

The Ethics of the Obama Administration's Nuclear Policy

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We live in interesting times indeed when Messrs. Schulz, Kissinger, Perry, and Nunn become the avatars of the movement for a nuclear-free world. But they have lots of company. In my remarks, I want to touch on three topics. The first is the emergence of a broad ethical consensus—one that unites the just-war and nonviolent strands of the Catholic community—in support of nuclear abolitionism. The second is an assessment, from that standpoint, of the Obama administration's recent moves regarding nuclear policy. The third of my topics is the shape of a Catholic abolitionist agenda for moving ahead.

1. Nuclear Ethics and the Cause of Abolitionism

The ethics of nuclear policy encompasses two major questions: the morality of the use of nuclear weapons, and the morality of deterrence. The most basic qualms about nukes and their prospective use are readily summarized. On the first question, one needn't invoke the prospect of Armageddon or nuclear winter to rule out the use of nuclear weapons, since these violate key principles of even a modest theory of just war, namely the criteria of proportionality and discrimination, or, as it's perhaps more widely known, non-combatant immunity. On the second matter of nuclear deterrence, the chief ethical obstacle is this: in order to be credible and hence viable, a deterrence policy must rely on an actual intention to use nuclear weapons should certain circumstances arise. Because, in ethics, an immoral intention is sufficient to invalidate an act, deterrence, understood as constituting a murderous threat, is a culpably immoral policy—quite apart from any beneficial consequences it might produce. The famous analogy supplied by the great Protestant ethicist Paul Ramsey, whatever its other limitations, is illustrative of the problem: a policy designed to limit traffic fatalities on Labor Day weekend would surely be found ethically wanting if it entailed binding live babies to automobile bumpers in order to prevent crashes.

(Given the tremendous resources required to produce and maintain a system of nuclear weapons, we could add a third major question here: the matter of distributive justice. But I will hold off on that issue for now.)

These ethical judgments, I say, are readily outlined—but they are hardly incontestable, and there are, arguably, plausible grounds for suggesting that (1) there might be forms of nuclear weapons whose applications might be surgical enough to meet “just-war” restrictions and (2) we might still recognize that there is a enough of a moral difference between the threat of the use of nuclear weapons and the actual use to provide the basis for a limited ethical defense of deterrence. It is instructive here, I think, to consider briefly two attempts along these to justify some form of nuclear strategy: those of Ramsey—whom I invoke with some trembling since I happen to know that his Excellency, the

Archbishop, wrote a dissertation on him—and the U.S. Catholic bishops, who in their 1983 pastoral letter included a limited acceptance of deterrence.

Ramsey –to whom we have to give credit both for framing the debate for people of faith and for making a strong case for neighbor-love, agape, as the foundation of the ethics of war--presented a complex argument that, while renouncing first use of nuclear weapons or any targeting of population centers, held that defensive and retaliatory uses of counterforce weapons could provide the basis for an effective deterrence strategy. A key point in his theory was his contention that unintended but foreseeable civilian casualties, acceptable under the principle of double effect, could generate a successful deterrent without requiring immoral intentions. There are numerous reasons for which this theory has been, in my view rightly, criticized; my own argument would start by pointing out that the contemporary phenomenology of moral agency doesn't sustain the conception of double effect so crucial to Ramsey's case.

If Ramsey's acceptance of deterrence was contorted, the bishops' was uncomfortable and, as some later said, grudging. After stating fairly definitively that the use of nuclear weapons was immoral, the bishops nonetheless provided a "strictly conditioned moral acceptance" of deterrence—with the proviso that no arms race be tolerated and that the policy be a temporary stage on the path to disarmament. Again, penetrating and, I think, successful challenges were made to the coherence of this position, especially given the bishops' acceptance of the empirical premise that an actual nuclear war could not be prevented from escalating. For our purposes, what is crucial, however, is that the "already but not yet" provisional acceptance of deterrence has, in the intervening decades, effectively expired. As it became clear that the security policies of major powers including the U.S. tended not only not to produce decisive movement toward abolition, but indeed moved toward developing capacities for limited nuclear war fighting, statements began to emerge from the bishops and the Holy See suggesting that the conditions that had supported their earlier tolerance for deterrence no longer obtained.

This development occurred within a broader move within Catholic thought on war, spurred by John Paul II's sensibilities and the series of nonviolent regime changes around the world at the end of the Eighties, marked by a rise in the stock of nonviolence as a Christian stance. (This shift was reflected in the evolution from the 1983 pastoral's bald statement that "Justice is always the foundation of peace" to the title of the follow-up document ten years later, "The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace.") For Catholic pacifists, be they Pax Christi activists or practitioners of civil disobedience of the Plowshares sort, nuclear weapons and deterrence had always been non-starters not to be reconciled with a prophetic witness to the solidarity and peace of the Body of Christ. At this point, something of a convergence has occurred around the view that a renewed push for disarmament must be the focus of Catholic teaching and action on nuclear weapons. Interestingly, this development has paralleled a different abolition movement that has gathered steam in Catholic circles over roughly the same period, namely opposing capital punishment.

2. The Obama Administration

President Obama ostensibly shares this view, having proclaimed in his Prague speech a year ago “America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons” as well as his resolve to “put an end to Cold War thinking.” This year, in rapid succession, the Obama administration has accumulated a string of opportunities to forge ahead with these objectives, in the Nuclear Posture Review, in the START negotiations with President Medvedev of Russia, in the recent Global Summit on Nuclear Security here in DC, and in the upcoming Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in New York. How has President Obama fared so far?

