

THE MORALITY OF THERMONUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Can We Resolve the Conflict between Absolute Principle and Strategic Necessity?

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During last year's Military Procurement Authorization Hearings, a Senator requested that a speech relating current defense policy to the Christian just war doctrine be inserted into the record. He was quick to note, however, that he agreed only with some of the speaker's views on defense policy, not with the moral principles outlined: "You won't find them in any doctrine in any church; in fact, the Catholic Church justifies the use of force to protect life and property." Another Senator pointed out that the speech included the statement, "According to Christian doctrine the use of force to oppress evil can be justifiable under certain conditions," and added the caution: "I would hope the implication is not that under certain other conditions it would be wrong to resist evil."

The potentially scandalous but usually ignored significance of the just war doctrine for our age of total war is that it does in fact set definite, morally unbreakable limits to a just use of force so that "under certain conditions it would be wrong to resist evil." The doctrine holds that against even the most unscrupulous enemy a defense must not be made through morally evil means. Nor can one engage justly in a defense which would result in a disproportionate amount of evil. As Pope Pius XII, one of the foremost modern theorists of the doctrine, put it in 1954: "When the damages caused by war are not comparable to those of 'tolerated injustice,' one may have a duty to 'suffer the injustice.'" The just war is a limited conflict by definition. If it is thought that national defense must exceed those limits in order to be successful, then one may have a duty to suffer the injustice.

But the precise nature of the limits imposed by the just war doctrine have not always been well defined, especially with regard to nuclear war. Almost all moralists are agreed on the general principle that the doctrine does establish certain limits of defense, and that nuclear war to be just must conform to them. The case for a "just nuclear war" is argued by scaling down the prospective conflict to the mor-

al theory's limits, not by opening up the theory so that it has no limits. Total, indiscriminate warfare was condemned by Pius in the address quoted above. Speaking to the delegates of the World Medical Association he said at that time: "When putting this method [ABC warfare] to use involves such an extension of the evil that it entirely escapes from the control of man, its use must be rejected as immoral. Here there would no longer be a question of 'defense' against injustice or a necessary 'safeguarding' of legitimate possessions, but the pure and simple annihilation of all human life within the radius of action. This is not permitted for any reason whatsoever."

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The Pope was here reaffirming the classic just war distinction between combatant and non-combatant and the obligation to preserve the rights of the innocent, rights obviously transgressed by "the pure and simple annihilation of all human life within the radius of action." Since few Protestant theologians would challenge the substance of Pius' condemnation, the methods of total war have been effectively ruled out of the Christian frame of reference.

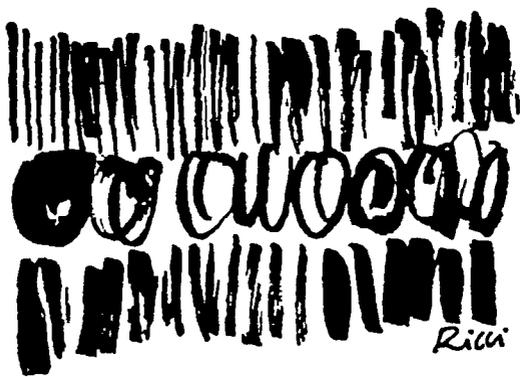
Short of total war, an act of such evident injustice that a formal condemnation is almost unnecessary, the problem of specifying just limits remains. The root principle at stake in all such efforts is that one is never permitted to seek the death of an innocent non-combatant. The willful killing of the innocent is murder, in war as well as in peace. The first theologian to apply this principle with any thoroughness to the indiscriminate bombing of World War II was the Jesuit, John C. Ford, in "The Morality of Obliteration Bombing" (*Theological Studies*, 1944). His pioneer effort remains basic to any discussion today of the morality of nuclear bombing and deterrence.

Father Ford began by establishing beyond reasonable doubt the contemporary validity of the distinction between combatant and non-combatant. A combatant is defined by his close participation in the waging of war, and despite propaganda and

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common assumptions to the contrary, a careful survey of the occupations in any modern, wartime state is enough to show that at least three-quarters of the population is innocent of such participation and enjoys a natural-law right of immunity from violent repression.

The second part of his article consisted in a weighing of the claim that the obliteration bombing of German cities could be justified by the principle of double effect, with the killing of the predominant non-combatant population serving as an unintended, incidental effect. His argument was in two steps: that obliteration bombing in fact clearly included the *direct intent to kill the innocent*; that, even if it could be considered indirect, the killing would be unjustifiable for *lack of a proportionate reason*. Basic to the first step was the point that it is not psychologically possible to bomb predominantly civilian targets and, at the same time, to withhold the intention of killing the innocent. Basic to the second step was the point that an evil which is definite,



widespread, certain, and immediate (the destruction of the lives and property of the innocent) cannot be compensated for by a problematical, speculative, future good (the winning or shortening of the war).

