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TRIDENT - A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

A reflection by Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet, President of the Methodist Peace Fellowship

BASIC FACTS

The British Trident Defence System consists of four nuclear submarines, each with 16 missiles on board. Each missile has between three and eight warheads. Each of these warheads has at least ten times the destructive power of the bomb that flattened Hiroshima in 1945 and killed 100,000 people. One of the submarines is always at sea ready for action.

This system will reach the end of its shelf-life between 2025 and 2030. Decision on whether or not to renew or replace it has to be made soon because of the complex technicalities involved.

The cost of replacement would be, on present estimates, between £25 billion and £30 billion - enough money to provide 120,000 newly qualified nurses every year for ten years.

Some countries have got rid of their nuclear weapons: South Africa, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus. The need to make a decision opens up the whole question of whether Britain should follow their example and become a nuclear weapons free state.

A THEOLOGICAL QUESTION

The question whether or not to replace or renew Trident is a political question and it is a moral question, but for the Christian it is also a theological question. The purpose of this paper is to look at the matter from the standpoint of Christian theology. Any such consideration must, of course, show an awareness of the political and moral issues involved because theological judgements do not exist in a vacuum. Theology is essentially thinking about God and his purposes for the world. Any theological statement or judgement about a contemporary issue will only be valid and useful if it is the result of a careful examination of the relevant facts in the light of Christian belief.

CHURCH STATEMENTS

The British government has called for an open debate on the question of Trident replacement and church leaders have urged Christians to get involved in that debate. In July 2006 a number of Anglican bishops wrote a joint letter to the Independent newspaper urging members of parliament to take seriously the views of the churches. They said that 'nuclear weapons challenge the very core of our faith.'

The historic peace churches - Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers - believe that there is no ethical, practical or theological justification for nuclear weapons. Pacifist Christians in the

other denominations take the same view. A number of church assemblies, including the Methodist Conference, have registered their opposition to Trident replacement. In May 2006 the Church of Scotland and the Catholic and Episcopal Churches in Scotland signed a joint resolution:

“We urge the government of the United Kingdom not to invest in a replacement for the Trident system and to begin now the process of decommissioning these weapons with the intention of diverting the sums spent on nuclear weaponry to programmes of aid and development.”

In his 'Message for the Celebrations of World Peace Day' (1 January 2006) Pope Benedict XVI described the policy of reliance on nuclear weapons as 'not only baneful but completely fallacious,' and called for 'a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament.'

These judgements have resulted from discussions about the legality of nuclear weapons, the morality of their possession and use, and their practical usefulness as a means of defence. I propose to look briefly at each of these headings before coming to the specifically theological insights, which should undergird any Christian judgement.

LEGALITY, MORALITY AND PRACTICALITY

a). Legality. In 1996 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) gave an advisory opinion on whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons is permitted under international law. It asserted that any threat or use of force in contravention of Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter and which fails to meet Article 51 of that Charter would be unlawful. The Court found itself unable to conclude definitely 'whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake.'

It is difficult to imagine any scenario in which that statement would make sense and many were disappointed at the failure of the ICJ to reach a completely clear conclusion. The Court did, however, re-affirm the disarmament obligations of the nuclear states under the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. That Treaty commits those states to undertake good-faith negotiations leading to 'the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.'

b). Morality. The church has always been concerned about the morality of warfare. Although at the beginning it took a largely pacifist view, when the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and made it the state religion, the church undertook to assist in the defence of the state. The definition of 'just war,' developed by Augustine, Ambrose, Aquinas and others has sought to define the circumstances in which Christians would be justified in resorting to arms and the rules of engagement. It has always been a doctrine of limitation. In practice it has always been difficult or impossible to stay within the limitations of 'just war.'

It has become increasingly clear that modern methods of mechanised warfare and the use of weapons of almost unlimited destructive power could never be termed 'just' by reference to the traditional requirements. To mention only one of those: there must be no attack on civilians. In these days 90% of the casualties in war are civilians. It is beyond dispute that the traditional teaching of the church rules out the use of nuclear weapons. It is a well-established ethical judgement that if it is wrong to do something, it is also wrong to threaten to do it.

c). Practicality. The argument about the deterrent value of nuclear weapons is fundamentally illogical. A weapon can only deter if it is recognised that it could be used. But if it were ever used, it would not have deterred. The existence of nuclear weapons has not prevented wars over the past fifty years; neither has it prevented terrorist attacks - the main threat to our security today.

