

# The Catholic Church and the Arms Race

J. Bryan Hehir

No question of foreign affairs surpasses the arms race in terms of moral complexity and moral content. Along with the correlative issue of world poverty, the arms race forms the heart of the moral agenda of foreign policy. The Roman Catholic bishops of our country attach overriding significance to the arms race and its threat to the sacredness of life.

The massive technical complexity of the arms race in its political and strategic dimensions is something that people in our government grapple with daily. We respect that technical complexity and have tried to assimilate it in this testimony. At the same time, for the church the arms race is principally a problem defined in religious and moral categories. The specter of war, in any form, raises for Christian ethics the central question of the taking of human life. Since the life of every single human, of whatever race or continent, bears the sacred dignity of the image of God, the question of the religious and moral significance of warfare has received more sustained reflection in Roman Catholic theology than almost any other moral problem. From St. Augustine's masterful treatment of war in Chapter XIX of *The City of God* to the Second Vatican Council's injunction to the church that it should "undertake a completely fresh appraisal of war"<sup>1</sup> there has been present in Catholic tradition an abiding, if not always effective, determination to limit the impact of war on the human family.

We wish to draw from the resources of this religious and moral tradition categories of analysis we believe are valuable tools for analyzing the dimensions, dangers, and issues of the arms race today. Accordingly, I will proceed with this examination in four steps: (1) a sketch of the moral and religious themes that shape our views; (2) the imperative of arms control; (3) the ethic of nuclear deterrence and strategy; (4) the problem of arms exports.

---

J. BRYAN HEHIR is Associate Secretary for International Justice and Peace at the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC), the public policy agency for the Catholic bishops of the United States. This article is based on testimony he presented on behalf of the USCC before the U.S. House Committee on Armed Services.

## I. The Problem of War: Religious and Moral Categories

From the rich vision of the Old Testament notion of peace conveyed by the word *shalom* to the New Testament announcement of the birth of Jesus in terms of peace there is an abiding witness in the Scriptures that God wills peace for his people. Peace in this vision is not simply the absence of war; *shalom* conveys a sense that peace grows out of a complex set of conditions marked by justice and equity among people and a right relation with their God. Peace in this sense is the fruit of order, an order based on justice. One task of the religious communities that have inherited the biblical vision is to keep alive the hope and drive for peace. A policy that fosters peace must grow from and be supported by a psychology and spirit of peace in the public opinion of nations; the church has an abiding duty, not always well met, to cultivate the spirit of peace as a precondition for a substantial policy of peace in our nation.

The Christian tradition is eloquent about the vision of peace. It is also realistic about the fact of war. The same biblical and theological tradition that articulates the idea of peace acknowledges war as a constant possibility, a recurring fact of life, and at times even a justified endeavor. The affirmation of peace as the desired condition of the human race and the acknowledgment of war as possibly justifiable shapes the moral problem of war in Christian tradition. At the heart of this problem is the sacredness of the human person. Each human life has unique value; it is never simply negotiable for other goods or values. At the same time, in a still decentralized international system, devoid as yet of effective public authority or an effective legal system, "governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense once all peace efforts have failed."<sup>2</sup>

Faced with this compelling conflict, a strong, vocal, and now quite visible part of the Christian and Roman Catholic community has formulated one moral response to war by regarding any participation in it incompatible with Christian faith and witness. This pacifist response has found a growing receptivity among Catholics in our

own day, but it has not been the dominant Catholic analysis about the problem of warfare. The dominant response, still reflected in the teaching of the church today,<sup>3</sup> has acknowledged in principle the legitimacy of warfare that has been undertaken by the state for the common good but is pursued within detailed rules of limitation. In this "just war" tradition the abiding moral concern has been to protect, even in the midst of war, the sacredness of human life and values related to life.<sup>4</sup>

