

Comment

The November meeting of the Conference of bishops of England and Wales issued a statement setting out five principles concerning the right to life. It was issued in response to the debate on the moral issues involved in the medical care of mentally and/or physically handicapped babies, arising out of the recent acquittal of a doctor on the charge of attempted murder of a Downe's-syndrome baby. In the muddled confusion of the public debate, principles have often been blurred by the all too understandable and difficult emotional aspects of the matter, and the bishops' enunciation of clear principles was both timely and welcome.

Having these principles to hand and applying them so clearly and with such alacrity to that particular moral debate makes it all the more baffling why the bishops still feel unable to apply the same principles to the morality of the possession of nuclear weapons. Consider the first, second and fifth of these principles:

1 The Roman Catholic Church teaches on both religious and rational grounds that all innocent people have a fundamental right to life. This right is totally independent of the wishes of others, or the judgment of society.

2 Each individual in society and society itself has a corresponding and most serious obligation to respect that right. . . . This duty cannot be qualified or set aside, just because people are unwilling to recognise it, or find it difficult, or consider that it competes with other less fundamental rights.

5 . . . No human legislation or legal judgment can ever morally justify an action which deliberately aims at destroying the life of an innocent individual.

It is precisely the application of such principles that are at the heart of the *moral* case against the possession of nuclear weapons, (whatever other arguments of military and tactical expediency offered for their retention and development manage to blur the moral vision). So why the clear and speedy application of these principles in one moral issue and the seeming reluctance to apply the same principles in another? The cynical suspicion that there is deliberate procrastination (sometimes called 'prudence'), from fear of some resulting political unpopularity with the Tory party, the S D P and sections of the Labour party, we can hopefully ignore; surely of all christian groups the Catholic Church in England would not allow itself to be seduced into shabbily courting political popularity, especially in this month when we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Edmund Campion! Eschewing such impious thoughts, and given that the Church in *Gaudium et Spes* (*para* 80) has already condemned the *use* of

weapons of indiscriminate killing and mass destruction, two other reasons may be holding back the bishops from making the same judgment on their *possession*. Firstly, there may be a 'moral' (i.e. not involving the murder of millions of innocents) use of nuclear weapons, e.g. depth-charging of submarines or the accurate knocking out of military targets with no civilian involvement. Secondly, in itself the *possession* of weapons of indiscriminate mass destruction is morally neutral, since it is only concerning their *use* that we can make moral judgments.

It must be said that both these arguments are theoretical abstractions from the real world of nuclear deterrence, and to allow them to deflect us from making a judgment on what *is* the case could be a scandalous moral cop-out. Because what *is* the case is the existing NATO nuclear deterrence strategy which quite clearly is that under certain conditions there is a real intention to use nuclear weapons of mass destruction involving the certain killing of millions of innocents, the mentally and physically handicapped, the newly-born, the unborn, the old, the sick. Such a conditional real intention is not different, morally speaking, from actual use, and clearly conflicts headlong with the principles in the bishops' statement and indeed contradicts them. To carry credibility the deterrence strategy cannot be bluff, the conditional intention must be really serious. Because that intention *is* really serious, the abstraction of the 'possessing nuclear weapons is morally neutral' argument is exposed. Nuclear weapons are not like knives or guns that can be harmlessly locked away in some arsenal in case and until we have need to use them (morally or immorally). The real *intention to use* weapons of mass killing of innocents is continually expressed in their being in a continual state of preparedness and readiness for use at a minutes notice, involving a chain of command of many people trained and willing to do what they are told when they are told to do it. This is what makes possession of nuclear weapons morally indefensible in terms of the bishops' principles, since possession is inextricably tied to a continual state of preparedness which manifests a continual real intention to use them. And a real intention to use them is a real intention to kill millions of innocents.

"Unless there is a nuclear deadline, there is no obvious deadline for the end of this debate," Archbishop Worlock is reported as saying. What is the nuclear deadline? The obvious line of dead? The debate will then indeed end. But who will care?

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A very happy Christmas to all our readers and friends