DIALOGUE AND NUCLEAR CONFLICT

How Can We Accept the Burden and Terror of Our Time?

Gibson Winter

Consideration of moral responsibility in nuclear combat has been caught between stupefied horror at the enormity of such conflict and largely hysterical protests by nuclear pacifists. Meanwhile, the large body of citizenry who entertain moderate views have found it difficult to formulate their feelings in a coherent way. Moreover, the technical discussions of nuclear combat, counter-city warfare, overkill, etc. have overshadowed moral reflection—particularly because technical discussion sustains an aura of secrecy. (I would like to add, however, that I am indebted to the reflections of Paul Ramsey, John Bennett, Kenneth Thompson and others who have carried on serious moral reflection in and through these technical discussions.)

Undaunted by this situation, these present reflections touch the basic mode of thought in which the nuclear conflict can be considered in moral and spiritual terms without overlooking ever-present levels of conflict. The premise is that the Cuban crisis of 1962 dramatized an equality of world powers which had been implicitly present. This equality of destructive power brings international relationships within the framework of dialogue, thus posing the possibility of new levels of moral reflection. So long as nations are thought of as discrete entities following their interests and occasionally bombarding one another in conflict, nuclear power provides an irrational element which reduces these power struggles to sheer insanity. However, a nuclear stalemate embraces the nations in a common community of interest and humanity—an equality which is the essential character of dialogue. This equality has a negative form, co-existence or co-extinction, but it also frames a common concern for continuity of the dialogue.

The equality of nuclear power creates an apocalyptic umbrella for the continuing dialogue; this is, to be sure, a new kind of apocalyptic, since it is mediated by nuclear arms, a human agency, and effects a judgment which has no clear relationship to the manifestation of the divine sovereignty. The redemptive character of the new apocalyptic is, thus, highly ambiguous. Nevertheless, the discontinuity with traditional apocalyptic should not be exaggerated. Certainly the ambiguous character of the judgment places a special burden upon the quality of the human actions in the dialogue, since the potential destructiveness of broken dialogue gives a new moral quality to the struggle to continue the dialogue. In this sense, the new apocalyptic has an historical seriousness which was often obscured in the traditional apocalyptic.

The dialogue among the nations is now set against a backdrop of life and death, blessing and curse—a final judgment impinges at every moment of the dialogue, calling for recognition of the right to be. We are placed before life and death, blessing and curse. We are called to choose life and not death, a future in justice and community rather than annihilation. We are much nearer to the Deuteronomist than to Daniel, for we see history now as the sphere of choice in which God's presence is disclosed; the transcendent apocalyptic is once again historicized, and the Deuteronomist speaks to us:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live..."

Deut. 30.19

Our moral problem today is how we choose life in the dialogue of humanity. The nuclear umbrella creates the necessity for openness, recognition, dialogue and ultimately community. This is the choice which faces us in the dialogue among the nations—openness to continue the dialogue or refusal of dialogue and destruction. The task of preserving life is one of continuing the dialogue; this is the preservative role of government today—to remain open to dialogue and yet resolute against the invasion of the integrity of the people. Openness without resolution is mere weakness—it surrenders the life which it intends to preserve. Resolution without openness is closure to the realistic demands of the other party—

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it endangers the life which it purports to sustain by turning dialogue into monologue.

The continuity of the dialogue, the preservation of life, calls for openness and resolution; this is the impossible burden of our time—choosing life by entering a dialogue which bears the constant threat of death. This is indeed the work of faith in an apocalyptic age: the courage to be resolute against undue claims backed by nuclear blackmail; the confidence to be open to the aspirations and questions of other nations despite our fear of admitting any weakness in our own fabric. Faith is the gift of continuing dialogue amidst our deepest fears; faith risks openness and casts out the fear that breaks resolution.

- Many difficulties obscure this fundamental role of faith in the dialogue of the nations; in fact, misunderstanding of these difficulties can easily lead to the notion that faith is a sanction for a nuclear holocaust. How can man possess such destructive power without being possessed by it? If we are to choose life in line with the word of the Deuteronomist, does this mean that we should dispose of the weapons, disarm unilaterally and let fate take its course? This is a view held by Christian pacifism and shared by humanistic pacifism. To choose life becomes choosing a moral norm or a transcendent hope—a refusal to bear the responsibility for such power. The nuclear pacifist rejects the possibility that man can assume responsibility in history for such power. History is shrugged aside before the horror of such a misuse of human capacities.

This view has the obvious appeal of a seeming moral clarity and the obvious difficulty of ignoring the actualities of man's life in history. The choice between life and death is raised to higher magnitudes by the nuclear terror, but this choice is the universal meaning of every human encounter. We would all like to be rid of these bombs, rid of this grave responsibility, but to choose life is not to disown man's capacities for the sake of a transcendent ideal of moral perfection. To choose life is to accept the burden and terror of history in a particular age with full recognition of its limitations and ambiguities; we have no ideal history of timeless norms but only this history with our knowledge of nuclear power. We can deny our history, but we can have no other. Faith is the courage to live in this history amidst the fear of our capacities for destruction.

