

# The Council and the Bomb— Casuistry or Witness<sup>1</sup>

by Walter Stein

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- ‘Would you press the button you know is going to annihilate millions of people?’
- ‘If the circumstances demanded it, I would.’

This reply, under oath, by Air Commodore Magill to Pat Pottle at the British Official Secrets Trial of February 1962, distils the essence of nuclear deterrence. In the light of common sense, and especially with reference to just-war principles, it also defines its essential immorality.

As a prosecution witness, the Air Commodore was being cross-examined by one of the accused who had invaded a nuclear base in protest and who was later sentenced to imprisonment for this offence. The Air Commodore’s reply is of course in no sense surprising; everybody knows that the backbone of nuclear strategy remains the threatened incineration of enemy cities. (Even is so-called tactical nuclear combat and in so-called strategic counterforce strategies it is precisely the ultimate threat against enemy cities which seeks to enforce the proposed restraints.) What is notable about Air Commodore Magill’s colloquy with his objector is simply that it spells out, with a clarity we cannot evade, the moral cost of nuclear defence.

This cost lies not merely in the *risking* of future enormities; it involves gravely immoral intentions *here and now*. These declared intentions to execute city-hostages ‘if the circumstances demanded it’ are *no less immediately* and categorically genocidal for relating to a future hypothetical condition. No doubt there is a difference between murder accomplished and murder in one’s heart, but it is not a difference between murderousness and non-murderousness.

The Air Commodore was unfortunate in being required to declare solemnly in his own person the commitments inherent in the Deterrence State, and it is of course only for this accidental reason that he is here referred to in evidence against such states. After all, is this not what government leaders themselves have been at such pains to proclaim throughout the deterrence era, above the deafening chain reactions of the arms race?

The most powerful deterrent to war lies in the retaliatory power of our Strategic Air Command and the aircraft of our Navy. They present to any attacker the prospect of *virtual annihilation*

<sup>1</sup>From a Symposium: *Peace on Earth: The Way Ahead* to be published shortly by Sheed and Ward Ltd., London.

of his own country. Even if we assume a surprise attack on our own bases, our bombers *would immediately be on their way* in sufficient strength to accomplish this *mission of retaliation*. (President Eisenhower, January 1958; italics added.)

The strategy of N.A.T.O. is based on the frank recognition that a full-scale Soviet attack *could not be repelled* without resort to a *massive nuclear bombardment* of the sources of power in Russia. (British Government White Paper, 1958; italics added.)

The fact is that this nation has a nuclear retaliatory force of such lethal power that an enemy move which brought it into play would be *an act of self-destruction* on his part. (Mr Roswell Gilpatric, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defence, October 1961; italics added.)

The strength and nature of the alliance makes it possible for the United States to retain, even in the face of a massive attack, sufficient reserve power to *destroy* an enemy *society* if driven to it. (Mr Robert McNamara, June 1962; italics added.)

Governments *know* that major war would mean *the destruction of the world . . .* So the only defence we have is the ability to strike back against the enemy with some indestructible form of retaliation. (Mr Peter Thorneycroft, British Minister of Defence, February 1964; italics added.)

All this is familiar enough; so familiar indeed that it has mostly bred contempt for the moral challenge it poses. Many endorse such statements uncritically; many uncritically discount them; and a few – mostly just-war thinkers, anxious to square their principles with support for the deterrent – are at pains to explain them away: either as simple bluff, or as sophisticated equivocations (thus supposedly avoiding any real commitment to genocide). In the face of these government statements and in the light of the strategic realities behind the statements it is hard to fathom such explanations; Air Commodore Magill merely helps to bring the policy they declare and enact to a particularly unblurrable focus.

Anyone inclined to dissolve or neutralize even *this* lucidity of declared intent – in order to maintain a casuistry of ‘bluff’ – must decide which of the following glosses he would wish to subscribe to: (1) That the Air Commodore was lying under oath – and was indeed bound in duty to commit perjury on behalf of his Government? (2) That he was speaking merely for himself – quite unrepresentative of the Deterrence State? (3) That he knew, and could know, with 100 per cent certainty that the circumstances in question could never arise?

The first of these alternatives is as implausible as it would be outrageous. The second is equally absurd. What American, British (or Soviet) serviceman could – similarly cross-examined – avoid the Air Commodore’s reply? Neither the most responsible commanding officer nor the most junior member of a missile crew could accept or perform his job without constant, absolute readiness to let fly in moral cash what they already owe in professional I.O.U.s. Without

such *unconditional, trained and habitual, present* consent to whatever execution of city-hostages the government may command, the entire deterrence apparatus would wither away. Even if, say, the American President or the British Prime Minister secretly resolved never to order such retaliation against cities – not even in the face of imminent defeat – those who operate the deterrent would still have to be given the same, firm impression as the enemy they are to deter: that they might indeed be required to execute cities at any moment.