To fulfill this task the key categories used have been the principles of noncombatant immunity (or discrimination) and the principle of proportionality. These moral norms have served to guide the analysis about which kinds of war are in fact justified and which actions within warfare are considered legitimate. The principles are not the whole ethic of warfare; indeed, we find in Catholic teaching since World War II that the justifiable causes for war have been reduced from *several* legitimating reasons to the *one* justification of self-defense of one's own citizenry or others under unjustified attack.<sup>5</sup>

The analytical principles of discrimination and proportionality, however, are the most useful categories in analyzing the contemporary arms race. They are reflected in the following statement from the Pastoral Letter of the American bishops in 1968, *Human Life in Our Day*:

We join wholeheartedly in the [Vatican] Council's condemnation of wars fought without limitation. We recognize the right of legitimate self-defense and, in a world society still unorganized, the necessity for recourse to armed defense and to collective security action in the absence of a competent authority on the international level and once peaceful means have been exhausted. But we seek to limit warfare and to humanize it, where it remains a last resort, in the maximum degree possible. Most of all, we urge the enlisting of the energies of all men of good will in forging the instruments of peace, to the end that war may at long last be outlawed.

This basic statement of the relationship of Catholic moral teaching and contemporary warfare will guide the analysis of the following three issues.

## II. Arms Control

The significance of the present moment for arms control is that the U.S. and the Soviet Union appear to be at a crossroad regarding the future of the nuclear arms race. This is not the first time such an intersection has been faced, but the history of the past thirty years manifests few substantial limits imposed on nuclear weapons. It is not my purpose to say this is the most significant turning point in the arms race; it is enough to say that we do face choices which can limit or expand the arms competition.

We are aware that, in the public debate as well as in testimony before the Congress, distinguished experts on arms policy have offered quite divergent assessments of the significance of the present moment. These assessments include contending conceptions of at least three

main issues: (1) the relationship between strategic power and political influence in the world; (2) the state of technology in the arms race and projections about future developments; and (3) an analysis of the strategic doctrine of each superpower. Running through these opposing calculations is another set of factors that divides the experts and, to some degree, the general public. The contending parties divide on what value is most threatened by the arms race. One group sees the primary question as a threat to U.S. security; another group sees the primary issue as the need to establish control over the technological dynamic of the arms race. Neither side makes a unilateral argument for pursuing security with no concern for control or for purchasing control at the cost of eroding security, but the emphasis given one value shapes different recommendations for U.S. policy.<sup>6</sup>

The bishops have assessed these contrasting evaluations of the political, strategic, and technological dimensions of the arms race but do not believe that they have a unique contribution to make to this level of the arms debate. Rather, they wish to relate a body of moral principles and assessments based upon them to the complexity of the technical debate.

The use of weapons of mass destructiveness was unreservedly condemned in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council in the following words:

...Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation....

Scientific weapons, to be sure, are not amassed solely for use in war. The defensive strength of any nation is considered to be dependent upon its capacity for immediate retaliation against an adversary. Hence this accumulation of arms, which increases each year, also serves, in a way heretofore unknown, as a deterrent to possible enemy attack. Many regard this state of affairs as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time....<sup>7</sup>

This position involves a prohibition of the use of weapons that cause the kind of damage nuclear weapons produce in a civilian area. Complementing this prohibition is a marginally defined tolerance of a deterrent strategy. The tolerance is qualified by a warning regarding the inadequacy of deterrence as a basis for peace.

Whatever be the case with the method of deterrence, men should be convinced that the arms race in which so many countries are engaged is not a safe way to preserve a steady peace.<sup>8</sup>

The delicate balance of this statement matches the complexity of the issue it judges. The problem, as both strategists and moralists realize, is that the credibility and efficacy of the deterrent lies in the perception others have that the nation that possesses the weapons will use them if necessary. Since the success of deterrence is tied

---

***“At best...deterrence can be regarded as a necessary evil, the fragility of which should impel nations to pursue arms control with new intensity.”***

---

so closely to doing something that is morally prohibited by contemporary Catholic teaching, the narrowly defined tolerance of deterrence has been maintained in the teaching with the greatest difficulty. The tension between intention and action was manifested most clearly in a statement of the U.S. bishops in 1976, which went significantly beyond Vatican II in its critique of deterrence:

With respect to nuclear weapons, at least those with massive destructive capability, the first imperative is to prevent their use. As possessors of a vast nuclear arsenal, we must also be aware that not only is it wrong to attack civilian populations but it is also wrong to threaten to attack them as part of a strategy of deterrence. We urge the continued development and implementation of policies which seek to bring these weapons more securely under control, progressively reduce their presence in the world, and ultimately remove them entirely.<sup>9</sup>

At best, therefore, deterrence can be regarded as a necessary evil, the fragility of which should impel nations to pursue arms control with new intensity. It is now twelve years since the Vatican Council issued its condemnation, and the arms race continues. This situation may account for the unusually harsh and unyielding language employed by the Holy See in a 1976 intervention at the United Nations. The arms race was described as a danger and an injustice that not only threatened the life of the human community but also constituted an “act of aggression” against the poor, who stand in dire need of the \$300 billion annually expended on arms.<sup>10</sup> Against the background of this teaching, failure to take every reasonable and necessary step to bring the current SALT II negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion, as one step we can take toward disarmament, must surely be judged capricious and irresponsible. Of course other citizens can reach a similar judgment without using the teachings I have quoted, but my purpose is to illustrate that the Roman Catholic church supports every honest effort that can be made in this area.

For my purposes it is not necessary to spell out all the essentials of a satisfactory agreement. It should suffice to say that, ideally, any agreement should result in stopping further accumulation of strategic weapons and should prepare for subsequent agreements to bring about reductions in weapon stocks. Such an agreement should be supplemented by a comprehensive test ban, perhaps the most effective way to discourage experimentation with new weapon systems. If possible, there

should be agreement to halt the development of new weapons systems. It is unlikely that all these conditions can be met in the course of SALT II negotiations. But the important intermediate goal is to reach some kind of SALT II agreement that will clear the way for the third stage of negotiations in which such refinements may be possible.

### III. Nuclear Strategy: Issues and Options

Even those who, if barely, can justify deterrence in moral terms are not released from the further task of analyzing the political and moral questions *within* deterrent strategy. Two matters illustrate the complexity of these choices in the larger concern for arms control I have spelled out in the previous section of this presentation. The *first* is the debate between those who favor principal reliance on a mutual-assured-destruction strategy vs. those who would reorient policy in the direction of a counterforce option (without necessarily eroding the balance-of-terror posture). The *second* matter concerns the choices we face regarding new weapons and their impact on the arms race.

#### A. Deterrent Strategy: The Complexity of the Choices

The principal ethical issue of deterrent strategy is the choice between a strategy that targets population centers and one that targets enemy forces. The development of nuclear weapons has progressed to such a point that long-range ballistic missiles can deliver separate warheads within a radius of 1,500 feet from the selected target. Thus it is possible to devise target systems that emphasize military targets and try to avoid damage to population centers. In practice, given a large-scale nuclear exchange, the collateral damage resulting from counterforce targeting might not be much less than if centers of population were the targets.

Nevertheless a counterforce strategy has been praised by certain writers as morally preferable to a counterpopulation strategy, since discriminating weapons are preferable to weapons of mass, indiscriminate destruction effect. One reading of the texts from Vatican II with their condemnation of weapons of indiscriminate effect might support this conclusion. On the other hand the counterforce strategy is subject to the criticism that it makes nuclear war “thinkable,” increasing the probability of wars being started with such weapons or of such weapons being employed because they are controllable, with one side or both tempted to escalate the conflict to an “all-out” nuclear exchange.

Neither the strategic nor the moral debate about this issue seems destined for early resolution. Indeed, one can argue that the introduction of moral categories into the political and strategic discussion renders the decision more complex than ever. In a sense the strategic logic and the moral logic move in different directions. For example, given the position argued in the previous section—that the strategic balance (based on deterrence) is an unacceptable basis for preserving the peace—it would seem logical that we would favor a counterforce strategy that seeks to limit and contain the killing of civilians should a nuclear exchange occur. Such a position has the logical consistency of trying to limit the effects of what a deterrent posture might lead to in a superpower conflict.