This limitation of means established by Ford in terms of World War II—the moral immunity of civilian areas from massive bombing—has been brought up to date by his more recent analysis of hydrogen bombing (*Theology Digest*, 1957). By applying the principles of his earlier article to the hydrogen bombing of cities he reaches the conclusion that such bombing is again a massive violation of the rights of the innocent and adds that “if this kind of warfare were once conceded by moralists to be legitimate, it would mean the practical abandonment of any distinction between innocent noncombatants and guilty aggressors—that fundamental distinction which the Catholic Church has taught for centuries. We would be adopting, in practice at least, the immorality of total war.”

This finding seems consistent with the teaching of Pius XII and has been confirmed by the work of other moralists. One of England’s best-known Catholic theologians, Dr. L. L. McReavy, made the statement in 1958 that “in no circumstances, not even to save the Western world from being swamped by atheistic communism, will it ever be lawful to explode indiscriminate nuclear weapons of the major type on predominantly civilian centers of population.” In his Easter sermon of the same year, Cardinal Godfrey affirmed this principle in almost exactly the same words. And in 1962 the English philosopher, Father Anthony Kenny, noted that moral theologians in that country had reached agreement with the principle thus stated by McReavy and the Cardinal.

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If such agreement in principle is not so clearly evident among American Catholics, the foremost reason would have to be that few of them have even shown any interest in the problem. With a few exceptions like Fathers Ford and Francis J. Connell, who also ruled out anti-population H-bombs, the development of a beginning “nuclear theology” has been the achievement of the English. (One other major exception to American Catholic apathy, John Courtney Murray, S.J., has unfortunately never brought his principles close enough to nuclear war to deliver a judgment on city-destroying.) But even without much theological prompting, a few concerned policy analysts like John Moriarty and James Dougherty have acknowledged the morally binding nature of a no-city limit.

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Among Protestant moralists the interest has been greater and a similar consensus has been gradually evolving. Dr. John C. Bennet in his volume, *Nuclear Weapons and the Conflict of Conscience*, denied that “we could ever justify the use of megaton bombs for massive attacks on the centers of population of another country no matter what the provocation.” The same principle has been defended at length by the leading just-war theologian in the country, Paul Ramsey, first in his book, *War and the Christian Conscience* (1961), and more recently in the pamphlet, *The Limits of Nuclear War* (1963, published by The Council on Religion and International Affairs). Ramsey’s doctrine of the just war is, in fact, little more than a complex elaboration of the single principle of noncombatant immunity and its derivative, no city destruction, which he fixes as an absolute norm.

Building on a foundation solidly established by Ford and Ramsey, the Christian theological community seems therefore to be approaching unanimity on at least one limitation of means by which the justice of a prospective nuclear war can be measured: thermonuclear weapons must never be used against population centers *no matter what the provocation*. Such an act involves *necessarily*, through its very nature, a direct intention of killing hundreds of thousands of noncombatants, most of them women and children. It is therefore intrinsically evil, and on the most enormous scale conceivable; it is a use of the greatest destructive power in man's history to accomplish mass murder.

But welcome as it is nineteen years after Hiroshima, agreement on an absolute limitation of means is only the first step in a theological response to the nuclear crisis. Leaving aside for the moment the question what further principles must supplement this well-established limit, the irrelevance of any principle is clear without its application to the *quaestio facti*. Theological principle must meet strategic fact. Still it is at this point that theologians understandably become hesitant, approaching as they must the specialized realms of nuclear strategy and politics. Despite the crucial importance of application, the natural inclination of the theologian is instead to stop short at the door of officialdom and dispense principles to the strategists on their way into work. The danger of this prudent course, all the more evident from a close reading of the "overkill" literature, is that most strategists have a convenient, frequently emptied file for such principles. The point here is not simply a matter of good or bad will but more one of vision and awareness. It is the seeming irrelevance of moral principle to a vast military machine grown accustomed to the permissive silence of Christianity and to the autonomous demands of military necessity. Fundamentally then the question is, how can the Church make its principles felt on so profoundly important a question when the public authorities (and most Christians for that matter) interpret its present stand as a sign of unqualified support?

The most obvious way to begin to make principle relevant is for the moralist to acquaint himself with the strange discourse of thermonuclear war strategists now increasingly audible to civilian ears. The writings of strategists have reached such abundance that from this point on the kind of theological innocence which issues and ends in unapplied, and sometimes inapplicable, principles should no longer

be taken seriously. A second step therefore in a theological response to the nuclear crisis is the task of making established principle meet strategic fact.

