
Catastrophe and Christian Responsibility

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE NUCLEAR ERA

by *Edwin B. Firmage*

NUCLEAR WEAPONRY HAS PRESENTED THE greatest challenge and threat to humanity and to Christian belief in world history. Some of these problems are deep but are not unique to the nuclear era: Under what conditions—if indeed any at all—may one human being justifiably take another's life? Other problems, while not uniquely caused by nuclear weapons, are raised to a level of probability and scope never before seen. Genocide is an international crime which carries with it no conceivable justification or mitigation. Genocide has been committed by tyrants through many periods of world history and can be accomplished with enough time with crude weaponry or by famine and pestilence; or with efficient dispatch by a non-nuclear industrial state as Nazi Germany demonstrated in the holocaust of World War II. But the power of nuclear weapons, their number, and the increasing number of nuclear weapon states and other potential non-state nuclear actors such as terrorist groups make the possible scope of genocide, and its likelihood over time, greater than ever before. And by this decade of the nuclear era, at least, we now have the capacity to end human civilization as we have known it, and perhaps to end all life on the planet. No generation before has had this power, this threat, this challenge. Governments may yet act to reverse this arms race toward suicide of the species. If governments—including our own—continue to prove their incompetence and obduracy against meeting this challenge, the time will very shortly come when the Christian disciple must ask himself the most searching questions about ultimate allegiance and the meaning of the first commandment. But even if governments move with more sensitivity, acuity and dispatch than they have shown so far, we have now passed that point where law and government can remove forever the threat of nuclear annihilation of the world. Even if by some political miracle nuclear weaponry could be removed from earth, the knowledge of the atom would

remain. We can never return to the innocence of a pre-nuclear Eden. Every future generation will have the option of initiating once again a nuclear arms race and nuclear war. Ultimately, mankind must experience a rise in consciousness, a conversion if you will, so that we do not destroy the race. This ultimate necessity goes beyond the capacity of law and government alone. It calls for religious leadership which can transcend both the nation-state and its own sectarian divisions.

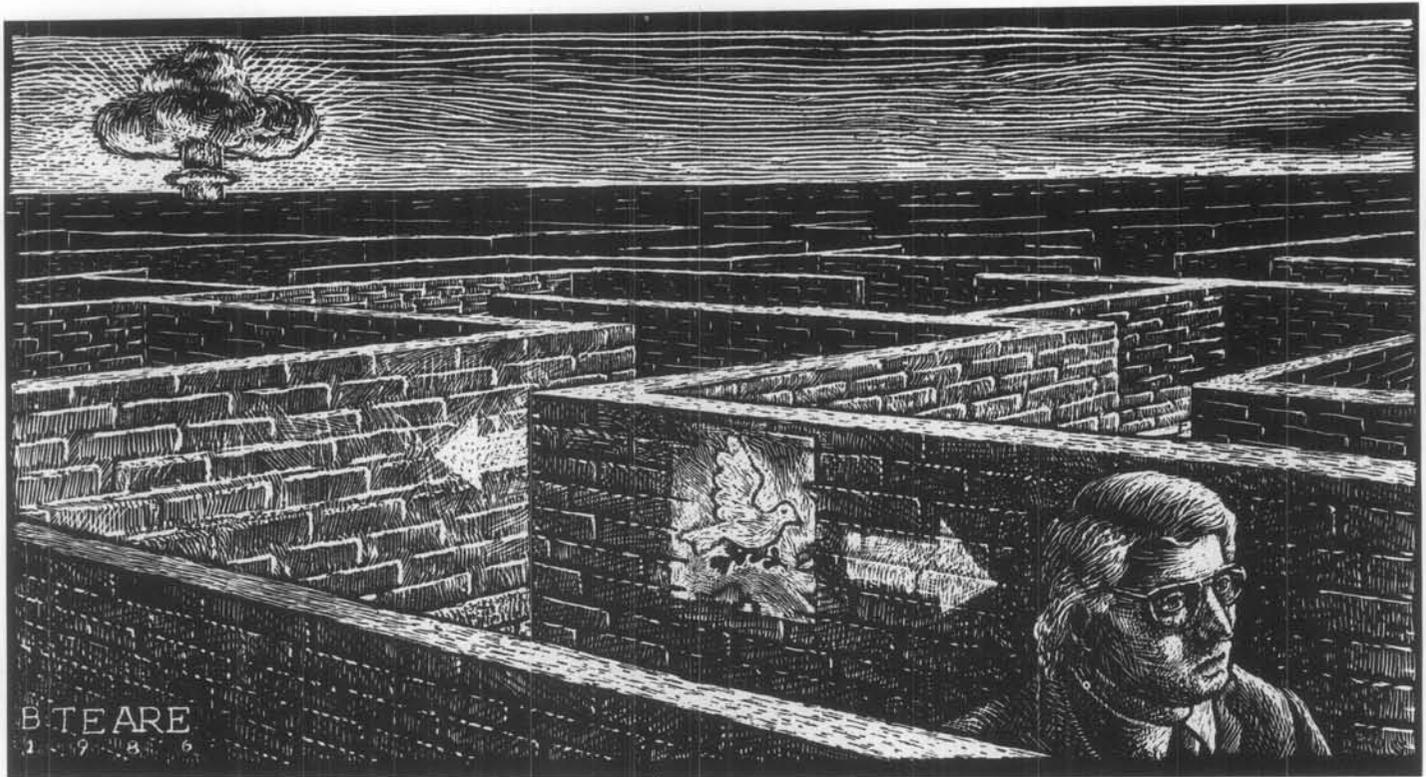
In a nuclear war of significant (though far from maximum) scope, 1.1 billion people would likely die in the initial blasts, radiation and fire.¹ Approximately the same number would die soon thereafter in an indirect, radiation-related pandemic.^{2, 3}

