventive, be judged in the light of actual provocation; and that war must be the last resort after preliminary means of arbitration and negotiation have been exhausted. A pragmatic note is added to traditional theory in the fact that war is not permitted if it is pointless, i. e., the combatant must be subjectively certain not only of the justice of his fighting, but of its efficacy. The

good to be entailed must exceed the evil that the enterprise involves, and I think we must emphasize that spiritual values must be considered in this equation that involves material destruction.

Perhaps the most popular restriction to the secular pragmatist is the universally held traditional principle that the end does not justify the means. I have already referred to the principle of the double effect which recognizes the complexity of human action from which effects, both good and evil, may emanate. But if the means employed are evil, they cannot be justified on the grounds that the end which they serve is good.

Such, in brief, is traditional theory. It has, of course, never been universally accepted and it has increasingly been subjected to criticism both within and without the scholastic tradition as outmoded and irrelevant. Dr. Zahn specifically condemns it for four reasons: first, as relying on abstract categories and distinctions no longer applicable; secondly, as an anachronistic formulation of Caesar-God, citizen-ruler relationships; thirdly, for mitigating moral theory out of a distorted respect of prudence; and fourthly, for failure to alert the Christian to his obligation.

Other objections are these: (1) The existence of an effective international organization has both limited national sovereignty and rendered war obsolete as an instrument of national policy; (2) Just proportion exists only theoretically in an age when the means employed entail disproportionate destruction; (3) Political complexity and security secrecy render individual accurate moral judgment impossible.

It is rather obvious that the United Nations in its present stage of development cannot be considered an effective international organization capable of rendering war obsolete. With regard to the second objection, one can disregard the element of proportion only if a positivistic norm of material destruction is given precedence over the spiritual wasteland that would exist in a Communist-dominated world. Thirdly, it is by no means true in this age of communication that the individual cannot or should not assume a responsibility of making an objective judgment on the morality of the cause. After the Cuban fiasco, it seems rather dubious that military experts and planners are as well informed as we would like to think they are.

Traditional theory has certainly been modified by the pronouncements of Pius XII who scores aggressive war as a "sin, offense, and outrage against the majesty of God." He rejected, for example, the whole concept of vindictive justice which permeated tra-

ditional theory and which would justify punishment and redress of wrong. He seemed increasingly convinced of the inefficacy of war as an instrument of national policy because of the increased violence that thermonuclear weapons inevitably involve. In other words, the punitive and therapeutic function of warfare previously defended in Catholic theory would now be inadmissible. Aggressive war, just or unjust, is proscribed. But Pius XII did recognize the legitimacy of self-defense:

"When all the possible stages of negotiations and mediation are by-passed, and when the threat is made to use atomic arms to obtain concrete demands, whether these are justified or not, it becomes clear that in present circumstances there may come into existence in a nation a situation in which all hope of averting war becomes vain. In this situation a war of efficacious self-defense against unjust attack, which is undertaken with hope of success, cannot be considered illicit."

It is perfectly clear that the Holy Father prohibits uncontrolled power weapons that result in indiscriminate annihilation, but it is interesting to note that he speaks of *efficacious* self-defense. May we not assume then that in using the expression "efficacious self-defense" in the year 1956 he is using the term in a modern context?

Well can we share Father Murray's misgivings about the "code-of-the-west" approach to international policy by which we insist we will never shoot first. Does defense in a modern context mean that we have to sustain a blow before we can retaliate? Must I wait for the enemy who stalks me to take a free shot before I can defend myself against the unjust aggression which I am reasonably certain will come? I admit that we are on dangerous ground here and "overt manifestation" is a vague expression with which to describe the provocation that would justify pre-emptive military action. But I feel such pre-emptive action or "anticipatory retaliation" as Professor Einstein has called it, justified.

It may be objected: Is this not advocacy of preventive war? I would prefer to say pre-emptive rather than preventive, adopting the distinction which uses pre-emptive to describe a proximate or immediate threat, and preventive to refer to unjustified aggressive action designed to remove a remote threat. But I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that I think such pre-emptive action might, in a concrete situation, be justified, and consider it utterly folly for our government to keep insisting that under no circumstances will we strike the first blow.

If I know my attacker has begun to stalk me unjustly for the purpose of destroying me, I think I am

justified in taking the first shot—although other factors, such as my inept marksmanship, may make it prudent for me to abstain from what it may be morally permissible for me to do.

I should like to make a final observation on the element of proportion in traditional theory.

To those who see American society in terms of Luther's *natura vitiosa*, the world of the West is hardly closer to God than the world of Soviet Communism. There is, consequently, a temptation to consider capitulation with an attempt at consequent conversion as preferable to extinction at the hands of the Soviets. It is, of course, true that one cannot identify the democracy-Communism conflict in oversimplified terms of God and anti-God. There are moral ambiguities involved. But as one who considers capitulation to Communism equivalent to extinction, I would prefer smashed buildings and smashed skulls to a Soviet world without God and freedom. We would all do well to forget the romantic notions of a Church of Silence, heroically administering the sacraments behind the iron and bamboo curtains. It is closer to the truth to recognize the brutal facts that the Church, its priests, and its catechists have been systematically and efficiently exterminated in lands where Communism has triumphed—even if it is tactically advisable for the Soviets to make concessions, as they do in Poland. I do not consider such a land, however intact its buildings, as preferable to widespread destruction.

Perhaps men will not permanently sustain tyranny, but wishful thinking about some supposititious future is a poor foundation for policy, either moral or political.

Again, we are told to remember the Providence of God and the comparative inefficacy of all human striving. But it is well to remember, too, that within the periphery of Providence is included the natural power that is given to men to contribute to their destiny. It is God's will that we be participants, not mere spectators, in the great drama of history.

And, finally, it may be asked how anyone can dare speak so confidently on a subject involving the lives and fortunes of so many people. But I should like to ask the counter-question: In a matter of such importance, however limited our talents, can we afford not to speak? The late Morris Cohen was once chided by his students because he did not supplement his rather negative critique with a positive suggestion. He remarked rather drily: "It is not recorded that Hercules did anything but clean out the Augean stables."