

# Reader's Response I

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## “Religion and Disarmament”

Richard L. Deats

Richard John Neuhaus dismisses the pastoral letter of the Mobilization for Survival as simplistic and arrogant, cheap prophecy and partisan deceit. As I read his Excursus, “Religion and Disarmament,” in the January-February issue of *Worldview*, I kept wondering if he had seen the whole pastoral letter or only isolated fragments wrenched out of context. He responded to it much as I imagine a temple priest of the eighth century B.C. might have reacted to bits and pieces of, say, the Book of Hosea. (Why *wasn't* Hosea more modest in his moral outrage? Why *didn't* he think through the implications of the armed might of the Assyrians?) I wondered, too, what Neuhaus thinks about the basic concerns of the letter, namely, the growing dangers implicit in the widespread development of nuclear power, the alarming state of the arms race (especially of nuclear weaponry), and unmet human needs all over the planet.

Neuhaus seems more disturbed about Russia's Backfire bomber and its military buildup in Eastern Europe than about the Trident, the cruise missile, and the neutron bomb. He assumes that the signers of the pastoral letter look on the Soviet Union as perhaps a benign power, that our real motive is to advance a pro-Communist ideological agenda, and that the U.N. Special Session is just another opportunity to propagandize the American public with our leftist critique of capitalism. I would expect such a view from any number of warrior intellectuals; somehow I expected more from one of the founders of CALC [Clergy and Laity Concerned].

The pastoral letter is *not* a call to the Soviet Union—or other nations for that

matter. It is a statement signed by *American* churchmen and women and addressed to *American* society. The pastoral letter does begin by putting the arms race within a global framework, noting the inaction of governments “here, abroad, at the UN, everywhere.” It speaks of a “grotesque Olympics” in which the nations race headlong to disaster. But the letter then focuses upon our *own* government and our *own* nuclear and weapons policies, as the specificity of the Word of God demands. A parallel comes to mind. Recently the Christian Peace Conference in Prague issued a statement criticizing the neutron bomb; I wondered why *that* was their point of criticism of the arms race rather than weapons developments in the Eastern bloc of nations.

The point of a religious appeal such as the pastoral letter is to examine society in the light of a transcendent and righteous God whose plumb line brings an awful judgment upon us. Its purpose is not to compare ourselves favorably with adversary nations but rather to hear the Word of the Lord and the controversy he has with the inhabitants of the land. And it is a call to repentance and to trust in the sure mercies of God.

The pastoral letter is written in strong, bold strokes to be sure. Too long have men and women of good intent accepted the balance of terror and the growing probability of a nuclear cataclysm. By defining reality and salvation within the confines of the nation-state, the arms race has become legitimized and seen as necessary to our survival. Learned essays are written about the morality of the neutron bomb (which kills only people but doesn't destroy property) and the cruise missile (which

is so much cheaper than the B-1 bomber and can do the job even better). Yet our ability to obliterate the enemy many times over has not given us the security we crave. Three more new nuclear weapons must be produced daily, even though, had we exploded one Hiroshima-sized bomb daily from the birth of Christ until today, we still would not have exhausted our nuclear arsenal.

Arms control talks for thirty years have failed to produce disarmament. The pastoral letter is correct: “not one nuke destroyed, disassembled, since Hiroshima, by any nation.” Jimmy Carter came to office pledging to reduce the military budget and arms sales—yet *both* are to be increased. The vested interests clamoring for the things that make for war are far greater than presidential rhetoric unsupported by a massive shift in public opinion toward the things that make for peace. Giant strides in a new direction, not timid steps along the same old path, are what is called for. We are in the midst of a global crisis today brought on by the deteriorating environment, the depletion of our natural resources, nuclear proliferation, neglected human needs, and a runaway worldwide arms race. *This* we should address ourselves to. The latest developments in Soviet weaponry are symptoms of the wider sickness afflicting us all.

Neuhaus finds the assertion that the arms race is, “among other things, an assault on the poor of the earth,” like bombs falling on neglected ghettos, as “absurd, maybe even obscene.” The pastoral letter does not call what is happening to the poor and powerless in our society equivalent to a nuclear holocaust, but it does point out the inescapable effects on them as we maintain our garrison state. Something is

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profoundly wrong in a society as rich as ours that can squander its resources on such things as a Trident submarine twice as long as a football field and equipped with 408 nuclear warheads but does not have the will or resources to save dying inner cities or reduce chronic unemployment.