There are steps we might take to avoid this fate.

First, there must be a moratorium on any further development and deployment of nuclear weaponry. We must halt the quantitative arms race. Since we possess at least 40 times more nuclear weapons than would be necessary to obliterate the Soviet Union and any combination of other states, this moratorium must be accompanied by deep cuts to bring our nuclear arsenals below the point where they might trigger a nuclear winter. We can no longer afford the macabre humor implicit in the argument that we maintain and add to a nuclear stockpile so large that the detonation of a small fraction might end life on earth in order to protect our national security.

Second, the United States should immediately stop any further testing of nuclear weaponry and delivery systems and invite the Soviet Union and other nuclear and non-nuclear states similarly to suspend further testing. A complete test ban is perhaps the single most important step we might now take to end the qualitative or technological arms race. The ongoing efforts of the United States and the Soviet Union to leapfrog the other's nuclear deterrent by a devastating technological breakthrough is the greatest threat to arms limitation and to a world without nuclear war. Our own attempt, and that of the Soviet Union, to add so-called defensive weaponry, or "star wars" technology, to our

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arsenals without first severely limiting the enormous number of offensive weaponry, is a prime example of this threat, as MIRV was in the last decade. States do not deploy new weapons systems which they cannot test. A complete test ban would blunt severely if not end the qualitative arms race. An administration which chooses, contrarily, to continue testing in the face of every opportunity to have such an agreement is guilty of criminal malfeasance of office. Such a group would treat arms control as a public relations problem with which to manipulate a people. Meanwhile, those vital years when agreement could be had are squandered by ideologues and ignoramuses who think that great states can be intimidated into compliance, and that the deepest moral and spiritual problems can be solved by technology.