We do not need to have such weapons to secure 'a seat at the top table.' The five permanent members of the UN Security Council were chosen before anyone had nuclear weapons. In any reform of the membership of the Council, the nuclear status of the candidates would not be significant.

The continued possession of nuclear weapons is an incentive to proliferation and the very opposite of an aid to security.

The idea that Trident is 'Britain's independent deterrent' is a nonsense. It depends on the United States in all sorts of ways and could never be used without American approval and assistance.

THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

The basic sources of Christian theology are the Bible, reason and tradition. It is of the utmost importance that sound principles of biblical interpretation are established before scripture is used in the service of theology. A central principle is that of development. The Bible is held by Christians to be a 'holy book,' but that does not mean that truth is spread evenly over every page. In fact the Bible is the story of two ideas in conflict.

In parts of the Bible we read of terrible acts of violence and even of genocide (e.g. the slaughter of the Amalekites recorded in 1 Samuel chapter 15). These terrible acts are often described as having been done at the express command of God.

There is, however, a quite different idea that surfaces again and again. For example, in the story of Joseph, ill-treated by his jealous brothers, but showing them great kindness when they came to Egypt seeking relief supplies. (Genesis 44 & 45).

The Bible shows how God's people moved from error to truth, from partial understanding to fuller understandings of God's nature, from narrow tribalism to glorious universalism.

Unless this principle of development is understood, random quotations from the scriptures can be used to justify all kinds of bad behaviour. Indeed, the followers of three great Abrahamic faiths - Christianity, Judaism and Islam - have often been guilty of this false justification because they have failed to understand that there is in their sacred writings a movement from primitive to more mature views of God's nature and purposes. That is why religion, which should be the midwife of peace, has so often been the fomentor of strife and bloodshed.

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. This is a small word with large meanings. It signifies not just the absence of war but harmony, wholeness and health in all human relationships. That all-embracing harmony affects both humanity and the whole of creation. The visionary heights of Old Testament prophecy are full of radiant images of *shalom*: joy and peace that cause the trees to clap their hands, new covenants written on the heart, the forecasts of one who will come to be the Prince of Peace. Ezekiel and Isaiah speak of God's

redemption as universal. Narrow nationalism is repudiated and servanthood is exalted.

Jesus came as the fulfilment of all that prophecy. His Sermon on the Mount is the great declaration of peace. We are bidden to love our enemies. Hatred destroys both them and us. St Paul's letters expound the theme of peace as being of the very essence of God's purpose for humanity. In Christ everything in heaven and on earth is to be brought into unity (Ephesians 1:10).

It would be good to report that Christians everywhere are agreed on precisely how the gospel imperatives for peace are to be translated into concrete action, but this is not so. However, in spite of different traditions, there has been emerging a broad Christian consensus, which agrees that the manufacture, possession, use, or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible. One unitive aspect of this consensus is its recognition that nuclear weapons threaten the very fabric and future of the planet.

It is increasingly clear that the really big issues affecting the future of humanity are global issues. The threat to the environment caused by global warming is only one example of the need to mobilise the concern and resources of all nations in a battle the outcome of which affects us all.

The question whether or not to replace or renew Trident must be seen against this wider background. And for the Christian is, as I have argued, a theological question. The Bible begins with what we now call ecology: God's charge to humanity to be the stewards of his creation. Christians who oppose Trident and the manufacture, possession and use of nuclear weapons believe that they are acting in obedience to the divine will.

Kenneth Greet

Prayer

God our father, we thank you for the privilege of standing with all those who oppose the manufacture, testing and use of nuclear weapons, which we believe to be wholly contrary to your will and purpose. Help us to use our minds as we respond to false arguments and give us a readiness to work with all who seek the way of peace and reconciliation, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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