

Comment

The major industrial nations of the world – largely speaking those of the Northern hemisphere – have lived together for 36 years without any outbreak of war. It is something that was not expected in the late forties, when it was obvious that there were enough causes for a new world war of even greater devastation than the one which had just finished. I can remember being told in 1949 by my primary school teacher that we could expect war with the Russians in the next five years. It didn't come. The received doctrine is of course that this unprecedented period of peace between mortal enemies, all heavily armed, must be attributed to nuclear deterrence. It is the system the world was forced to adopt once it realised that it was in possession of weapons of unlimited destructive power. For nuclear nations and their allies, war has ceased to be a way of settling international conflict and we have had 36 years of talk instead, not much of it very constructive, but at least not very destructive either. Meanwhile war has been exported to the South and millions of people have been killed in far away places with weapons made by the nuclear states. But we in the North settled down to live with the Bomb and tried to forget about its diabolical features as we enjoyed the prosperity and freedom of the 60s and 70s, not thinking then that – like Faust – we may have put our souls in pledge for it.

It doesn't take much reading of the daily papers to realise now that there has been a dramatic loss of confidence in the system on both sides. There is a fear that the hour is fast approaching when the devil is coming to claim his pledge. Once again school children are being told they might not live out their lives and are inclined to wonder aloud what point there is in training for a career or starting a family of their own.

What has happened? Whatever it is, it has happened largely among Europeans. Europeans have begun to think that the super-powers might just risk fighting each other with nuclear weapons if things got serious enough, and that the chosen venue is Europe. It was brought home to them by the attempt of the United States to push the neutron bomb and the cruise and Pershing II missiles on

all-too-willing European Governments: weapons which appear to be designed for war in Europe. It wasn't any change of strategic doctrine, just a refinement of a strategy which had been around since 1967 when NATO adopted that marvel of deterrent logic, the doctrine of Flexible Response. Those weapons are the logical outcome of the doctrine (or is it the other way round?) and they display for all to see the inner contradictions of it: the more credible the weapon is as a deterrent, i.e. the more the enemy believes you would be willing to use it if provoked, the more you are indeed likely to use it. That is, the more it looks to you and your enemies like a weapon for fighting a war rather than for deterring one. The contradiction is inescapable and no amount of theoretical good intentions will eliminate it from the system. What the nuclear planners did not allow for in their scheme was the public reaction which occurred when a lot of people found out about it. The message has now filtered down to ordinary people in Europe and has made them feel very unsafe in their homes. Strategic niceties are now everyone's concern. It has reminded people of two things about nuclear weapons which have always been true, but which could be more easily forgotten when strategy was an affair left thankfully to experts: that nuclear weapons are made to be used, the system does not depend on bluff; that the process of diabolical invention is not something that took place once for all in 1945, but is something that has proceeded at an accelerating pace ever since and still goes on producing weapons which are more and more lethal in ever increasing quantities. These features seem to be inherent to nuclear deterrence rather than accidental to it. After a certain point, apparent improvements in deterrence have paradoxically meant a progressive loss of security.

So it seems that what all the moral arguments failed to do when most of us dreamed that the system was safe ("the Bomb will never be used") has now been done by the system itself: turned large numbers of ordinary people against it. In our greatest danger is our greatest hope. It is only when people realise that their very existence is seriously threatened by what they are doing that moral arguments really begin to bite. This is not a cynical judgment, but a reminder that a clear view of the real consequences for themselves is always necessary if people are going to get enough passion to act. We might know in a theoretical way what is right and wrong ("It is wrong to threaten to annihilate innocent civilians with weapons of mass destruction"), but we are not going to change our ways while it doesn't seem likely that we ourselves will ever be involved in such an event. And it is not a purely selfish reaction, since, as we see the horror in store for ourselves, we also become aware of what it would mean for our enemies.

The genuine moralists are the prophets: the ones who can see more clearly than those around them where everything is leading. They are not mere legalists or rule-merchants. They are more like passionate clairvoyants. It is not saving consciences from sin they are passionate about, but saving human life from destruction. So they are passionate for the spread of real knowledge. There were still a few of those prophets, both Christian and secular, shouting away in the wilderness during the fat years. They have now come into town and we had better listen. Our one hope lies in more and more people listening, getting to know what is going on and getting the passion to act to put a stop to the diabolical process of nuclear deterrence.

It is, of course, a process and not just a state. This means that the policy of tolerating it as the "lesser of two evils", which has been the moral approach of some Christians, is inappropriate and dangerous. It is a policy for no change. But it is not — as some believe — a policy of not upsetting a delicately balanced arrangement lest worse should follow. It is rather one of not deviating from a headlong career that has no logical end but iniquity and destruction. It is a bad way of trying to bring Christian principles into relation with political realities. It is also fatalistic — and therefore without faith — since it always interprets the latest products of human planning as unchangeable reality which has to be lived with willy nilly. "We have to live with the Bomb now it has been invented" soon becomes, "we have to live with Polaris now we have it" and then, "we will have to live with Trident and cruise missiles since they are necessary replacements", and of course, we will have to live with what comes after them, though we don't yet know what it will be. Thus are Christians swept along in the current muttering about something called "Christian realism".

The only hope for us is a different morality — the prophetic one — the steady witness to the facts and to the values we must follow at all cost. It is a witness that must be made in season and out of season until the political climate is in such a state that people can receive the message. This will be when they are sufficiently frightened by what is happening. The time seems to be coming fast in Europe. We may be near the historic moment for change. But there have to be prophets proclaiming "unrealistic" truths if people are going to be ready when the time comes.

We can be thankful for the temporary effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in saving Europe from war for 36 years without being committed to the proposition that it was the only possibility or that it is a proven system that ought to be continued. It was an undeserved time of grace which may have given the human race the ultimate fright necessary to make it think seriously about

alternatives to warfare. Nuclear deterrence is not the alternative. It is only the fearful recoil from the terrible vision at the end of centuries of war-making and weapons development. We have to find the real alternative while there is still time. It could be the frightened Europeans' historical task to find it now.

Roger Ruston

Some Books by Prophets:

Walter Stein and others, *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience*, 1961, now reissued by Merlin Press, 1981.

Robert Neild, *How to Make up Your Mind about the Bomb*, André Deutsch, 1981

Alva Myrdal and others, *Dynamics of European Nuclear Disarmament*, Spokesman, 1981.

Lord Mountbatten, Lord Noel-Baker and Lord Zuckerman, *Apocalypse Now?* Spokesman, 1981.

Ken Coates, E. P. Thompson and others, *Eleventh Hour for Europe*, Spokesman, 1981

Sir Martin Ryle, *Towards the Nuclear Holocaust*, The Menard Press, 1981.

God, the Living One

Edward C Schillebeeckx O P

When a Western European landed his plane among African natives who gazed unbelievably at this enormous bird, he proudly remarked, "In one day I have covered a distance which used to take me thirty". Thereupon the wise black chieftain came forward and asked, "Sir, what do you do with the other twenty-nine?"

Here we have the twofold possibility of man's fundamental decision: on the one hand *technological rationality*, and on the other the question of the *meaning* of human action.

The question also of the relationship between human hopes and expectations by self-liberation, and the God-given salvation: *the question of God* as connected with the context of mankind's striving for liberation. The question of God-talk is intrinsically connected with the question of human integrity and wholeness in such a way that this question of identity cannot be solved in purely *theoretical* terms: it includes the question of a particular life-style — contemplative *and* political as well. Talk about God