The other voice in our present difficulty is the clamor for use of our nuclear power in order to ob-literate our enemies—to put an end to the dialogue before it puts an end to us. If the pacifist fears our destructive inclinations, the proponents of preventive war fear domination by others. Both positions, however, foreclose historical responsibility—the pacifist by denying man's obligation to choose life in the midst of his power to destroy, proponents of first-strike by denying man's obligation to respect life despite its potential threats. We can no more be rid of our enemies than we can dispose of our weapons and knowledge; such easy solutions only transfer our responsibilities to another generation. To choose life is to live in the history we are given with a profound respect for human life. This obligation precludes the possibility of our initiating the use of nuclear weapons in conflict with other nations. Respect for life imposes the weightiest burden against initiation of nuclear war. To choose life in a nuclear age means to continue the dialogue to the last hour—to continue resolutely and, hoping against hope, to remain open to the future and its possibilities.

- Resolution in bearing the burden of nuclear power and openness to the possibility of dialogue still leaves us before the most difficult problem in the use of nuclear power. Retaliatory power sets the boundaries within which dialogue continues and aggression is limited, and yet retaliation after a destructive attack becomes simply vengeance or sheer destruction. How can a Christian understanding of history give sanction to a world strategy built upon retaliation? (These matters should be much more widely discussed in our community than they are at present, even though the final decision must rest in the hands of the executive. The burden of this final decision should be shared by a moral consensus, even though the responsibility has ultimately to be borne by the one who makes that decision.) No matter how carefully one grades the stages of nuclear conflict, limiting the destructiveness at each stage and opening the way for negotiation, there remains the possibility of intentional or unintentional destruction on a mass scale and corresponding retaliation. What does it mean to choose life in this moment?

Here we encounter the depth of the work of faith in the continuing dialogue. In this moment of destruction, we as a people can pray for the courage to choose life for others and forego retaliation. When the use of nuclear power no longer preserves dialogue and therefore life, nuclear power ceases to be an instrument of man's strategy for man and be-
comes the demonic possession of man by his own technology. The dialogue sets the boundaries of any use of force. The paradox of our position is that this limitation on retaliation cannot be prescribed, legislated or imposed on the executive, since the possibility of retaliation is the power which restrains aggression. However, this fact deepens the responsibility of our people to support the executive’s restraint in this final moment—choosing life for others at the cost of our own life. To choose life in the moment of final opposition, of termination of dialogue, is to choose the life of others over our own—this is the message of the Cross.

However little we as Christian people may understand and appropriate this message in our day-by-day encounters or our reflections on the dialogue among the nations, this is the true work of love in a world of alienation. As the work of love, this possibility can never be a human strategy but only a human hope. To bear the burden of nuclear weapons without this possibility is to assume the destructive power of judgment without hope of redemption—to put ourselves in the position of choosing death for those who have chosen our death. Our Christian hope is that seriousness about history and respect for life may find their final testimony in the moment of retaliation, if it must come, in the choice of life and blessing.

The concept of dialogue is not introduced as trickery to conceal the deep moral crisis of our world. Dialogue is a term which expresses the depth of the humanity at stake in our world relations. Possibilities of disruptive conflict are always present in dialogue, and they are being multiplied as knowledge of nuclear weaponry spreads. In view of these dire possibilities, bans on testing, limitation of weapons, arrangements for inspection and consideration of limitations on use of nuclear weapons have to be discussed with utmost seriousness. Nevertheless, how we think about problems can deepen and strengthen our capacity to cope with them. We need to think in moral and human terms as well as tactically. The term dialogue is interjected into this discussion only to this end. Equality of humanity is the spiritual reality which underlies the dialogue among the nations; the nuclear umbrella provides a negative, external expression of this fundamental humanity and equality. Our moral reflection on the limits and possibilities of human community have to be set in the full richness of this human framework if we are to exercise our responsibilities.

Sir: It is good to have the late Pope “place the United Nations squarely in the main stream of the movement toward world community” (worldview, June, 1963). This is a more positive endorsement than many Protestant leaders have made. But the Pope might have gone further yet, had he stressed one fact, namely, that without the missionary movement, both Catholic and Protestant, there would have been no United Nations!

There are at least four basic ideas in the U.N. that came out of Christianity, that is, out of Christianity as taught in the missionary schools and colleges of the Orient and Africa. These are (1) Direction—no, rather union with a sense of direction, of going somewhere. A direction in history, a destiny, derives from the Old Testament; but there is no such thing in the cyclic cultures of Oriental nations, where life is subject to fate or else is simply illusion (Buddhist mata). (2) Secondly, no union without a Common direction, lest the units pull against each other. Again, brotherhood, internationalism, is Christian. (The Christ can tell us who our brothers are.) The Oriental religions are exclusive, isolationist, or, as with Buddhism, individualistic. (3) A third basic idea is that of the rights of man, which we are happy that the Pope stressed, “hoping for the day to come when man’s rights shall be effectively guarded.” No rights, however, if there are no “persons,” no selves; and again with the ancient cultures of the Orient, there is no clear conception of a person, much less of the “sacredness of personality” or even of a self. (4) Lastly there is the idea of hope. No progress without hope of attainment. Love and faith are not absent from the non-Christian religions, but, hope, like destiny, is purely Judeo-Christian, and for the same reason: the historic cycles give no hint of a future different from the past. Says Emil Bruner, "It was by Christianity that men were taught to hope, that is, to look to the future for the meaning of life.”

Of course now in 1963 and even in 1945 when the U.N. was organized, the Oriental leaders (like U Thant or Ayub Khan) talked as if these basic ideas were their own, as indeed they are, so well has our Christian missionary work been done. Here readymade, then, are some of those universal ideas the Supreme Pontiff was calling for! RODERICK SCOTT