With regard to the basic limiting principle of no-city destruction, there is a central strategic element in nuclear war which seems to render the "just nuclear war" contradictory in essence and unrealizable in fact. This element is the strategic need today for a total-war deterrent or "umbrella" in order to enforce any actual limitation of means. The necessary condition for limiting war between nuclear powers is the constant mutual threat of unlimited retaliation if the limits are passed. Strategists up to and including the Secretary of Defense have repeatedly emphasized this total-war deterrent as a *sine qua non* of nuclear power politics.

The immediate moral problem raised by this strategic demand is its head-to-head conflict with the absolute limitation of means, no city destruction, whose practical realization is at the same time one of its goals. In order to make the absolute moral limit viable in practice, one must also make it conditional and profess a readiness to break it and "destroy an enemy society if driven to it," as Secretary McNamara put it in his Ann Arbor address (June 16, 1962), and as he and other officials like Dr. Alain Enthoven, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, have since continued to emphasize. But if the limit is morally unbreakable to begin with, it could not, of course, be waived in the end to make possible a "necessary," "punitive" act of genocide. Conditional or retaliatory murder is still murder. The prohibition against H-bombing a city is constituted from the intrinsic character of the act and from the natural, permanently inviolable rights of the innocent. No circumstances exist or could exist in which "it might be all right" or "necessary" to commit a few Hiroshimas. The moral barrier against city-destroying and against its cumulative effect, society-destroying or genocide, is a stone wall made of a million Mosaic slabs having the individual and collective strength of the divine imperative, "Thou shalt not kill."

The only conceivable way out of this conflict between absolute moral principle and strategic necessity, short of rejecting all nuclear war, is to introduce a moral split between deterrence, or the *threat* of city destruction, and the *act* itself in execution. Since the fulfilment of the threat would clearly be immoral, our only hope of retaining the deterrent morally is to create an abyss between the threat and its actual execution. This is the *argument from*

bluff, the argument that the West would never in fact carry out in actual war its threats of city or society destruction. If such final restraint could be legitimately assumed despite appearances to the contrary, thermonuclear deterrence would not involve a conditional commitment to the murderous methods of total war. The upper reaches of the deterrent could be considered instead as a "bluff" whose only purpose is to restrain the enemy within the same nuclear limits which we ourselves would in no case exceed.

Before considering the merits of the argument from bluff from the standpoint of the no-city imperative, one particularly loose assumption in it which is not formally at issue here should at least be noted. That assumption is that a perfectly targeted counterforce, no-cities nuclear war could *in itself*, apart from any higher threat, fulfill the requirements of a just war. Given, however, the increasing possibility of a large number of hardened enemy missile bases vulnerable only to the larger weapons, even an attack directed exclusively at such military targets would raise a grave question with regard to the "incidental" effects of several hundred thermonuclear explosions across a country. A huge loss of civilian life through fallout or ecological effects, however "indirect" or "unintended," would still be unjustifiable by that just war principle of proportionality which can compel one "to suffer the injustice."

But the principle of proportionality is not so clearly established in its limits and application as is non-combatant immunity. The argument from bluff seeks principally to avoid an otherwise irresolvable conflict between the strategic necessity of a total-war deterrent and the no-city imperative.

It must be conceded that the premise of the argument from bluff, a secret rock-like resolution by the responsible officials never to carry out their public threat, is a possible one. And this is precisely where the argument derives an appearance of strength: no one can disprove its premise. One can

quote nuclear strategist Herman Kahn's practical objection that "while we can probably keep the details of our war plans secret, it is most unlikely that we can keep the philosophy behind them secret," thus calling into question the perfectly kept secrecy of a philosophy of absolute restraint. According to the strategists, the effective credibility of the deterrent depends on the will to carry out the threat.

One can point out how unlikely it is that the greatest and most automatic war machine in human history, if provoked by the destruction of its own cities, would do less than retaliate in kind. But it must still be admitted that it *might* restrain itself, and that its command *might* be prepared to do so in perfect secrecy without alarming Senators like the two quoted earlier. It is also possible that a particular thermonuclear war might not be so awful as we imagine. And after it all we might even call ourselves Christians when confronted by the results of our work. All these are possibilities. A secret resolution never to destroy cities is no less likely than the others, all of which possibilities, however unlikely in fact, we are inclined to look upon hopefully as narrow ways out of a moral impasse.