The resolve to press the button ‘if the circumstances demanded it’ is thus built into the very substance of the Deterrence State. Not only was the Air Commodore representative in his witness; nothing short of a public government resolve to treat non-combatant populations as inviolable, *whatever* the circumstances – the dismantling, that is, of the whole ultimate foundation of deterrence – would now dismantle these built-in commitments to genocide on the part of its servants. Should anyone wish to maintain that a government might be able to signal its moral resolve *secretly* to all those manning the deterrent, he would need to forget all about security-leaks – and discount the gradual revelation of ‘softnesses’ in crises.

And there is a further, decisive problem. Even if a government could, somehow, ingeniously remove that built-in demand for murderousness from its nuclear personnel, what about the rest of us? We may not be called upon to press buttons; nor even to engage in nuclear research, missiles production, or strategic planning; but as long as we endorse or tolerate our government’s strategy, we are implicated in its commitments. More precisely, we are implicated in what these commitments, by all available evidence, seem to be.

This evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the government is requiring its nuclear personnel to be prepared for genocide if circumstances demand it. Now even if the government should wish – and be able – to convey to its nuclear personnel that, after all, no murderous use of our bombs is really envisaged, by what national whispering campaign or telepathic proclamation, flawlessly shielded from the enemy, might the underlying innocence of the deterrence policy be conveyed to the rest of us – all of us, in whose name it is being carried out? Ultimately, in this matter of genocidal commitments, State business is our own. It is possible for a Deterrence State to be divided against itself; it is impossible that it should be secretly united in self-contradiction.

The third alternative to recognizing Air Commodore Magill’s statement as definitive of nuclear immorality is to suppose that he ‘knew’, and could know, with 100 per cent certainty that the circumstances in question could never arise’. The vital terms are here ‘knew’, ‘could know’ and ‘100 per cent certainty’; everything depends upon their being precisely, unreservedly applicable: even the smallest margin of uncertainty would leave the intention to genocide intact. Very few people with any claim to be informed in these

matters would be prepared to stand by such an assertion.

It is obvious, on any rational basis, that *certainty* is not to be had in these matters, however optimistic one might be in one's assessment of the 'balance of terror'. No doubt, the balance has worked hitherto, at any rate as regards all-out nuclear war. No doubt, too, the balance has, to all appearance, become more 'stable' in recent years, particularly since Cuba, and governments are doing all they can to increase this stability. But we are dealing with a matter of history – not of logic. Moreover, we are dealing with a matter of *future* history. And, whatever the advances in technique to avoid war by accident, and whatever the progress in diplomatic caution, there are so many unknown factors, so many dangers and potential dangers in a world still divided in, and by, a terror which history does not know, that it would need divine, rather than *diabolic* powers to *know, beyond all doubt*, that the daemons of genocide will never be unleashed. It has always been easier to call up daemons in one's service than to keep them in their places; there is the well-known case of the doctor who, according to Christopher Marlowe, found he could not cancel the contract he had signed in a moment of rapture and over-confidence. Our dearly bought Doomsday security also has its risks; and there must be limits even to the most highly endowed computer's prophetic programme.

As this is being written, Vatican Council II has not yet completed its deliberations on peace and war in our time; and there are signs that the Council may fail to speak with the clarity and directness that this unique human – and Christian – crisis requires. If so, it has to be said, the Council whatever its other achievements, would essentially have failed the world. It would have failed mankind on the verge of self-destruction, mankind astray in desperate moral self-violation – and so, too, our age's obscure, deep nostalgia for an epiphany of Christianity's stigmata. A freely outward-looking, prophetic witness would, by the same token, be infinitely liberating and resurrecting. Vague exhortations, however well-meaning, and loop-holing casuistic abstractions, however 'prudent', will not – as we enter the third decade after Hiroshima – suffice. Either way, much will remain to be done when all the bishops have finally returned home – to follow up, or go forward from, the Council's response to the nuclear crisis.

Two arguments were used during the third Session of the Council – in the Council itself and, it was reported, by a group of American laymen, petitioning the conciliar Fathers – to dissuade the Council from any clear condemnation of nuclear weapons. First, in the words of Archbishop Beck, of Liverpool:

There may well exist objects which in a just war of defence are legitimate targets of nuclear weapons even of vast force. To attack a ballistic missile or a satellite missile in the outer atmosphere would, for example, be a legitimate act of defence and, with just proportion duly preserved, it might require the use of a weapon of vast power.

Nor, as Bishop Hannan, Auxiliary Bishop of Washington, D.C., put it: contrary to the schema's draft statement's condemnation of nuclear weapons, 'whose effects cannot be imagined'.

there now exist nuclear weapons which have a very precise limit of destruction. There is a weapon now in use which has a range of 1.3 to 2.5 miles and whose missile has a force of 40 tons of T.N.T. The effects of a low yield nuclear weapon can indeed be imagined.

Indeed . . .