Third, the development by or transfer of nuclear weapons and material to states without nuclear weapons should be prohibited by international law and enforced with international sanctions. This can only be done when both the quantitative and qualitative arms races are seriously dealt with by the two superpowers, rather than the mockery made of arms limitation by this administration. The two town drunks hardly have the credibility to preach the virtue of abstinence to the rest of the world, let alone enforce it. But if other states were to see the superpowers make serious, sustained cutbacks in their nuclear arsenals and refrain from further testing and development of such weaponry, then the moral base would be present for an agreement to end what over the long term, and I fear a short long term, must surely be the most fearsome arms race of all. For a world in which twenty states, and eventually terrorist organizations as well, possess nuclear weapons, regardless of the sophistication of the delivery systems, has entered, perhaps irreversibly, into a deterministic phase of life in

which talk of agency or choice becomes rhetorical drivel. By then war would seem inevitable, whether by accident, miscalculation or insanity; or, like the sanity of Adolf Eichmann and the Holocaust, most probably by rational acts by loyal functionaries of the state for whom obedience is the first law of heaven. *

Fourth, the illusion of fighting and winning nuclear war, with the deadly concomitant of developing an endless smorgasbord of nuclear weaponry meant to use and not simply to deter, must be exorcised. No combination of defensive weaponry, civil defense and population dispersal, and exotic new and accurate nuclear weapons can ever make it possible to fight and win a nuclear war. Whether or not "nuclear winter" is a scientific fact, as it appears to be, man is a social being. There is simply no doubt that the social fabric of mankind would be so badly riven by nuclear war that our human society would not restore itself over our lifetime, nor that of our children and theirs for generations to come. Those who believe otherwise, based on zeal without knowledge, should be removed from public office.

Nor should we prepare weapons and train troops to respond to conventional assault with nuclear war. We should not risk human society on the dubious proposition that nuclear war once begun can be contained. Whatever the political decision at the moment of massive conventional assault, even if the decision at the presidential level would be in favor of restraint against the use of nuclear weapons, an army trained and equipped to use nuclear weapons might well use them in the chaos of actual war.

Nuclear weapons, until that time when with God's help, they may be forever and completely removed from the earth, should

be developed and deployed with one function only determining their nature and number: nuclear weapons are not weapons meant to ever be used but are simply instruments to deter other nuclear weapons. Period. Under such a conception there is no need of endless numbers and variety and training for the use of such weapons.

The technology of war has evolved to a point where we must progress in law and government and, more fundamentally, in social consciousness to a level beyond what we have attained so far. The realization of agreements for nuclear disarmament like those sketched here would represent one of the greatest possible accomplishments of law and government in history. The limited, fragile attempts at arms control over the past forty years have been overwhelmed by human fear and the resulting torrent of spending on military technology and armaments. No evidence from our past indicates that such agreements are likely. Similarly, states have generally not resolved disputes which have involved vital national interests by peaceful means, but have resorted to war. Arms limitation and techniques to peacefully resolve disputes would seem to have a bleak future. Yet if this, or something very like this, cannot be done, then we are lost.

The key to this accomplishment in law lies in the human soul. We must first change our minds and our spirits before we will possess the will to change our law. And this seems even more idealistic and impossible than simply changing the legal superstructure of our society. Yet, again, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is no other way.

We must come to see each other as we really are. I believe that objective evil, or something approaching it, does exist. An almost complete dichotomy between good and evil, therefore, may appear historically. Adolf Hitler may approach that in his impact on society. World War II, in some justifiable oversimplification might be considered a "just war" where good of necessity battled evil. But most conflicts and almost all people cannot be categorized this way. Instead, World War I, Vietnam, the Cold War, and others offer more than enough misunderstanding, greed, avarice, stupidity and fear—particularly fear—to go around. The differences we think we see between ourselves and our brothers and sisters in Russia or China or Eastern Europe are often simply our

fearful projections from our own souls onto them. Until the beams in our own eyes are removed we will continue to eviscerate each other as we try to pluck out the motes from our brother's eye.