In fact the linkage between the position on deterrence I have taken here and a counterforce posture is not all that direct or strong. What renders us skeptical of a counterforce posture is the fact that, in addressing the problem in moral terms, the determination to prevent any use of nuclear weapons is reached prior to any determination of our reservations about deterrence. Because the counterforce strategy, while more discriminating and selective in its effects, also increases the possibility of using nuclear weapons (either because of *our* sense that we can control them, or *their* misperception of our intentions), we find the strategy morally problematical. Given the present state of the arms race, technologically and politically, it does seem more prudent to place our strategic and moral emphasis on the side of those weapons systems and strategic doctrine that seek to prevent *any* use of nuclear weapons, that renders them literally “unthinkable” in political and moral terms. From this position we would then recommend that the primary emphasis of U.S. policy be to reduce in a reasonable, balanced, and prudent manner the size and scope of the deterrent network, bringing it progressively and more securely under control and decreasing its significance and legitimacy in world affairs.

The moral debate about forms of deterrent posture is as intractable as the strategic debate. The debate is cast in terms of force structure, targeting choices, and accuracy and yield of warheads. The “technical issues” are evaluated in terms of moral categories of weighing increased risk of war *vs.* increased discrimination of weapons; of balancing the moral significance of intention in policy *vs.* the moral weight of calculating the consequences of an actual nuclear exchange, however limited it may be. The moral logic of the position I develop here places first priority upon preventing *any* use of nuclear weapons. It gives qualitative moral significance to preventing *any* step across the conventional nuclear divide because of the political and psychological as well as the strategic consequences such an entry into a nuclear exchange could have on world politics and the people who are the subject of world politics. Next to preventing the use of nuclear weapons, our second moral priority should be to have the superpowers move down the deterrence ladder and eventually away from the logic of deterrence. A third significant moral objective is that the superpowers act in such a manner regarding vertical proliferation that they do not incite, encourage,

or provide assistance to the spread of horizontal (weapons) proliferation in the international system. All three prescriptions about deterrence strategy point to the significance of the choices we make on new weapons systems.

### *B. Two Cases: The Neutron Bomb and the Cruise Missile*

The political and moral debate about nuclear strategy is specified and concretized at the key moments when we face choices about specific weapons systems. In commenting on two choices the U.S. now faces, I reiterate that these choices must be judged in light of the larger picture of arms control possibilities. The debate about the neutron warhead, designed for inclusion in the NATO inventory, reached a first stage of resolution with President Carter’s decision of April 7 to defer production of the warhead as a gesture toward limiting the arms competition with the Soviet Union. In contrast to much of the critical commentary aimed at the president’s decision, Archbishop John R. Quinn, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, argued that the decision was “reasonable, courageous and morally informed.”<sup>11</sup> The reasoning supporting this position acknowledges that on both strategic and moral grounds the neutron warhead can be considered less objectionable than existing tactical nuclear warheads in the NATO stockpile. It is essentially a defensive weapon and would probably cause less loss of civilian life and less damage to surrounding property than the tactical weapons now deployed in Central Europe. Hence, in terms of traditional moral theology, this discriminating character of the weapon would recommend deployment.

However, in assessing the moral character of the neutron weapon it is necessary to use the traditional principles of moral theology in a broad framework. Within that framework the three reasons the archbishop articulated in support of the decision to defer production of the neutron bomb form a coherent moral case. First, he cited the impact on the arms race itself of a decision to deploy the weapon—the decision to defer deployment is one of those “reasonable risks” for peace that the Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic Conference said should characterize U.S. defense policy.<sup>12</sup> Second, the archbishop stated, the neutron warhead raises the same problems as counterforce strategy—by stressing its “limited damage” it tends to reduce the psychological and political barrier between conventional and nuclear war. Third—and here use was made of an argument that is more pastoral than policy-oriented but which is part of the human reality surrounding the nuclear arms race—Archbishop Quinn took specific note of the moral and emotional revulsion provoked by the neutron debate. His commentary on this moral phenomenon was the following: “This revulsion may express the deepest feelings of people who are asked to envisage a nuclear war in their homelands. President Carter has perhaps sensed this revulsion in a way which has been overlooked in official discussions of NATO strategy.”