But the appalling irrelevance of the argument, even in its own terms, immediately becomes apparent, as soon as we begin to think of the actual 'overkill' stockpile the Western powers possess, and consider how much of this stockpile and how many of its weapons are *not* directed towards these deracinated 'legitimate targets'. Thus *The Tablet's* military correspondent, Eugene Hinterhoff, cites authoritative American estimates, based on a yardstick of 100,000 people killed by the Hiroshima bomb (a 'Hiroshima equivalent'), which places U.S. overkill capacity at 125 times this yardstick for the whole globe and 500 times for the whole Sino-Soviet bloc. For the Soviet Union alone, containing 140 cities with populations of 100,000 or more – and allowing for a fifty per cent failure to deliver warheads – the 'United States could deliver about twenty-five million tons per "Hiroshima equivalent", amounting to a United States overkill capacity of one thousand two hundred and fifty times'. If, more conservatively, it is assumed that one-megaton bombs are the size most likely to be delivered to most of these 140 cities, the 'U.S. overkill capacity is seventy-eight times, even allowing for fifty per cent attrition of carriers'.<sup>2</sup>

Even a 'limited' local war, confined to 'low-yield', 'tactical' nuclear weapons in military battle (and very likely, in any case, to escalate into all-out 'strategic' war) would be utterly remote from the dis-incarnate 'legitimacy' envisaged in Archbishop Beck's and Bishop Hannan's abstractions. Thus, in a well-known article, Sir Solly Zuckerman, chief scientific adviser to the British Ministry of Defence, has shown that even in a relatively small area of Europe containing no major centres of population, a nuclear battle between combatant forces would be fatal to enormous numbers of the population.<sup>3</sup> And John Strachey, in a highly expert book, went so far as to write: 'However *geographically* limited to a war waged with tactical nuclear weapons *might* remain, there would be nothing limited about it for the inhabitants of the area in which it is fought . . . The inhabitants would be killed'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>*The Tablet*, 19 October 1963. Captain Hinterhoff's references are to *A Strategy for American Security – An Alternative to the 1964 Budget*, edited by Professor Seymour Melmann of Columbia University.

<sup>3</sup>'Control in Modern War', *Foreign Affairs*, January 1962.

<sup>4</sup>*On the Prevention of War* (London, 1962), p. 95; italics Strachey's.

In these circumstances references to, 'for example', attacks on ballistic missiles or satellite missiles in the outer atmosphere, or to low-yield weapons which have a very precise limit of destruction, are scarcely more adequate to *the total reality that occasions them* than those autonomous, extra-worldly appeals to 'for instance, a fleet at sea' that used, until fairly recently, to serve as the standard legitimizing paradigm in Catholic nuclear apologetics. Behind the Davy Crockett there is the 20-megaton bomb; behind Counterforce there is 'The Great Deterrent'; behind all those sore-thumb 'legitimate targets' there is the present announced commitment to destroy the enemy nation 'if the circumstances demanded it'. It is as irrelevant to talk about 'legitimate targets' in this context, without diagnosing the total, dynamic commitments we call the deterrent as it would be to talk about Eichmann's scrupulous attention to the comfort of his victims during their transportation.<sup>5</sup>

The second argument, used both by Archbishop Beck and by Bishop Hannan may be represented by the latter's words, 'I am sure that our nuclear weapons will be used with wisdom by our leaders . . . Council should be humble and rely greatly on military experts and the proven capacity and wisdom of our leaders'.

But we have already seen why it is so hard for men – however high, and however humble – to be so *sure* in these matters. Of course, we sometimes say, for instance, 'I'm sure that so and so will prove a saintly President', or 'General X has never pressed a button in his life'; but such remarks do not measure up to the criteria of reassurance we need here – particularly since our statesmen and military experts have themselves (as we've recalled) been saying that *they* are far from sure whether nuclear weapons will, *in all conditions*, be confined to 'military targets'; and – no less decisively – since it is, after all, the 'wisdom of our leaders' and the 'proven capacity of military experts' that massacred Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the last war – acts still unrepudiated by their successors.

The most crucial, and depressing, feature of the Council's third Session was, however, the fact that neither Bishop Hannan nor Archbishop Beck – representing the two leading nuclear communities

<sup>5</sup>*Cf.* 'It is admittedly unlikely that an enemy would ever present its opponent with land or sea targets, such as massed armies or fleets, to which megaton weapons would not be disproportionate, but such weapons are now deemed necessary to meet the not-altogether fanciful threat of satellites orbiting in space with a nuclear load, or to disrupt the enemy's defensive radar, and they are even being tested for these purposes.' – Mgr L. L. McReavy, *Peace and War* (London, 1963), p. 50. *Who* has 'deemed' it necessary that *these* 'not-altogether fanciful' threats be met with an over-all overkill capacity of between seventy-eight to one thousand two hundred and fifty times and to maintain this capacity for *these* 'not altogether fanciful' purposes? (Mgr McReavy's single-clause proviso, 'There can therefore be legitimate uses for most nuclear weapons, *though not so evidently for the immense number that are being stockpiled on both sides*', is not nearly 'so evidently' efficacious as his emphatic, categorical re-abstraction of nuclear 'legitimacy'. This characteristic, one-way mixture of concrete and abstract, factual and fictitious, committed and non-committal assertions, forms a casuistic critical mass; and the coming together of such casual – crucially un-pursued – concessions and tacit complementary evasions is catastrophic.)

in the West – confronted the question whether existing deterrence policies, entail, or do not entail, massively murderous commitments *here and now*. This question is inescapable for anyone who approaches contemporary strategy with traditional Catholic presuppositions concerning non-combatant immunity on the one hand and the ethics of commitment and intention on the other: the mere twenty years' facts of deterrence have imposed this question beyond any possibility of being side-stepped. Whatever it may be fitting to say about 'clean' and 'dirty' weapons, or about normal rights of self-defence, it cannot be fitting to bypass the morality, *here and now*, of nuclear deterrence, *the actual human activity that sustains the Deterrence State*: 'Would you press the button you know is going to annihilate millions of people?' 'If the circumstances demanded it, I would'.