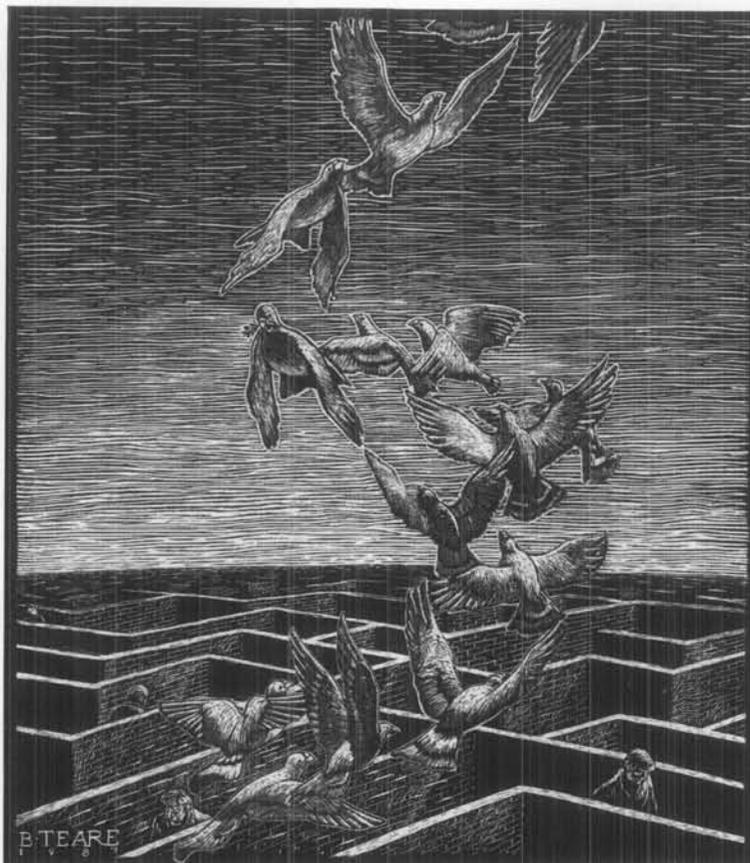
Tyrants in every age have attempted to remove attention from their own malfeasance by identifying the enemy "out there." The "evil empire" is in our own souls. Only when we and the Soviets, and the Israelis, Palestinians, Libyans, and the South Africans and Salvadorians and Nicaraguans comprehend this can we have peace. Leadership which cultivates and panders to fear of other people and other nations fouls the well from which all must drink. The credibility of such an administration will eventually disappear. But the loss of trust in government will be a cost paid by succeeding administrations. Most vital, this precious time when agreements to reverse the nuclear arms race and develop means of peacefully resolving disputes are possible will be squandered and may not come again.

The challenge to prophetic religion is even greater than the seemingly insurmountable barriers confronting the world's statesmen. Every major religious tradition has taught of a God-like love which can transform our being. A turning, or conversion, is sought individually. If this were to be done throughout society, a change in social consciousness would result. We would understand that

we are meant to love and not kill.

The Christian disciple, the disciple in any tradition, must face this challenge as the greatest goal of our time. The commandment to love ourselves, our neighbor and our enemy commits us to deal with what is directly before us. No one is exempted in that the injunction obliges us, by definition, to work precisely within the circumstance and with the people we have the capacity to reach. No one need be a Secretary of State or President to love self, neighbor and enemy. As each of us touches another in love, both are transformed. This process can continue and multiply as surely and effectively as a chain reaction. The critical mass, the core, is the individual.

This, to me, is a vital part of the Incarnation, God with us. Through prophetic teaching God can bring us so far. But then He must show us, not simply tell us, how we assume His likeness. The Incarnation is His response. In that sense, the life of Jesus,



and St. Francis of Assisi, and Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa, show us the way. We transcend law as it is embodied in our lives, as the Apostle Paul taught, seeking Christ's image. Each soul can touch another. To this process race, gender, nationality, religious tradition are all irrelevant.

Never before in human history have the results of our own actions forced us to choose with such awful consequences the gods we worship. Surely the essence of the first commandment is that we will become like that which we worship. Any state which commands genocide as an act of allegiance has become a penultimate idol. We are commanded to worship the Father through emulation of His Son, who taught and demonstrated that we must love and not kill. The first commandment demands and the first amendment protects such allegiance and discipleship.