This position on the neutron warhead flows from the perspective on arms control and the prohibition against use of nuclears running through my presentation.

The decision still facing us on deployment of the cruise missile also concretizes the broader strategic and moral themes of the nuclear debate. From the viewpoint of traditional moral theology, the cruise missile can be regarded as no worse and perhaps better than the latest and more accurate ballistic missiles. From the point of view of arms control it presents problems because it is small and can be easily concealed, making it difficult to verify by national technical means. In terms of its impact on the firebreak between nuclear and conventional warfare, the capabilities of the cruise missile make judgment difficult. One author argues that it could raise the nuclear threshold because of its conventional potential but that it also lowers the threshold because the cruise missile can be used for tactical nuclear strikes.<sup>13</sup> Published reports indicate that U.S. military authorities are understood to favor the cruise missile because of its "war fighting" characteristic, and some of our Western European allies are said to be anxious to acquire cruise missiles from the U.S. Applying the criteria discussed above, it would seem prudent for the U.S. to avoid deployment of the cruise missile if at all possible. Such deployment could encourage the USSR to develop a similar weapon, stimulate a demand for it among our European allies, and perhaps increase rather than decrease the possibility of a war in Europe.

#### IV. Arms Export Policies

In addition to being one of the principal contestants in the nuclear arms race, the United States is also seen as the principal supplier of conventional weapons to the non-Communist world. Despite President Carter's pledge of May, 1977, to impose constraints on U.S. exports of conventional weapons, the total value of American military sales to all nations in this fiscal year is estimated at more than \$13 billion—\$2 billion more than in the previous year.

Participants in the Call-to-Action conference held in Detroit in 1976, a gathering of representatives from the national Catholic community sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, demanded "that the United States convert to a peace-based economy as more consistent with the needs of its citizens and its responsibility for world peace making and third and fourth world development."<sup>14</sup> Given the state of the world as Presi-

dent Carter encountered it, and particularly in the wake of the Nixon-Kissinger arms sales policy of "selling virtually anything to virtually anybody," such a call might be regarded as something more than can be immediately or easily implemented, but it sets a reasonable objective for policy.

President Carter's arms transfer policy statement of May, 1977, announced a policy of restraint according to which arms transfer will be viewed as an "exceptional" implement of foreign policy, with "the burden of persuasion on those who favor a particular arms sale rather than those who oppose." This policy seemed to be a well-conceived and realistic attempt to strike a balance between those arms transfers that seemed clearly in the U.S. interest, i.e., to NATO countries and Japan, and those that resulted from high-pressure selling (or worse) by sales representatives of U.S. manufacturers or embassy and U.S. military representatives. Execution of this policy was entrusted to an Arms Export Control Board.

President Carter further indicated that he would seek to extend the principle of restraint multilaterally to other major suppliers such as the USSR, the U.K., and France, and at least one meeting has been held with the USSR. On February 1 of this year the President reaffirmed the policy of restraint and claimed that already new commitments in the latter part of fiscal year 1977 were less than half of the total approved during the same period of 1976. He announced at the same time that new commitments in the current fiscal year (FY 1978) to all countries except NATO, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand will not exceed \$8.6 billion, compared to \$9.3 billion in FY 1977.

This is an encouraging start and one for which the Carter administration should be commended. It was not to be expected that such a departure could show immediate results. The task of the Control Board is complicated greatly by domestic pressures, by the momentum of the trade itself, and by the relatively greater importance of arms exports to the economies of the U.S. and France. It is not, however, as clear as it might be that arms sales are no longer being used as a convenient "implement of foreign policy." The sale of AWACs to Iran, valued at \$1.2 billion, is a case in point. A recent Congressional Research Service study concluded that on a case-by-case basis decisions are being made "much the same as before."<sup>15</sup>

It is obvious that in assessing the political and moral legitimacy of a given case it will be necessary to examine the local, regional, and international context in which the sale is made. The United States Catholic Conference has been particularly concerned about past arms sales to authoritarian governments in developing countries that can demonstrate no serious outside threat but that use increasing military power as a tool "to stabilize" and control politically their domestic constituency. The question of how one should judge arms export policies by human rights standards is, for us, a major concern.