The facts impose their own questions. What does the Christian community have to say in the face of *these* questions – and not merely some substitute question or other of its own choosing?

It is necessary to recall that these questions have, moreover, been thoroughly and widely discussed among Catholics in recent years. Further, I have not met a single viable rejoinder to the proposition that prevailing deterrence strategies are *here and now* murderous. Indeed, even Mgr L. L. McReavy, who remains the most highly placed Catholic theologian in Britain to defend nuclear deterrence – and whose theological style and approach foreshadows Bishop Beck's Council speech – has lately come to acknowledge that 'the intention with which these weapons are being held' raises a 'serious moral difficulty' since 'both sides have openly declared their determination not to shrink, if only in the last resort, from massive retaliation in a form which would apparently include reciprocal crimes of wholesale murder of each other's civilian population'.<sup>6</sup> And Mgr McReavy actually goes on to identify such policies as 'criminal'<sup>7</sup> and 'morally evil'.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, and perplexingly, Mgr McReavy does not seem to take the measure of his own findings, and quickly moves on towards restating his often expounded view that the possession of the deterrent merely constitutes an 'occasion of sin' – and one that, though both 'proximate' and 'grave' is yet rightly accepted, in view of the counterbalancing dangers of communism.<sup>9</sup> How an *actually criminal and morally evil condition* can at the same time be merely an 'occasion of sin' is not explained – and is of course inexplicable in Catholic terms.

It would seem that Mgr McReavy thought it sufficient – in order

<sup>6</sup>*Peace and War*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 50–51: 'It is true, as we have observed, that both sides are seeking to escape from this suicidal policy, as crazy as it is criminal; but neither has yet formally abandoned it, and the current MacNamara plan, of which the British government approves, expressly holds it in reserve'.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

to convert this acknowledged 'moral evil' and 'criminality' effectively back, *in mente*, into a mere 'occasion of sin' – to gesture in passing towards an agonizing reappraisal of nuclear strategy – without any apparent cognizance of the gigantic, unilateral (and at present not even embryonically potential) strategic, technological, political, moral and spiritual revolution this would demand:

An evil intention is none the less evil for being provisional, or reluctantly formulated. Murder is not lawful even as a last resort. It follows therefore that a government which intends to use its nuclear weapons for morally evil purposes, even if only in an extreme emergency, is normally [*sic*]<sup>10</sup> bound to reform its intention. It equally follows that it may not make or retain the weapons *for these purposes*. But it does not necessarily follow that it may not make or retain them for the legitimate purposes which, as we have seen, they can and do serve. Likewise, those of its citizens who realize that certain of its intentions are immoral may neither approve of them, nor condone retention of weapons to implement them, but must, on the contrary, do their best to bring their government's policy into line with the moral law. On these conditions, however, they can licitly support the making and retention of nuclear weapons for licit purposes, at least as long as their essential rights cannot be effectively defended against unjust aggression by means less likely to be abused. Those who, in the late war, disapproved of the abuse of heavy bombers in indiscriminate attacks on enemy cities could not be charged with sinful complicity in such crimes as the slaughter of Dresden, merely because they actively supported the legitimate war-effort of their country. The same applies to the use and abuse of nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup>

This is all that Mgr McReavy has to say in the face of the 'evil' and 'criminal' intentions to 'wholesale murder' inherent, on his own showing, in the strategies now *actually at work*; and he immediately proceeds to discuss nuclear deterrence as a 'proximate occasion of grave sin' (rather than as *now actually gravely sinful*), as though that 'serious moral difficulty' – and the abyss between actual and possible 'criminality' – had thus, instantly, withered away. I have quoted the passage at length, entirely without abridgment, since what it, so hugely omits or slides over is no less vital than what it seems to affirm; and since its linguistic and logical techniques are not only thoroughly representative of our dominant Moral Theology, but since their function and tendency in this particular case are crucial, far beyond Mgr McReavy's personal standpoint, for the official witness represented by Archbishop Beck's Council speech or Cardinal Heenan's subsequent comment that 'we should not condemn out of hand responsible statesmen, gravely burdened in conscience and hating nuclear warfare, who refuse to destroy arms which match

<sup>10</sup>read 'morally' (?).

