

worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

THE CHURCHES AND THE BOMB

Since its inception almost seven years ago, *worldview* has devoted much of its attention to the problems engendered by nuclear weapons. It will probably continue to do so, since the years have not rendered the problems less complicated or less urgent. The problems are technical, political and moral, but they are so intertwined that anyone who attempts to concern himself with one set of problems soon finds that he is drawn, willy-nilly, into the others. This does not mean that one must become a universal expert in order to form an opinion, but it does mean that the major premises of each set of problems must be acknowledged and respected if one's opinion is to be humanly relevant. This seems a truth too obvious to be debated, but so much of the discussion carried on over the last decade has been indifferent to or actively defiant of this truth that there is, apparently, a constant need to state and restate it.

The last decade has taught us that even when the several relevant disciplines are properly respected in discussions of nuclear weapons, the conclusions that are reached do not provide comfortable resting places. It is not only that we continue to understand more fully the nature of a world armed with nuclear weapons, though this is surely true. It is that the conditions under which nuclear conflict is possible continue to change. In a recent issue of *War/Peace Report*, Herman Kahn reviewed some changes his thinking had undergone since he wrote *On Thermonuclear War*. There is now, he believes, less chance of nuclear war by accident and he thinks that "governments and decision makers have, on the whole, been more sensible than anyone had the right to expect." The measured optimism of these comments is balanced, however, by his further statements:

"I suspect that at least as far as the major powers are concerned, and I include China among them, in the next ten years they are likely to continue being reasonable, cautious, prudential and restrained. But I still do not think the

system can work for any great length of time without some explosion. Eventually somebody is going to be overly stubborn."

Although nothing in recent years has shaken Mr. Kahn's lack of faith in the ability of governments to withstand indefinitely the usual political pressures, there are indicated in this brief quotation changes of attitude on two significant points. First, Mr. Kahn, while refusing to say that the present system is "safe" from technical accident, believes that it is more stable than it was ten years ago. Second, he has modified his opinions about the degree of responsibility that governments will attain under the pressure of the threat posed by the nuclear deterrent.

Those who share Mr. Kahn's modified views are also called upon to modify to some degree their recommendations about our nuclear policy. It may be, however, that for many people the technical and political changes of the last ten years do not touch what is for them the central issue; the secondary problems may shift but what they regard as the large central facts remain the same. That this is indeed the case is made clear by the several articles that appear in this issue of *worldview*.

This issue of *worldview* is devoted almost entirely to comments on a statement concerning nuclear arms that was introduced for discussion in the Vatican Council. The problems posed by the threat of nuclear war are no different for the Catholic Church than they are for other churches, or for any religious community that attempts to cope with them. But the brief discussion on these problems in the Vatican Council emphasizes in a special public way not only the responsibility and burden which religious groups must bear but the temptations and dangers to which they can so easily succumb.

It must be admitted that not every informed critic of the discussion that was initiated in the Council views the dangers in the same way. As

the several differing comments in this *worldview* symposium make clear, there is sharp opposition on the stand the Council should take, on the need for expert technological and military opinion, and on the authority proper to the Church in such matters. But what these differing comments also make clear—the one large issue on which there is general agreement—is the need for further debate and discussion, so that when those who represent the Church do speak they do so with the clarity the subject allows and the moral urgency it demands.

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The question before the Vatican Council is not going to be solved by those who would suggest to the nuclear powers that all nuclear arms be

disposed of, unilaterally if necessary; nor will it be solved by those who would work out a theoretically neat plan of limited nuclear war that could be justified under traditional just war principles. As the writers who follow make clear, what the churches must cope with is the existence of a strategic nuclear deterrent—a deterrent whose effectiveness cannot be encompassed within traditional concepts of limited war. Until the churches acknowledge and grapple with this problem they will remain as spectators on the sidelines while some of the momentous issues of our time are being decided. The alternative is to engage in intensive self-education and then to speak within the boundaries allowed by the subject and under the obligations imposed by a human and religious commitment.

in the magazines

In the September issue of *The Catholic World*, William V. Kennedy—who is described in an introductory note as “a military analyst”—deals with “The Morality of American Nuclear Policy.” Citing testimony given by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara before the Senate Armed Services Committee last February, Kennedy characterizes our current defense policy as one which consists in the building up of “our strategic retaliatory forces” so that they are “visibly capable of fully destroying the Soviet society.” This policy also demands that the U.S. assure the Communists “of our ability at all times to retaliate decisively against Soviet cities, even under the worst circumstances,” he says, again quoting McNamara.

But such strategy, writes Mr. Kennedy, is “an inversion of the traditional Christian viewpoint that the destruction of the enemy’s military forces is the only legitimate target, with destruction of civilian, essentially non-combatant lives and property to be permitted only as an unavoidable consequence.” He adds that “the argument that Mr. McNamara has constructed this threat as a ‘deterrent,’ and that the sheer terror implicit in the threat makes total war ‘unlikely’ begs the issue. The threat exists” nonetheless.

Kennedy then proceeds to another area in which, he contends, a vocal and forceful minority has again

made its view of nuclear strategy prevail. This is the view “that we are restricted by conscience from a ‘first strike’ and we are incapable of overcoming Communist military power without leveling the Russian, Chinese and satellite ‘society’ in the process. He argues that “there is no rationally established system of morality—including the Christian moral code—that says, in effect, that a man or a society must allow an assailant to strike what could be a fatal blow before taking countermeasures sufficient to deflect and to prevent repetition of the blow.”

Indeed, the author continues, “Secretary McNamara was wrong in stating, during his testimony to the Senate, that there is no body of responsible professional thought in the Department of Defense which holds that the United States is justified in certain special circumstances in launching a full-scale nuclear blow before an enemy’s weapons are exploding all over the free world. There is such a body of thought,” Kennedy avers, “and it extends all the way to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.”

He notes the availability of intelligence sources and specialized apparatus to provide the kind of warnings which “are certain to precede any Communist attack with nuclear weapons,” and states his conviction that “given a situation in which he was faced with reasonable certainty of a Soviet nuclear assault, there can scarcely be any doubt that any