In fairness, of course, he has acknowledged that a nuclear weapons-free world is a long-term project that may not be completed in his lifetime. That said, his progress so far, from the ethical standpoint I have alluded to, is modest at best.

- It is true that the Nuclear Posture Review has included a statement ruling out the use of nuclear weapons on non-nuclear states in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty—a position that pointedly excludes Iran, for example. This concession still falls short of a more thoroughgoing renunciation of nuclear attacks, a step that was reportedly considered but dropped.
- The opportunity to declare that the U.S. nuclear arsenal serves a deterrent purpose only was eschewed in favor of the formulation that that is its “fundamental role.”
- Although no new nuclear warheads or tests are planned, the current policy pumps an additional \$7 billion into the nuclear budget. Facility to aid non-nuclear powers?
- The recent summit in DC yielded a constructive proposal to secure errant nuclear materials around the world within a four-year timeframe; however, the agreement didn’t squarely address the issue of continued production of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium beyond the moratorium that is currently in place.
- No progress has been made at this point toward the removal of tactical nuclear weapons housed in five European countries—a situation arguably in violation of the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Indeed, it seems fairly clear that the NPT’s obligation under Article VI to pursue good-faith negotiations aimed at disarmament has not been honored.
- The prospect of further reductions through negotiations with Russia seems to be stymied by mutual distrust and the refusal of either side to take the lead. Here, one might expect Obama to take seriously his own claim that, as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the U.S. is under a special obligation to act.
- Obama’s campaign promise to remove the U.S. system from a policy of “hair-trigger alert” remains unfulfilled.
- Obama’s pledge to push aggressively for the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty has likewise not yet come to fruition.

President Obama's administration, in short, has much work to do in moving toward the ethical objective of a world without nuclear weapons that he himself has endorsed. In pursuing this goal, he could do worse than to look to the model of one of his predecessors, who noted in his memoirs how he came to the realization that "A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought": "My dream, then, became a world free of nuclear weapons. For the...years I was president, I never let my dream of a nuclear-free world fade from my mind... Some of my advisors, including a number at the Pentagon, did not share this dream. They couldn't conceive of it." This president proceeded to then doggedly, even courageously set forward his nuclear agenda. Without judging the particular merits of his strategy, which combined a push for arms reduction with the development of a "strategic defense initiative," Ronald Reagan can't be faulted for the way he took on naysayers in his own administration and moved forward.

3. Moving Ahead: A Catholic Agenda

Reagan might not have been so successful in his efforts were it not for the crucial alliance he forged with one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral James D. Watkins. I mention this because it was not incidental that Watkins was a Catholic who, although he initially found the Bishops' pastoral an "outrage," legitimately engaged with the questions they raised and gradually moved to a view critical of Mutually Assured Destruction. Obama, too, will need such advocates. In this sort of capacity and others, Catholics have a range of valuable roles to play in the pursuit of an ethical nuclear weapons policy premised on disarmament and a strict regime preventing the spread of nuclear capabilities. It is fitting, perhaps, to consider this agenda under the headings of strategic objectives and tactical measures.

There are some tactical points, in addition to the ones I've already mentioned, that involve policies: for example, the pursuit of so-called "nuclear-free zones" (an idea similar to the notion of "zones of peace" championed by various voices in peace and conflict studies) in the Middle East and in Europe. Just as important, however, are movements, and actions, directed toward peacebuilding. Activists have the opportunity in a few days to convene in New York at a conference addressing the NPT at which Ban Ki Moon will deliver the keynote address. Interfaith work will be important in tapping faith-based support for reduction measures. The normal venues of democratic citizenship, of course, are vital, and yes, there can be a place for targeted civil disobedience in pursuit of abolitionist goals—an American tradition, after all.

Strategically, there are some broad goals that might go under the heading of "visional ethics." By this I mean not a simplistically utopian ethics but one that attends to the importance of how we see the world and constitute the shape of its problems in the first place. What does it mean to move beyond "Cold-War thinking"? Obama noted in Prague that "if we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable, then in some way we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable." Against this belief, we need to contest the notion that possessing nuclear weapons is vital for national security, and give greater credence to the view that such weapons make the world more dangerous.

One abiding source of vision is the legacy of Catholic social teaching, which, especially in its post WW II development, has given important support to the idea of the global common good as an ideal that tempers national sovereignty and reflects a spirit of interdependence and humanitarianism that transforms the set of problems associated with possession of and access to nuclear weapons.

As it slowly unfolds, CST is also articulating further principles that have deep relevance to the ethics and politics of nuclear weapons, regarding ecology, sustainability, and the topic of the most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, namely authentic human development. For nuclear weapons cannot be successfully grasped, much less countered, without a full sense of how their regime is bound up with economic inequalities and unsustainable environmental practices. The burgeoning of the Catholic conception of peace has been marked by a shift in Church pronouncements from the bishops' reluctant characterization in 1983 of the deterrence regime as "peace of a sort" to Cardinal Martino's more recent acknowledgment that nuclear weapons are in the end not consonant with "the peace we seek."

Finally, visional ethics is a theological exercise that requires, depending on how you view it, the disclosure of a truth to be witnessed to or the identification of a leap of faith to be taken. Either perspective can be pointed toward by my closing quote, from Paul VI: "If you wish to be brothers, let the weapons fall from your hands" (UN speech 1965).