<sup>11</sup>*ibid.*, p. 51.



those of potential enemies'.<sup>12</sup>

We may consider Mgr McReavy's pregnant paragraph under three main headings: (1) its instant transmutation of an acknowledged 'moral evil' and 'criminality' into a 'licit' and 'legitimate' moral risk; (2) its reductive assimilation of nuclear to conventional war-crimes, purporting to show that the 'likely' abuse of nuclear weapons need not involve 'sinful complicity' on the part of those who foresaw this abuse as 'likely'; and (3) its minimal, elusive (and compared with the author's own subsequent eloquence on the duties of anti-communism) strikingly anaemic pointers to the practical duties deducible from its own theoretical concessions.

Each of these aspects of Mgr McReavy's formulation rides over the most massively challenging actualities with a proportionately autonomous theoretical ease. Together, their galloping interaction – the whole paragraph almost parenthetical, in a context of authoritative exposition of indisputable (and undisputed) doctrinal principles – once and for all disposes, or so it seems, of all 'serious moral difficulties' that now impose themselves in their light. Thus, indeed, neither reviewers nor the English bishops seem even to have *noticed* what, if noted and acted upon, would have been shockingly revolutionary: Mgr McReavy's now categorical admission that our *actual present deterrence policies* are 'criminal' and 'morally evil'.

(1) The most basic element in the paragraph before us is its apparently effortless neutralization of the 'morally evil purposes' it does not deny – through a *purely and simply suppositional* 'reform' of *admittedly actual* 'criminal intentions': 'Murder is not lawful even as a last resort. It follows that a government which intends to use its nuclear weapons for morally evil purposes, even if only in an extreme emergency, is normally bound to reform its intention' – as though this could be as certainly and readily 'reformed' as a commercial advertisement or a recruiting poster. As a matter of fact:

(a) it is highly doubtful whether these evil intentions could be adequately 'reformed' without fatal injury to the deterrent;<sup>13</sup>

(b) they certainly could not be 'reformed' without enormous structural reductions and alterations in the physical composition of our weapons systems<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Cardinal John C. Heenan, *Unity and Peace: Some Aspects of the Vatican Council* (Burge Memorial Lecture, delivered at Church House, Westminster, on 25 May 1965. SCM Press).

<sup>13</sup>I have stated this point in detail in 'The Limits of Nuclear War: Is a Just Deterrence Strategy Possible?', in *Peace, the Churches and the Bomb* (ed. James Finn; Council on Religion and International Affairs, New York, 1965).

<sup>14</sup>The most serious formulation of proposals envisaging such a re-structuring of Western defence is to be found in Justus George Lawler's *Nuclear War: the Ethic, the Rhetoric, the Reality* (Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1965). The whole book, which I was fortunate to see in proof, forms an outstandingly important work of constructive witness. (The need for – at least – such a radical re-structuring of the deterrent is already implicit in Mgr McReavy's unobtrusively pregnant remark: There can therefore be legitimate uses for *most* nuclear weapons, *though not so evidently* for the immense number that are being stockpiled on both sides' – *op. cit.*, p. 50; *italics added*. Cf. p. 16 and note 10, above.)

(c) any effective 'reform' of nuclear 'intentions' would already constitute a high degree of unilateral disarmament; and

(d) any such 'reform' could certainly not be effected without an immense programme of moral and political re-education, and especially an unstinted, creative corporate Christian witness.

Each of these points requires the most disciplined attention. Anyone who chooses to teach that the deterrence system is morally licit though the criminal intentions associated with it must be 'reformed' is under the strongest intellectual and moral obligation to *substantiate* his (otherwise absolutely meaningless) proviso. Until this has been done, we cannot begin to assess the viability – strategic, political or moral – of his postulated 'reform'; indeed we cannot begin to grasp what is being said. Even Mulka, the Auschwitz man responsible for erecting the gas chambers and for ensuring supplies of gas, protested, it may be remembered, that he had never hurt anybody.<sup>15</sup> (He himself never, presumably, turned on a switch – and it could be he felt his 'intentions' had been 'reformed' ones.) What steps, then, are being proposed? What are the technological, strategic and political means by which they are to be implemented? How far are we bound to destroy or renounce defences which, in Cardinal Heenan's words, 'match those of potential enemies' – if they happen to match them in murderousness? What kind and degree of unilateral action (if any) are we bound to if we are indeed 'bound to reform' our nuclear posture? And what kind of responsibility rests upon the Church as a body – the official Church, represented by bishops and theologians – for the instruction of erring governments and nations? Is it sufficient to leave the matter at a theologian's simple – in itself hardly surprising – admission that morally evil purposes ought to be reformed, or a Cardinal's simple – in itself hardly surprising – conclusion that 'it is difficult to declare that Christians ought to disarm and leave their nations to the mercy of the enemy'?<sup>16</sup> Mgr McReavy, recognizing the need to bridge the nuclear gap – the gap between 'morally evil purposes' and traditional just-war rights – has hastily papered across it a sort of blank cheque or intended solvency; unfortunately we have no means of knowing the state of the bank account.

(2) In drawing out the implications of present government policy – 'as crazy as it is criminal' – for people at large, Mgr McReavy is equally elusive. We shall look more closely, presently, at his general formulation of these; but first I should like to consider especially his analogy between nuclear 'abuses' and the late war, with which he concludes his argument: 'Those who, in the late war, disapproved of the abuse of heavy bombers in indiscriminate attacks on enemy cities could not be charged with sinful complicity in such crimes as the slaughter of Dresden, merely because they actively supported the

<sup>15</sup> *The Guardian* report on the Auschwitz trial, 20 August 1965.

