

New Arms, Old Modes of Thinking

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An address (slightly shortened here) given on 19 April, during Coventry Peace Week.

Einstein long ago said, 'With the splitting of the atom everything has changed except our modes of thinking and thus we drift to unparalleled disaster.' *Our modes of thinking*—that is the key, yet we change them with the greatest difficulty to meet a new, entirely new, situation. We now have got the power to destroy our world. We can do it *slowly* by exploitation, tearing up the forests, polluting the seas, piling up nuclear waste and filling even outer space with the dustbins of our technology. Or we can do it *quickly*. A war no-one expects suddenly starts—confusion reigns, troops panic, a nuclear weapon is fired and the gate to Armageddon opens. This is not a panic scenario. With 50,000 nuclear weapons in the world today it is a perfectly realistic one. We have, in our mad arsenals, something like 6,000 times the fire power of the whole of the Second World War. A cruise missile, made to sound so nice and small and tactical, has a warhead about ten times that of the Hiroshima Bomb—itself over a thousand times more powerful than the largest bomb of the Second World War. Yet our MoD talks about using them '*to stop the Russians at the eleventh hour*'.

Years ago the United Nations, in several serious reports, made it clear that this nuclear deterrence on which we put such reliance cannot be a stable system of security. The Professor of War Studies at King's College, London, said of the arms race in 1981, 'To believe that this can go on indefinitely without major disaster requires an optimism unjustified by any historical or political perspective.'

Nuclear deterrence has not brought peace. How can we call peace a world in which one death in three is that of a child under the age of six? Fourteen million every year, nearly all of them the victims of starvation or preventable disease, while we spend as a human family about a trillion dollars every year on what we choose to call security. How can we call peace a world in which dreadful wars rage right now in a long succession back to 1945? This is supposed to have been the age of peace but it has seen at least 150 wars and nearly 20 million direct victims, most of them

civilians. No-one can calculate the millions of indirect victims—the cost of lives ruined. Remember the little boys from Pauline Cutting's Beirut with their broken spines. Remember the scarred face of the Falklands survivor, remember the home at Richmond for paraplegics and basket cases, or the girl with her legs blown off in the Belfast dance hall. Those people don't appear on television any longer. They have had their moment. But they are part of the price of war.

Ah yes, says the militarist, but we haven't had a *nuclear war*. Deterrence must have worked.

Who knows? In fact we are sliding with increasing speed towards the catastrophe that no-one can possibly want. The reasons why are obvious. Terror cannot bring security. Terror only operates on rational people who fear consequences. Deterrence cannot stop accidents from happening and there have been hundreds of those. It is only two years since an entire Soviet submarine with all its warheads sank 200 miles off the American coast after a fire in one of its launching tubes. We have had computer failures, bomber launches, missiles fired, hydrogen bombs dropped and nuclear carriers skidding off roads on ice. All the time as technology 'progresses' we shorten the time for the correction of accidents. The Soviet military had two hours to decide what to do about the ill-fated Korean air-liner and finally they shot it down. A Pershing II failure resulting in a firing would mean a time for accident notification and correction of about 10 minutes. We have not yet reached computer based launch on warning scenarios—but we inevitably will.

It is not only accidents that cannot be deterred. People become irrational as a result of drugs and alcohol and all armed forces suffer these problems. People also exist who are prepared not only to kill but also to die for their cause. This is not abnormal—it is called courage. The Shi-ite who drove his dynamite lorry into the American marine barracks in Beirut was, in nationalist and religious fervour, already willing to die.

Such suicidal people will *also* equip themselves with the weapons of mass destruction in due course. Why on earth not?

There is something called the non-proliferation treaty which is meant to stop nuclear weapons passing into other hands. When signed it was not without hope—the nuclear powers were committed to negotiations and a nuclear-free world. They have all increased their stockpiles substantially since the treaty was signed and Britain actually ignores Article VI of that treaty by refusing to negotiate its weapons anywhere.