NOTES:

1. "Effects of the Use of Nuclear Weapons," Group of Experts, Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations, in *Toward Nuclear Disarmament and Global Security: A Search for Alternatives*, B.H. Weston, ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), pp. 29-56.

2. See, e.g., "The Effects of the Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946), detailing these and other effects of nuclear weapons. See also *Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings*, the Committee for the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (New York: Basic Books, 1981); *The Effects of Nuclear War*, Office of Technology Assessment, Congress of the United States (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, May 1979). Physicians recently are becoming increasingly concerned about the devastating effects of nuclear war. The seminal and still key research in this area of the medical consequences of nuclear war is Ervin, et al., "The Medical Consequences of Thermonuclear War," *New England Journal of Medicine* 266(22): 1127-1137 (1962); see also Hiatt, "The Final Epidemic: Prescriptions for Prevention," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 252(5): 635-644 (3 August 1984).

3. Sagan, "Nuclear Winter: Global Consequences of Multiple Nuclear Explosions," *Science*, vol. 222, p. 128 (23 December 1983); Ehrlich, et. al., "Long-Term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War," *Science*, vol. 222, pp. 1293-1300 (23 December 1983). According to those studies, even relatively limited nuclear exchange would ignite tremendous fires whose toxic plumes of black smoke would shroud the Northern Hemisphere in a pall of darkness for weeks or months. The physical environment of the earth would instantly become inhospitable to virtually all life forms; freezing, starvation, sickness, epirradiation, death—and perhaps extinction—would follow.

4. "One of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him perfectly sane. I do not doubt it at all, and that is precisely why I find it disturbing.

"If all the Nazis had been psychotics, as some of their leaders probably were, their appalling cruelty would have been in some sense easier to understand. It is much worse to consider this 'calm,

well balanced' unperturbed official conscientiously going about his desk work, his administrative job which happened to be the supervision of mass murder. He was thoughtful, orderly, unimaginative. He had a profound respect for system, for law and order. He was obedient, loyal, a faithful officer for a great state. He served his government very well.

"He was not bothered much by guilt. I have not heard that he developed psychosomatic illnesses. Apparently he slept well . . . He had a good appetite, or so it seems . . .

"It all comes under the heading of duty, self-sacrifice, and obedience. Eichmann was devoted to duty, and proud of his job.

"The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane ones who are most dangerous.

"It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, the sane ones, have prepared. What makes us so sure, after all, that the danger comes from a psychotic getting into a position to fire the first shot in a nuclear war? Psychotics will be suspect. The sane ones will keep them far from the button. No one suspects the sane, and the sane ones will have perfectly good reasons, logical, well-adjusted reasons, for firing the shot. They will be obeying the sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command. And because of their sanity they will have no qualms at all. When the missiles take off, then, it will be no mistake . . .

"No, Eichmann was sane. The generals and fighters on both sides, in World War II, the ones who carried out the total destruction of entire cities, these were the sane ones. Those who have invented and developed atomic bombs, thermonuclear bombs, missiles; who have planned the strategy of the next war; who have evaluated the various possibilities of using bacterial and chemical agents; these are not the crazy people, they are the sane people. The ones who coolly estimate how many millions of victims can be considered expendable in a nuclear war, I presume they do all right with the Rorschach ink blots too. On the other hand, you will probably find the the pacifists and the ban-the-bomb people are, quite seriously, just as we read in *Time*, a little crazy.

"I am beginning to realize that 'sanity' is no longer a value or an end in itself. The 'sanity' of modern man is about as useful to him as the huge bulk and muscles of the dinosaur. If we were a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival. But if he is sane, too sane perhaps we must say that in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally sane."

Thomas Merton, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," from *Raids on the Unspeakable*; see also Dorothee Soelle and Fulbert Steffensky, *Not Just Yes and Amen* (Fortress Press, 1983).