<sup>16</sup> *Unity and Peace*, p. 19.

legitimate war-effort of their country. The same applies to the use and abuse of nuclear weapons’.

Mgr McReavy is concerned to show that – whilst citizens may not condone nuclear war-crimes, they may nevertheless support the ‘legitimate’ Cold War effort of their country. Let us assume the (by no means unquestionable) proposition that obliteration bombing did not negate the validity of the last war. The proposition is grounded in the indubitable principle that an essentially just and beneficial undertaking does not necessarily forfeit our support because of some attendant abuses. Life, in a fallen world, always has to reckon with abuses. Support for a political party, or the mere fact of being a citizen, somewhere; membership of a professional group; even, indeed, membership of a Church – all have to reckon with abuses and corruptions.

But whilst it is part of the human condition to find community in corrupt communities (which we compose), there are limits to what is acceptable for the sake of communal loyalty. These limits are not always easy to recognize, but there are times when we know that they have certainly been left behind. A surgeon in a hospital that occasionally procures therapeutic abortions hardly needs to resign, especially if the practice were universal in all hospitals available to him; but he might confront radical probes of conscience if he found himself saving lives amidst colleagues systematically engaged in euthanasia; and were he to find that the service is in fact financed out of euthanasia fees, he would (at any rate, if he shares Catholic assumptions) no longer have any doubt that it is time to withdraw. Similarly, there are sufficient differences between membership of a police force in which framing and torture are not unknown and membership of e.g. the Gestapo to facilitate conscientious discrimination, by those who wish to discriminate conscientiously.

War, of course, is peculiarly open to ‘abuses’ (so much so, in fact, that the historical pertinence of just-war theorizing has increasingly come under sceptical scholarly questioning). We may concede that an isolated, uncontrollable massacre in the heat of battle – however tragic and morally wounding – may not *kill* the underlying validity of the communal effort. The systematic, and cumulative, use of massacre as an instrument of war – of which the bombing of Dresden formed a part – is another matter; even in the context of resistance to Nazism, such criminal ‘abuses’-turned-into-war-policy should give us pause before we slot down: ‘legitimate war-effort’ into our bursting conceptual boxes. By the time we are prepared to bracket ‘the use and abuse of nuclear weapons’ with ‘such crimes as the slaughter of Dresden’ (already slotted cleanly out of the way) the abstractions have taken over.

It is not merely that something has gone critically wrong with our proportions, here (*cf.* ‘megadeath’, ‘overkill’, ‘genetic damage’, etc.) – although real, living decisions are indeed mostly bound up with

matters of proportion. Nor is it merely, beyond this, that whilst the 'abuses' of World War II really were *abuses* – gratuitous, and morally innovating, departures from essential strategic commitments, the 'abuse' of our 'overkill' nuclear stockpile is its only conceivable *raison d'être*. Ultimately, this popular loose analogy between late-war and Cold War 'abuses' is actually in danger of seeming to habituate the older atrocities almost into excusing precedents.

Against the last of these dangers Mgr McReavy's passage, despite its generally permissive drift, is more effectively guarded than Cardinal Heenan's lecture. The lecture, on *Unity and Peace – Some Aspects of the Vatican Council*, only has two paragraphs on the latter subject – 'I have said little about Peace (although it comes into our title) because the Council has said little about it'. The first paragraph (without referring either to the original draft schema or to the strong condemnation of nuclear violence by Cardinal Alfrink of Utrecht, Patriarch Maximos IV and Bishops Ancel of Lyons and Giulhem of Lavel)<sup>17</sup> endorses Archbishop Beck's approach: 'All he was doing was pleading that we should not condemn out of hand responsible statesmen, gravely burdened in conscience and hating nuclear warfare, who refuse to destroy arms which match those of potential enemies'. The second paragraph continues, and concludes:

It may be that before the end of the Council the wider question of disarmament will be considered. This might be more logical than thinking only of nuclear weapons. It is hard to imagine from the victims' point of view what difference there was between being in Hamburg or Dresden during two weeks when people were slaughtered by British high explosives and being in Hiroshima during the few minutes when the Americans dropped their nuclear bomb. Thousands more were slaughtered or maimed for life in Germany than in the Far East. Is the principle of the kind of bomb so very different? It is really complete disarmament that Christians should be working for all the time. But it is difficult to declare that Christians ought to disarm and leave their families and nations to the mercy of the enemy.<sup>18</sup>

Cardinal Heenan's references to 'complete disarmament' are welcome – though they hardly amount to a clarion call, and although it would be difficult to think of a responsible public figure – Christian or atheist, Western, Afro-Asian, Russian or Chinese – who has not, over the last twenty years, voiced similar sentiments, often with more elaboration and insistence. Also, the Cardinal is no doubt right to point out that such episodes as Hamburg and Dresden rivalled Hiroshima in horror; and we may be sure that Cardinal Heenan would be horrified at any suggestion that the total effect of his comparison is somehow reductive of moral edge, rather than morally alerting. It is largely a matter of emphasis, omissions and

<sup>17</sup>Cf. *The Guardian*, 10 November, 1964.

