

“Nuclear Weapons and the Moral Compass”

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply grateful to the Permanent Mission of the Philippines and to the Global Security Institute for hosting this event, with special thanks to Ambassador Libran Cabactulan and Jonathan Granoff for inviting the World Evangelical Alliance’s participation. The WEA is one of the three global Christian bodies, representing more than 600 million Christians across 129 national evangelical alliances, and it is my honor to join the other speakers and offer remarks on behalf of the WEA today.

One of the benefits of being an evangelical is that nobody expects you to be moderate so I will just jump right in.

Let’s begin by admitting that, nearly 70 years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that which can be thought about the immorality of nuclear weapons has already been said. We should not be anticipating some new piece of moral reasoning so sharp it will cut through the Gordian knot of global nuclear politics. Certainly it will not come from the WEA. Humility demands that we acknowledge that we are late in coming to trenches where our brothers and sisters from the Roman Catholic Church and World Council of Churches – as well as our neighbors in many other faith traditions – have labored long and faithfully. Hopefully our immoderation will help make up for our tardiness.

But, to clarify that the three global bodies representing between them the world’s two billion Christians are in vocal agreement on this matter – for the first time in history, it’s worth noting – let me recapitulate that which we all know: nuclear weapons, like every other creation of human hands, are at base merely a technology. Like all technologies, they give us a capacity or ability to do a particular thing – in this case, to make an unimaginably large explosion. Like all technologies, they cannot be uninvented. And thus, like all technologies, the first moral question regarding nuclear weapons is: what are the normative moral parameters for this capacity?

The 69-year-and-counting taboo against the use of nuclear weapons in war constitutes a robust de facto norm of non-use, the de jure force of which is upheld, from a Christian perspective, by any analysis of the theological ethics governing war and peace. That is, the only legitimate goal for such weapons is that they never be used, under any circumstances.

Given this operating principle, the second moral question regarding nuclear weapons – which should unite us all – is which is the prudential structure best suited to manage the technology toward this outcome?

During the Cold War, the prevailing conventional wisdom was, of course, that the threat of nuclear weapons – deterrence – was an essential component of ensuring their non-use. I leave aside for now whether this was ever moral. But in the multipolarity of the post-Cold War era, the perpetual reliability of deterrence to prevent nuclear conflict seems implausible at best. It is certain that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the nuclear powers' reliance on deterrence cannot indefinitely coexist. Indeed, because deterrence requires nuclear possession, it incentivizes proliferation and thus instability, making it a seemingly self-defeating strategy. Thus a technique ostensibly intended to ensure nuclear non-use instead leads inexorably toward the opposite end.

Now, however, a new conventional wisdom has emerged – for anyone with eyes to see, at least – that the only prudential strategy with a chance of resulting in perpetual nuclear non-use is the universal prohibition and verifiable elimination of these weapons. If this is true, then it is the only politics deserving of moral sanction.

Unfortunately, our actual politics may be going in precisely the opposite direction – not because of moral disagreement, but because the narrowly conceived, near-term security interests of each state seems to counsel precisely the opposite course of action required by the long-term, existential security interests of all states. I confess it thus seems unlikely to me that moral discourse will penetrate and transform the immediate situation, and as a result I believe there is every likelihood that the countries of the world will lead us into some form of nuclear catastrophe. (I am speaking personally here; the WEA is not in the prognostication business.)

So, what, then, of the moral compass? Why then speak? If we can expect no efficacy from our words?

A Roman general returning from foreign conquest enjoyed the glory of a triumphal procession through the Eternal City. As legend has it, it was custom for him to have his slave sit with him in his chariot. Beneath the roars of the acclaiming crowd, the slave would murmur, over and over again: *memento mori, memento mori*. Remember that you will die. O king: you, too, are mortal.

We who traffic in moral claims are the slave, and we must be as relentless. Our words lack any power to compel; our declarations are only accepted when they align with national interest. We are, in fact, entirely powerless. But our words are powerful because they are true. And that truth is that no matter how powerful the king there is an authority that is greater still. The apparent absence of this authority on a global level is in fact the very crisis which the United Nations was created to address. It will always be easy, even self-evident, for the mighty of the world to imagine that nothing and no-one stands above them. But no, we say: there is a God in heaven who will someday judge. Therefore we speak, so there is a record of witness, that no nation may stand before the throne of judgment at the end and claim that they did not know.

Well, and what is the standard of this judgment? Just this: that the stakes of the nuclear wager radically exceed the moral accounts of any nation. The recent rise in discussion about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, whose conferences the legal

nuclear powers have so far decided not to attend, is a welcome reminder that these devices are not simply the province of state security. These are weapons of indiscriminate destruction with potentially limitless effect, and the lives that they put at risk are not trifling matters.

The power that nations wield often gives them the illusion of substance. But states, for all their worth, are purely functional entities, existing to serve their people. I mean no insult to those here who serve governments; it is a noble calling. But they are at best fictional constructs, albeit with guns; at worst, demonic powers and principalities. They were not created in the image of God; Christ was not crucified for them. The greatest empire has less standing in the court of heaven than a single child.

So we here respectfully remind them of their relative stature, and plead they recalibrate their standards of security. Who knows? Perhaps our murmuring in the chariot will have some effect. I do not expect it to; the kings of the earth are notoriously deaf to the pleas of servants. But we may take hope by remembering that God has done stranger things than these. When the prophet Jonah preached God's judgment over Ninevah, the king put on sackcloth. The city fasted and raised lament and repented. And all were saved.