So the number of countries possessing such instruments will most certainly and logically increase. But technology itself spells the end of deterrence. We may or may not move towards First Strike *policies*. We certainly do move towards First Strike capabilities. New generations of highly accurate missiles make anti-missile strikes possible. Submarine

detection systems mean that submarines, supposedly invulnerable, now also become hittable targets. Fantasies like Star Wars at least turn the public mind towards defensive shields supposedly capable of dealing with retaliatory strikes. In the very mad world of deterrence to strike at retaliatory capability is to undermine deterrence itself, yet on that road we are certainly travelling.

But of the immediate dangers I would give highest priority to the notion of First Use. This is the idea embodied in present NATO strategy that, if deterrence fails and war starts, nuclear weapons can be used as if they were weapons and as if someone could win. In short, that a war involving the use of nuclear weapons could actually remain limited. Lord Mountbatten in 1979, before his assassination, rubbished such notions. So did Olaf Palme in his famous Common Security report of 1982. So did Robert McNamara in his 1987 book *Blundering to Disaster*. But these opinions have not been heeded. The policy remains as expressed in the US 1983 Fiscal Year budget report. 'US Defence policies ensure our preparedness to respond to, and if necessary successfully fight, either conventional or nuclear war.' Or, as Lord Carrington put it in 1985. NATO relies on nuclear weapons for several reasons, one of which is 'to provide credible retaliatory capabilities' if deterrence fails.

One would have thought by now that the costs and risks of world militarism would have been enough to produce a dose of common sense at the level of governments. After all, no-one is urging that there should be no speed limits for cars, or that it does not matter what side of the road you choose to drive on, or that aircraft should be able to select their own altitudes. Common risks ought to produce common security policies. It is true that in the Soviet Union and the United States there is more top level common sense around than there has been for some time. The INF treaty, though being busily undermined at this very minute, is a step forward. So would a 50% Start deal be if it did *not* just mean that the two giants got rid of out of date systems and proceeded with First Strike capabilities.

In this country I see very little sign of sprouting common sense at Downing Street level. The government agencies—and that includes too much of our national press—continue with the old slogans. 'Peace for forty years', 'Strong defence means an independent nuclear deterrent', 'Unilateralism means insecurity', 'Negotiating from strength pays off'. These illiterate jingles are sung at every opportunity. Our government boasts of its arms sales, now at a record £6 billion per annum. It gave not a penny of support to the 1986 United Nations Year of Peace. With Trident it multiplies its warheads by three times while the Superpowers are actually talking about reductions. It ignores its Non-Proliferation obligations and supports a policy which must, with Star Wars, mean breaking the ABM treaty. Despite the clear recommendation in paragraph 106 of the 1978 Document on Disarmament of the UN, which this country endorsed, it

opposes, rather than *encourages*, programmes of peace education. Those who challenge its policies are ridiculed, abused and marginalised.

In one sense all this is rather depressing, though from countries as various as New Zealand and Denmark, Indonesia and Mexico, there *are* signs of hope. It has made me realise two things. The first is that arguments about particular military policies are *not* enough. The second is that those who have some vision of a world of social justice where swords turn into ploughshares must both stand together and prepare to suffer.

That discussion of military policies is not enough should be obvious. We deal not just with weapons but psychology, not just with expenditure but with fear, not just with tribalism but with nationalism—90% of the real religion of 90% of the people, as the historian Toynbee once said. It is the curse of our age. It is a bogus emotion artificially generated. Of course, love of language, culture, tradition and achievements is proper and praiseworthy. But we have gone beyond all that. We have made a loyalty absolute which ought to be relative. Some years ago the United Reformed Church produced a report on violence in which the authors said that our first loyalty—and I speak as a Christian—should be the Transnational Body of Christ. What a vision. Jew united with Samaritan. Gentile united with Jew. Many branches, one vine. One Father and therefore One Family. Where does the nationalism of today fit into that picture, I would like to know!

In her entrancing novel *The Towers of Trebizond*, Rose Macauley mused about love of country—‘why it was thought better and higher to love one’s country than one’s county or town or village or house. Perhaps because it was larger. Then it would still be better to love one’s continent and best of all to love one’s planet’. I think we have to look again at today’s nationalism through her critical eyes.