<sup>18</sup>*op. cit.*, pp. 18–19.

lack of rigour. But, in these matters, rigour, and emphasis, and irreducibly spelled out implications (or else nuances by default) are, theoretically and pastorally, decisive. In its spare, stone-walling context, the loose popular question: 'Is the principle of the kind of bomb so very different?' not only appears to minimize the enormous, quantitative *and* qualitative, differences that remain, to by-pass the entire, decisive problem of 'intention', and to by-pass entirely the attempts at disciplined theological dialogue with authority that have presented themselves; it could actually lend itself to the sort of reductive slide down represented by Lord Attlee's remark that one of President Truman's advisers 'seems to have had scruples' about using the atom bomb on Hiroshima – 'a rather delayed qualm after what had been done by orthodox bombing'.<sup>19</sup> Such remarks are neither of purely academic relevance nor, it has to be recognized, confined to non-Catholics, who may not have the guidance of Catholic tradition. 'Death', wrote a distinguished Jesuit priest, in 1956, 'is a horrible and frightening thing, however it comes. To use emotive language about "the babies of Hiroshima" being blasted to bits is to imply that, but for atomic warfare, the sting would be taken out of death. The only thing that can take the sting out of death is faith in immortality. If we have this, if we can see the holocaust of Hiroshima "*sub specie aeternitatis*", we shall be in a better position to view this problem dispassionately by keeping it in proportion'.<sup>20</sup> I am sure that the writer of these words would not now still wish to subscribe to them, yet it was possible for them to be written. That the point is anything but academic is evident from the writer's conclusion at the time: 'Even were . . . a war [with atomic weapons] to mean the end of civilization as we know it, even if it were to involve the ultimate catastrophe (as some suppose), namely the end of the world itself, I still fail to see that it is "worse" than the perpetuation of a world in which the finer qualities of the human spirit were being gradually extinguished'. Nor can we dismiss it as merely eccentric (though eccentric, in a Catholic sense, it is) when a young, Catholic-schooled novelist like Auberon Waugh was, more recently, able to write: 'From a purely military point of view, there can be no meeting such numbers [as Communist China's], even armed with machetes,

<sup>19</sup>'The Hiroshima Choice', *The Observer*, 6 September, 1959.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Corbishley, s.j., *Cruz*, Spring 1956. Cf. Fr Corbishley's article 'Can War be Just in a Nuclear Age?', *Blackfriars*, September 1965, which has moved a sufficiently long way from this 1956 statement to conclude that 'Nuclear Warfare is the end of reason, precisely because it involves the use of force out of all proportion to any possible good which may be brought about. Indeed it seems necessary to hold that to contemplate the mere possibility of launching a nuclear attack on an enemy implies such colossal failure to recognize the value of human life, as to reduce the whole operation to something sub-human'. Nevertheless, Fr Corbishley still defends the interim threat of nuclear war: 'we need to give more time to the discussion of the ethic of bluffing'. Unfortunately – just as Mgr McReavy restricts himself to an unexamined reference to the need to 'reform' the intentions behind nuclear deterrence — Fr Cornishley, gives very little time to 'the ethics of bluffing' in his own article, and does not refer to existing discussions purporting to refute the argument from bluff in the nuclear context.

without recourse to the bomb, or some equally frightful weapon. If it is justifiable against military objectives, why not against the greatest military potential in any country, the civilian population?<sup>21</sup> After all, it was an Assistant Editor of the *Catholic Herald* who maintained that 'the bomb is encased in the enemy nation, and I must accept that, *prima facie*, most of the nation acquiesces in what its leader is about to do. It is, therefore, the whole nation that I must hit' if nothing less will suffice.<sup>22</sup> And it is *The Tablet* which has long zigzagged between a frank editorial recognition that the essence of nuclear weapons is to be 'instruments of indiscriminate mass destruction'<sup>23</sup> and a converse, literal insistence that they are essentially 'counters of a diplomacy whose great aim is their abolition'<sup>24</sup> ('counters': and hence *not* 'weapons' or 'instruments' of murder) – an insistence in its turn subject to the view that there may, all the same, be circumstances 'in which it might be the lesser evil to employ them' (innocently, as 'counters'?) 'against an aggressor already employing them';<sup>25</sup> – all within the context of a recognition that a continuation of the arms race is indeed 'almost certain to lead finally to catastrophe'<sup>26</sup> (a counter of diplomatic failure?). In the inescapable context of such voices, the dangers of Cardinal Heenan's uncritical, parrying question, 'Is the principle of the kind of bomb so very different?', can hardly be exaggerated.