The pastoral letter is not, as Neuhaus seems to think, "a call to the pure of heart to separate themselves from a hopeless situation," nor will its signers "collapse in disillusionment" if utopia is not realized. It is, rather, a turning from "this blindness, this folly, this

## Gordon C. Zahn

It's always a risky business to take issue with Richard Neuhaus on any subject to which he has turned his critical eye, and this is no exception. The Mobilization's "pastoral letter" is vulnerable to all the points raised in his January-February Excursus. The letter most certainly is not a carefully argued evaluation of the plusses and minuses of nuclear disarmament or disarmament in general. It is extravagant in its religious rhetoric and far from the ideal of theological analysis and disputation that so crucial a moral issue deserves. Like the Mobilization itself, it is a sometimes strained amalgam of religious and political perspectives and motivations and reflects most of the inconsistencies and avoidances associated with any coalition activity.

I am, if anything, even more troubled than Neuhaus by the sheer presumption involved in producing a "canned" sermon intended for widespread use in a variety of churches. In this connection I applaud the decision of Pax Christi/USA to prepare its own pastoral stating the issue in terms better suited to the Catholic community—though here, too, it would be better were individual pastors to prepare their own sermons in support of the strong disarmament stand already declared by the Vatican. In any event I am not optimistic about the

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fascination with death" and a calling to "give flesh to our hope for a habitable human future by common action."

It is spoken with all possible urgency; nothing less will be sufficient for such a day as this. The time has come for something more from the religious community than prudential and modest calls to trim the arms budget. The time demands far more than a "reflective restlessness about diminishing the threat of nuclear war." It demands a clear, unequivocal *NO* to war and the preparations for destruction and a *YES* to life, to hope, to the future.

likelihood that priests or ministers will be willing to incorporate the reading of the "pastoral" into their services; and I am virtually certain that few in their congregations will read or be impressed by it as a church door handout.

Neuhaus is right, too, in protesting the ideological imbalance that finds the message condemning the beam in our own eye and largely ignoring the equally dangerous and offensive beam in the eye of the Soviet Union (a failing, incidentally, corrected in the Pax Christi draft). As he suggests, it does invite dismissal as an attempt "to seize upon the disarmament issue as but another occasion to assail the evil of American society in general and of capitalism in particular."

Granting all this, however, I still do not regret signing the statement, though possibly, had I read the Neuhaus Excursus first, I *might* have been persuaded otherwise. As I see it, most of the criticisms bearing upon the oneness or rhetorical excess of the document, valid though they may be, lose much of their force when one considers what the statement is intended to be and the sense in which it is intended to be received. Few sermons or pastorals in my experience would meet the tests one would ordinarily apply to more scholarly and detached analyses of whatever aspect of human behavior may serve as the day's subject for comment or condemnation. If anything, it seems to be one of the rules of the ecclesiastical game that social issues be reduced to their simplest terms in preachments in-

tended to serve as vehicles of moral or theological instruction. Neuhaus and I may prefer it to be otherwise, but, if the issue is crucial, I am willing to put up with a few embarrassing rhetorical flourishes to get the principal point across.

And disarmament *is* a crucial issue, perhaps *the* most crucial issue with which we must deal. Indeed, my own criticism of the Mobilization pastoral is that it weakens its potential impact by focusing too narrowly on *nuclear* disarmament and then proceeds to muddy the waters by intruding those quite unnecessary political overtones along with the more peripheral (and more debatable) concerns about nuclear energy. Disarmament, pure and simple, should be the objective, and all the added nuances imposed by the pastoral's authors (or by Neuhaus, if he had his way) can only distract and detract from that essential purpose. Thus it is only because and to the extent that the pastoral does address itself to the task of advancing the general cause of disarmament—and does so without explicitly intruding solutions or interpretations that, as Neuhaus notes, I could not support—that I was, and remain, willing to give it my support.

That imbalance which finds the pastoral's criticism addressed to this nation's record as leading producer, stockpiler, and seller of arms while ignoring the arsenal of our prospective enemy disturbs me less. After all, it is not incompatible with the religious approach, that we insist upon correcting our own faults before presuming to pass judgment on the sins of others. Uncomfortable though I may be with the ideological implications of the pastoral, especially its crudely superficial reduction of the issue to the sinister machinations imputed to our corporate "masters," the essential point is valid enough. We *have*, as Pope Paul put it in 1970, "based the development of many of our giant industries on the diabolical capacity to produce arms of every size and shape, all designed to slaughter and exterminate men who are our brothers; thus we have cruelly established the economic stability of so many powerful nations upon the trading of arms to poor nations which lack ploughs, schools, and hospitals."