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More relevant in evaluating the argument from bluff than the possibility of its premise being objectively true (and the at least equal possibility of its being murderously false) is the subjective demand which it makes upon the conscience of the individual citizen. If we concede, as we must, the bare possibility of an objectively good conscience for a few responsible officials, there remain several hundred million uninitiated participants in the West's nuclear policies, namely its citizens. The argument from bluff to be effective must maintain a purity of intention in all those committed to an outwardly evil policy, citizens as well as statesmen. No Western leader could employ a nuclear deterrent without the support and cooperation of the body politic. A presumed right intention, held secretly by the statesman and conflicting with all outward signs, must therefore be extended somehow to the citizen confronted by the same public evidence of the deterrent as the enemy.

It is here that the basic tensions of the bluff position are most apparent. For to realize the twofold moral-military objectives of the argument, the government must be seen as presenting the American citizen and the Soviet strategist with the same factual basis for two diametrically opposed judgments, each of them so well-founded that the government is right to expect it. Both agents are given the public



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fact of a total-war threat: an already huge, still growing missile-bomber force far outnumbering military targets; the declared intention to use this force for the destruction of an enemy society as a last resort. On the one hand, the Soviet strategist must have the good sense to believe this threat for it to be militarily effective. But on the other hand, the American citizen must disbelieve the threat in order to make his support of it morally permissible, since it is the citizen's formal and material cooperation in a potential act of genocide which is at stake here. How then is the citizen to pass from such strong negative evidence, which serves as the basis for the Soviet strategist's fear, to a contrary belief in an underlying right intention? The answer is: by an act of faith.

From all outward appearances, a citizen who supports such a publicly stated and reiterated policy of "destroying an enemy society if driven to it" is cooperating in conditional genocide, with no awareness of the presumably right intentions which lie secretly at its heart. The cooperation and resultant responsibility would, of course, be greatly heightened for certain classes of citizens, like a missile manufacturer or a "button-pusher." Yet in each case, according to the argument from bluff, any moral responsibility for what is potentially the most murderous act in man's history can be avoided by a leap of faith, beyond publicly stated threats, to the right moral intentions secretly animating the Pentagon's "War Boom." The argument from bluff rests ultimately on an utterly blind act of faith.

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We should be careful not to deny a purely natural faith its proper place. There can be no doubt that faith in the good will of those we live and work with is an essential element in human life. This is equally true of the faith we place in elected officials. We must often rely on their judgment for the sake of order.

At the same time there are certain crucially important political issues, concerning the destiny of whole peoples, on which every citizen must pass judgment personally and with his entire moral being. The racial crisis is one of these. Thermonuclear war is another. For a citizen deliberately to make a blind act of faith in his superiors' judgment on such matters, against all objective evidence, and then go dutifully about his affairs with eyes averted, is a sin and crime that we should by now, after an abundance of Third Reich accounts, be able to recognize instinctively. Our failure to do so, and the readiness of

moralists to provide a rationale for our own evasions of conscience, are suggestions enough of the moral passivity in our own society.

Apart then from the moral sophistication required for a preservation of innocence through "bluff," and which could therefore be a legitimate escape only for theologians, it can be questioned if it is this kind of faith which we need most in our present crisis. Christian citizens are right to place a proper faith in the holders of legitimately constituted authority. But as above all, Christians, they are also right to refuse support to steps professedly and obviously taken to destroy cities and societies if the "necessary" occasion should arise, and right to ground this refusal on a deeper kind of faith which must sometimes "obey God rather than men." To characterize this refusal to cooperate in genocide as being somehow a rejection of "a Christian responsibility for the secular order" is only to recall other irresponsible opponents of that same occasionally blind order who have outlived their times and the accusation. This is not so much to identify Thomas More as a Renaissance conscientious objector as it is to suggest that a Christian responsibility for the secular order goes a good deal deeper than making acts of faith in thermonuclear war plans.

The faith on which the moral defense of the thermonuclear deterrent rests is a faith against public policy, against poised weapons systems, and against a congress and electorate which would ruin any administration suspected of only bluffing to retaliate "if necessary" on an enemy society. It is a faith that the enormous facts before us are an illusion, and that the moral imperatives they thrust at us will be turned away finally by the deft shielding tactics of theologians schooled to reject instinctively any "extreme" in the name of an overbearing prudence.

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If prudence is practical wisdom, however, there is some prudence in the view that neither Christianity nor democracy is well served by means which on any close inspection bear the sign of mankind's destruction. Such a prudence would suggest as well that it is the Christian who is uniquely equipped to maintain the rights of life and of conscience against the murderous "necessity" of world events and in spite of the consequences his stand may bring upon him. Genuine Christian prudence is no apologia for skirting thermonuclear occasions of genocide. For the practical wisdom of the Christian is founded not on an ethics of fear but on the scandalous extreme of a cross.