(3) The underlying issue, here, is of course much wider, and deeper, than any plotting of positions, as between Dresden and Hiroshima, on a chart of comparative horror, or even the drawing out of the correct moral implications of present and future forms of warfare. The underlying issues – the issues, underlying all the verbal commissions and omissions within the Church in the crowded and morally radio-active decades since Hiroshima – is that of witness – or evasion of witness. 'Witness' is often, of course something more testing, even, than being cross-examined, though we do all stand under the cross-examination of history. Subjected to cross-examination, we may testify, or withhold testimony, according to our inclinations and verbal skills; but words, here, are only tools or symptoms. Merely to withhold, merely even to minimize, what is potential within us may too easily be a form of positively false witness. Indeed, even where we have not in fact been summoned for formal cross-examination, there are circumstances in which – at once gratuitously and of necessity, in free generosity and summoned by duty – we are bound to offer ourselves in witness: *acting in witness*, witnessing *in action*; since, both of necessity and *because* we are free, we are our brother's keeper.

Christians especially, assumed and named into a witnessing Body,

<sup>21</sup>Letter to *The Tablet*, 2 June 1962.

<sup>22</sup>*The Catholic Herald*, 11 April 1963.

<sup>23</sup>*The Tablet*, 23 June 1962; <sup>24</sup>*ibid.*, 22 February 1964; <sup>25</sup>*ibid.*, 22 March 1958.

<sup>26</sup>*ibid.*, 10 February 1962. (The notion of nuclear weapons essentially as diplomatic counters 'frequently recurs in *Tablet* editorial comments.)

cannot help bearing witness freely (or refusing freely to bear it), where 'the entire human family' stands in such need. Wounded and wounding, needy and violent, desperately not-quite-omnipotent, the nations grope dumbly for salvation. Of body, *and* intellect, *and* spirit. To bear witness against the daemonic dance, to put the risen intelligence at the service of human order, and to preach the Gospel – in real presence – to all nations are now divinely indivisible tasks. And we cannot be Christianly present to the world so long as we only reflect back the world's own terror-struck reflexes of mortal terrors. For as long as we did not witness freely before these the least our brothers, we have failed to witness unto Him.

Both, then, because the times directly summon us to personal evidence – lest we be implicated in deeds without a name – and because, far beyond this 'peace is our profession' – and salvation our business – we are required to speak out freely and without stint. Returning, in this light, to the rare, brief utterances by members of the British and American hierarchies on the nuclear crisis, to such theological teaching as Mgr McReavy's – and to such brassy re-soundings within the People of God as are on record, our hunger for Gospel truths begins to border on starvation: 'Likewise, those of its citizens who realize that certain of [their government's] intentions are immoral may neither approve of them, nor condone retention of weapons to implement them, but must, on the contrary, do their best to bring their government's policy into line with the moral law. On these conditions, however, they can licitly support the making and retention of nuclear weapons for licit purposes, at least as long as their essential rights cannot be effectively defended against unjust aggression by means less likely to be abused'.<sup>27</sup> Is this our witnessing 'best' – a 'licit', 'effective', 'likely' escape from abuse – or our Eucharistic, embracing and resurrecting commission to teach all nations? It is hardly surprising that Mgr McReavy's passing proviso that 'citizens' (including of course clergy and bishops) must 'do their best to bring their government's policy into line with the moral law' has remained inert and indeed does not even seem to have been noticed by anyone.

We have to recognize that it is not only immediately present emergencies that have brought us where we are, but a whole backwash of theological history. We are far too accustomed to facile, reductive understandings of 'precepts' and 'counsels' – of a 'prudent', legalist lifemanship on the one hand and the life of professional 'religious perfection' on the other. In social and international relations especially, centuries of both practical and theoretical domestication of Gospel mettle have habituated us to a diet of casuistic pusillanimities. As if 'religious perfection' were essentially a matter of perfect professional insulation from the flesh-and-blood stuff of

<sup>27</sup>*Cf.* p. 1f, above.

ordinary human communities; and as if ordinary human community were essentially a matter of giving Leviathan his due (and keeping sex in its place). We now stand under the message that, on these terms, life has finally ceased to be liveable – in any sense.

‘May all peoples of the earth become as brothers’, wrote Pope John, on Holy Thursday, 1963, before he died. For more than one reason it seems fitting to add, here, a reminder of what Pope Pius XII had already declared twenty years earlier, in his Christmas Message of 1943 – before the advent of nuclear weapons, before Hiroshima, and before, we have to add, the Western confrontation with communism, none of which can change the laws of God:

Unfortunately the world, as it looks around, must still behold with horror the reality of strife and destruction . . . We see, indeed, only a conflict which degenerates into that form of warfare that excludes all restriction and restraint (total war), as if it were the apocalyptic expression of a civilization in which ever-growing technical progress is accompanied by an ever greater decline in the realm of the soul and of morality. It is a form of war which proceeds without intermission on its horrible way and piles up slaughter of such a kind that the most bloodstained and horrible pages of past history pale in comparison with it. The peoples have had to witness a new and incalculable perfection of the means and arts of destruction while at the same time they see an interior decadence which, starting from the weakening and deviation of the moral sense, is hurtling ever downward toward the state where every human sentiment is being crushed and the light of reason eclipsed, so that the words of Wisdom are fulfilled: ‘They were all bound together with one chain of darkness’. (Wisdom xiii, 71).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>AAS xxxvi-II-xi, p. 12.