It is this that the Mobilization's pastoral would call upon the religious communities to oppose and, if possible,

stop. It would be even better if the Soviet Union were to stop too, but it is for our own actions, not theirs, that we bear immediate and direct moral responsibility. We may hope that if the call is heard and we do stop—or at least slow down—our contributions to the arms race, others, including our prospective opponents, might follow our lead for economic if not moral reasons. But even if they don't, we should recognize the moral obligation to act. Should the worst come to pass and our nation's security rest upon faith rather than the murderous potential of modern wars, even that should not be regarded as too unthinkable a situation from a religious perspective.

### Richard Neuhaus Responds:

Contra Deats, in the January Excursus and elsewhere I have spelled out my "basic concern" for disarmament and have proposed ways to enlist a larger political constituency in that cause. One such way is that the advocates of disarmament be scrupulously accurate in their statements lest the cause be dismissed as partisan propaganda. Another is to restrain the impulse to identify ourselves too closely with Hosea and other worthies or to confuse our prudential judgments with the Word of God. Contra Deats and Zahn, I do not believe that the rightness and urgency of the cause, or our primary responsibility for the policies of the U.S. rather than the USSR, excuse distortion of the facts. In 1964 most of us rejected one version of the false and, not so incidentally, losing proposition that extremism in the defense of one's favored cause is no vice and moderation in its pursuit no virtue. I see no reason to revise that judgment now.

[The following signers of the pastoral letter in question were invited to discuss in these pages their reasons for approving the document but declined the invitation: Bishop James Armstrong (Methodist), Bishop Joseph A. Francis (Roman Catholic), Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen (Roman Catholic), Dr. Jorge Lara-Braud (National Council of Churches), Rabbi Steven S. Schwarzschild, Rabbi Marc H. Tannenbaum, Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler (Roman Catholic)—The Editors.].

## Reader's Response II

### Human Rights in China

Robert W. Barnett

*Worldview has published a number of articles contending that human rights, if they are to be meaningful, must be based upon universal values. Herewith an alternative view by a distinguished scholar of Asian affairs.—The Editors*

We are putting before ourselves a practical question. Should we make Peking's record in handling what Americans call the human rights of the Chinese people an obstacle to normalizing diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China? In my opinion we should not.

I go farther. We should seek a better understanding of the moral content implicit in why and how Peking has sustained the legitimacy of its authority through rhetorical and operational means that are alien to the political experience of the Western world.

The psychic and philosophical premises upon which the Chinese system operates differ from other countries in the world, whether or not they are Marxist, affluent, or developing. But we should hesitate to condemn them as less moral merely because they differ from those of other societies. In fact China may be giving clues to a perception of moral necessities that we—not to mention particular countries like India, Indonesia, Brazil, and so forth—may be obliged to recognize, if we begin to believe we cannot continue to heal our economic and social dissatisfactions merely by perpetual opening up of new resource frontiers, geographical and technological; that is, if we heed intimations of doom expressed by the Club of

Rome, by Robert Heilbroner, and by H.F. Schumacher.

Let me hasten to say that I do not take delight in the China model. I was in the People's Republic of China in 1976. During my fifteen days there I did not have so much as fifteen minutes of conversation with my Chinese hosts that had anything like the human or intellectual content of conversations I had just six months before while traveling through several "authoritarian" countries of Southeast Asia. Having known China quite well before World War II, and acquainted with many Chinese overseas—in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere—a part of me was outraged by what Chinese leaders seem to have done to deprive its people of a capacity to laugh, to share in tragic despair, and to reveal to friends their gifts of verve and creativity, individuality, competitive compulsion, and personal warmth and loyalty. However, against that apparent loss there was a balancing perception before which I stood in awe. I recalled Ernest Hemingway's aphorism, "d'abord il faut durer"; that was the miracle of the People's Republic of China.

It is this, I think, that has awed almost all visitors to China. They see achievement in the face of obstacles that totally demoralized Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters. What there is now to see sobers leaders from other parts of the developing world, who identify mechanics but cannot imagine infusing their own people with the moral devotion upon which the Chinese system appears to be built.

Peking's obstacles were rooted in 150 years of humiliation and catastrophe visited on China by nature, by a steadily rising population, by dislocation of its

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