We have also to challenge our sense of normality. Abnormal people make a fuss about bombs, go to Aldermaston, hold meetings, visit one’s home like anti-nuclear evangelists and even go to prison from time to time. Normal people don’t get involved. Normal people don’t get excited. Normal people do not like to lose their dignity. Normal people do not lose their promotion prospects.

I wonder if you remember that brilliant little poem by J.B. Priestley about the lost souls.

The real lost souls
don’t wear their hair long
and play guitars.
They have crew cuts, trained minds
sign on for research in biological warfare
and
don’t give their parents a moment’s worry.

The urge to conform affects us all. This is a plea for more non-

conformity. I came across a devastating piece of conformity the other day in the shape of trade estimates sent by a respectable Berlin firm to the Commandant of the death camp at Auschwitz:

We acknowledge the receipt of your order for five triple furnaces including two electric elevators for raising the corpses ... for transporting the corpses we suggest using light carts on wheels ... we are submitting plans for our cremation ovens which operate with coal and have hitherto given full satisfaction ...

Nice orderly German office procedure. It was normal. So are Polaris and Trident submarines. Those operating them do not want to use their missiles. To suggest otherwise would be a gross injustice. But they are willing to do so and most people think that is normal. I think it is barbaric.

Secondly, I suggest that all those with a different vision have to work together and be prepared to suffer. Let me speak personally. In CND I have found hundreds of thousands of friends and partners, mostly ordinary people of amazing self-sacrifice. But like Nicodemus, who came by night because he did not want to be identified, are a whole range of others. Nice people. 'On your side', they say. 'Keep at it'. 'Well done'. 'Glad someone's keeping the debate going'. And so on. All with a pat on the back.

I don't want that kind of support any more. In the worlds of education, law, medicine, the Church, the media, politics and science, people have now got to show where they themselves stand. Who agrees with everything CND does? I don't, for one. But we *are* coming to the point when those who are not with the peace movements are actually against them. The real political choice in this country is either for or against a Thatcher-type nuclear nationalism. Those nice people in the middle who think that they can keep out of politics and who stand by while others are carved up ought to remember the words of Pastor Niemoeller, after the Nazis had taken the Communists, the Jews, the Trade Unionists and the Catholics, about speaking up:

then they came for me
and by that time no-one was left
to speak up for me.

Let me end, though, with a note of hope about the churches. On our Easter March I was given, by an Anglican priest friend, a piece of light relief about the churches which I hope will give you some mild amusement:

Like a mighty tortoise
moves the Church of God
Oh Brothers we are treading
where we've always trod.
We are not united
nor one Body we

only one in muddlement
and too much apathy
Onwards Christian soldiers
marching to and fro
without the slightest notion
where we ought to go.

Churches are used to getting knocked. If they get knocked it is because we all have some sense of what the Gospel might mean if it was actually operated in the world of today. There is a terrible tension between the Living Word and the way the Church actually thinks it has to live. It was Benjamin Franklin who once said: 'He who shall introduce into public affairs the principles of primitive Christianity will change the face of the world.'

If we are impatient with the Church—those of us who are its members—it is only because we sense what might be. A Christianity of poverty, of reconciliation, of loving enemies—national as well as personal—of self-judgement, of non-violence, of forgiveness, is a lever strong enough to move any boulder of hate or fear. In the Cathedral of Coventry, I once called the Church the sleeping Giant. So it largely still is. Cautious, conservative, thinking itself to be outside politics, much too friendly with Caesar, it nevertheless has the greatest potential.

The Value of Literature: I — Chaucer's language of forgiveness

Richard Finn OP

It would seem that literature these days is increasingly a matter of taste. We are helped, not to learn and practise discrimination between the good and the bad, but to buy and consume according to our 'special interest'. We ask of a play or novel, not whether it will sharpen our understanding, nor whether it may damage our sensibilities, but that it should appeal. It has not always been so. When Chaucer chose to take his leave of the reader at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* with a formal apology—though no mere formality—for the 'translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees'¹ it was precisely their appeal for which he sought to make amends.