On the other hand some political situations, like the Middle East, are obviously cases where serious strategic and political considerations are at stake for all participants. In these instances the judgment on arms transfers

---

***"The moral logic of the position I develop here places first priority upon preventing any use of nuclear weapons."***

---

is a more complicated affair, politically and ethically. It is not my purpose to examine or evaluate here the Middle East case; it is simply to say that, as "the hard case," it illustrates how elements of external threat should be visible in arms transfer policies as justification for them. The decision whether a given sale can be justified must then be weighed in light of regional factors, the U.S. objective in making the sale, and the impact it has on the obvious long-term objective of bringing justice and peace to the region.

Granted that the Roman Catholic church, like other major religious traditions, has a body of moral doctrine on the morality of war, what effect does the church believe its participation in the defense debate can have? We believe the moral teaching of the church can, in the public forum, test the policies adopted by our government and others in terms of their impact on human life and dignity. The moral question in defense policy will always relate to the broad range of choices about how well we can constrain, limit, suppress, and erode the threat of death and destruction that the nuclear cloud has cast over the human race in the latter half of the twentieth century.

A second effect flows from the relationship of public opinion and policy decisions. In the end, in a democratic society, the decisions taken on the arms race will be made by the administration and the Congress. The people in these elected and appointed positions have a unique responsibility, which does not belong to the church or any nongovernmental group. But the atmosphere of public opinion surrounding policy decisions does have its effect. It sets an ambit, establishes limits, and sometimes opens possibilities for decisionmakers. It is the role of the church to function in this ambit of public opinion, to foster a spirit and psychology of peace that will support a policy directed toward peace. In seeking to contribute to the public debate in this way, the church sees its role as assisting the process of forming a community of conscience that keeps alive the vision of *shalom*, a vision directed at peace on earth and the human development of the people of the world.

---

## NOTES

1. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), para. 80.
  2. *Ibid.*, para. 79.
  3. *Ibid.*
  4. For an explanation of the categories used in this moral doctrine, cf. J.C. Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (1960), pp. 249-73; P. Ramsey, *The Just War* (1968); R. Potter, *The Moral Logic of War* (no date).
  5. Murray, *op. cit.*
  6. Cf. P. Nitze, "The Strategic Balance Between Hope and Skepticism," *Foreign Policy*, 17 (1974-75), "Assuring Strategic Stability," *Foreign Affairs* (January, 1976), and "Deterring Our Deterrent," *Foreign Policy*, 25 (1976-77); H. Scoville, "Flexible Madness," *Foreign Policy*, 14 (1974), and "The SALT Negotiations," *Scientific American* (August, 1977); P. Doty, A. Carnesale, M. Nacht, "The Race to Control Nuclear Arms," *Foreign Affairs* (October, 1976); and A. Vershbow, "The Cruise Missile: The End of Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs* (October, 1976).
  7. *Pastoral Constitution*, para. 80, 81.
  8. Para. 81.
  9. U.S. Bishops, *To Live in Jesus Christ* (1976), p. 34.
  10. Mission of the Holy See to the U.N., *The Armaments Race* (1976).
  11. News Release, National Catholic Office for Information, April 14, 1978.
  12. U.S. Catholic Conference, Statement of the Administrative Board, "The Gospel of Peace and the Danger of War," 1978.
  13. Vershbow, *op. cit.*
  14. NCCB, *A Call to Action: An Agenda for the Catholic Community* (1977).
  15. Congressional Research Service, *Implications of President Carter's Conventional Arms Transfer Policy* (September 22, 1977).
-