

Nuclear Weapons: The Voice of Religion

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Address to Opening of International Law Symposium

“Perspectives on Current Nuclear Dangers”

Convened by Nuclear Age Peace Foundation

Santa Barbara, California, February 23, 2006

The insistence of the nuclear weapons States in maintaining nuclear weapons for war-fighting purposes is a violation of God's law against murder. It is time for religious leaders of all the major faiths to make this point clearly and unite in their opposition to any State holding on to nuclear weapons.

A united moral stance has become all the more necessary in the light of the recent report by the Reformist Iranian Internet Daily that for the first time extremist clerics in Iran have issued "a new fatwa," which states that "Shari'a does not forbid the use of nuclear weapons." Some ultra-conservative clerics are reported to be arguing that "when the entire world is armed with nuclear weapons, it is permissible to use these weapons as a counter-measure."

Hitherto, the religious leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran has regarded the use of nuclear weapons as opposed to Shari'a. Islam teaches peace at the heart of its doctrine. So do Judaism and Christianity. In fact, the Rev. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, speaking at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre this week, excoriated the spread of nuclear weapons technology as "an outrage to all humanity." He focused on the core of the problem: "The recent reports of countries acquiring nuclear weapons technology is frightening. But it is equally a scandal that countries which possess vast arsenals of nuclear weapons are unwilling to renounce their use."

Religious teaching about peace and non-violence does seem to be sublimated in the present tumultuous world. Extremists in all religions seem all too willing to justify violence. Thus, as States seek justification for their nuclear weapons, religions must re-focus their message.

In 1983, the World Council of Churches, a fellowship of 342 denominations from virtually all Christian traditions in more than 120 countries, rejected the doctrine of nuclear deterrence and unequivocally declared:

That the production and deployment as well as the use of nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity and that such activities must be condemned on ethical and theological grounds.

The Canadian Council of Churches, a community of 19 denominations, stated in 1998:

The willingness, indeed the intent, to launch a nuclear attack in certain circumstances bespeaks spiritual and moral bankruptcy. ...Nuclear weapons do not, cannot, deliver security – they deliver only insecurity and peril through their promise to annihilate that which is most precious, life itself and the global ecosystem upon which all life depends. Nuclear weapons have no moral legitimacy.....

In 1999, more than 7,000 people from around the world gathered in Capetown, South Africa for a Parliament of the World's Religions and issued A *Moral Call to Eliminate the Threat of Nuclear Weapons*, which states:

The threat and use of nuclear weapons is incompatible with civilized norms, standards of morality and humanitarian law which prohibit the use of inhumane weapons and those with indiscriminate effects. We say that a peace based on terror, a peace based upon threats of

inflicting annihilation and genocide upon whole populations, is a peace that is morally corrupting.

In his January 1, 2006 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Benedict XVI criticized the idea of nuclear arms for security as “completely fallacious.” He said: “Peace requires that all ... strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament.”

At the 2005 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, the Holy See made it clear that nuclear deterrence, in the modern context, cannot claim any moral legitimacy. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Permanent Representative of the Holy See at the U.N., stated:

When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way towards progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.

Archbishop Migliore warned that the new threat of global terrorism must not be allowed to undermine the precepts of international humanitarian law. In addition, “nuclear weapons, even so-called ‘low-yield’ weapons, endanger the processes of life and can lead to extended conflict.”

Nuclear weapons assault life on the planet, they assault the planet itself, and in so doing they assault the process of the continuing development of the planet. The preservation of the Non-

Proliferation Treaty demands an unequivocal commitment to genuine nuclear disarmament.

The moral condemnation of nuclear weapons appears to be strong, but it is hardly being heard and certainly not heeded by political leaders today.

The longer nuclear weapons are maintained, the more societal acceptance of them seems to grow and moralists appear consigned to the wilderness. And the moral stance is weakened when extremist clerics use the excuse of the major powers' retention as justification for a so-called moral use.

A two-class world is no more permissible than a two-class morality. Religion ought to be the first to raise its voice, in a united way, against the possession of nuclear weapons by any State.

The conference we are opening tonight is dedicated to "Nuclear Weapons and the Abandonment of International Law." If there is not a firm, universally accepted moral base to the humanitarian law that encompasses nuclear weapons, then the legal taboo against the use of nuclear weapons is bound to deteriorate. That is what is happening now.

When I speak later at this conference, I will make the point that while religion must be the foremost exponent of the moral condemnation of nuclear weapons, religion by itself cannot raise the level of public attention high enough to be effective. The moral opprobrium of nuclear weapons must be expressed in language that transcends the diverse religious traditions. Religion must work

with secularists in the common cause of strengthening international law to rid the world of nuclear weapons.