

## **Nuclear Weapons: man's challenge to God?**

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*'Now, I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.'*

*[Nuclear physicist Robert J. Oppenheimer after the first nuclear weapons test, quoting from the Bhagavad-Gita.]*

*'The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made. If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: We have the power to destroy everything that You have created ... If you are not religious, then look at it this way. This world of ours is four thousand, six hundred million years old. It could end in an afternoon. [Indian author Arundhati Roy]*

As we approach the anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it seems fitting to move into unusual terrain and spend some time thinking about the place of nuclear weapons in today's world.

Initially, most of us would question whether there is anything to even discuss. Surely there is a consensus against the use of nuclear weapons. We all recognise their unique destructive capacity and their inability to discriminate between civilians and combatants.

Yet such bombs effectively brought an end to the ongoing devastation and huge loss of life during the Pacific war; and so for some, nuclear weapons are a tragic necessity in a fallen world. One of the main arguments for maintaining nuclear arsenals is that they now continue to act as a deterrent.

**So who has nuclear weapons?** At the height of the Cold War there were 68,000 nuclear weapons. There are reportedly 27,000 nuclear weapons in existence at present. Thousands of these are said to be kept on hair trigger alert, ready to be used within minutes; and most are much more powerful than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. Countries known to possess nuclear weapons include:

USA:	10,000	France:	350
Russia:	15,000	UK:	200
China:	130	India:	50
Pakistan:	50	Israel:	75-200
North Korea:	10		

**Is the argument from deterrence valid?** In his *Among the Dead Cities*, U.K. philosopher A.C. Grayling revisits the war-torn days before Hiroshima. For the atomic bombings did not seem surprising at the time. It interested people that a new type of weapon was used; but the strategy of destroying entire cities had already been in place for some years. Indeed, the loss of life in the Japanese cities was far exceeded by losses in Tokyo, Hamburg, Dresden and Berlin.

Grayling convincingly argues that this kind of mass destruction was immoral by the standards of the time, was born mainly of a desire for vengeance, was obviously strategically ineffective, and did not deter the enemy nor reduce their morale. He does not condemn the air crews involved, and he does not dispute the evils of Nazism and Japanese militarism. Nevertheless, he believes that the time has come to admit serious moral failures in political leadership that authorised and promoted this wartime practice. It follows that if we reject carpet bombing as always having been immoral, then so always are weapons of nuclear mass-destruction. (Of course Grayling's views stir enormous controversy, especially among those with memories of how horrific the war was and of what seemed necessary at the time.)

Grayling is no friend of Christianity; yet his argument echoes a long tradition of Christian thought about 'just war'. Far from justifying war, this body of thought seeks to limit and curb warfare. Amongst its tenets are that war should not be prosecuted if there is no hope of success; that the means of war should be proportionate to the goal of a just peace; and that war may only be prosecuted against direct combatants, not whole populations. Carpet-bombing completely fails the last two of these tests, and a strategic nuclear war is likely to fail them all.

In a high profile opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal earlier this year, former US Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger (among others) joined together to publicly support nuclear disarmament, pointing out the failures of nuclear deterrence. Elsewhere, the Medical Association for the Prevention of War argues that nuclear deterrence 'is predicated on a willingness to incinerate millions of civilians and cause indiscriminate and persistent harm. By definition, this is immoral and incompatible with any civilized, humane, ethical or faith underpinnings. It is anathema to peace.'

There can be no 'just' or peaceful outcome in a nuclear war, only the complete destruction of society. On this basis alone, Christians have warrant to denounce strategic nuclear war and its weaponry as absolutely and always evil. Is the nuclear annihilation of our enemy, or the risk of exposing our own society to it, preferable to invasion or domination by the enemy? To think so may be the worst kind of idolatry of our ideology or 'lifestyle'. Lieutenant Calley declared of Mei Lai that 'we had to destroy the village (that is, kill all its inhabitants) in order to save it (from Communism).' The advocate of nuclear weapons seems to be saying 'we have to be willing to destroy the nation—theirs and ours—in order to save ours.' But no ideology or 'lifestyle' is worth that kind of defence.

**What about regulation?** Currently, there exists an international treaty framework for the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. (We have outlined some details in an appendix to this briefing.) But many commentators argue that the integrity of the regime is currently quite flawed and very fragile. Two factors undermine the non-proliferation regime:

1. There are inescapable links between civil and military operations. The expansion of nuclear fuel cycle capabilities around the world, although regulated by the non-proliferation treaty, promotes a 'cascade' of proliferation.
2. There is a stalemate between nuclear weapon states which want non-proliferation first, and non-nuclear weapon states which want disarmament first.

This kind of treaty-making comes from a time when only major states-actors had the means to create nuclear weapons. But with the spread of nuclear weapons and nuclear 'know-how', such a time is passing. While this regulatory framework remains very necessary, it may not suffice to prevent nuclear conflict, for 'as we have seen with the examples of Iraq, North Korea and Iran, even the suspicion of nuclear weapons possession invokes fear and mistrust, which leads to instability between nations' (ICAN). Indeed, Iran's recent development of an enrichment plant is within the terms on the non-proliferation treaty.

**What is the alternative?** A swelling chorus of voices argue that nuclear weapons have outlived their use-by date. If states do not have them, then states cannot use them; and if states are not making them, then terrorists probably will not be able to make them very easily either. Various ways forward are therefore proposed by which the international community can wean itself off its fear-based addiction to these weapons.

But could it be possible to envisage a scenario where nuclear weapons are altogether abolished? Surely such an idea is mere utopian dreaming. Surely 'geopolitical realism' dictates that since these weapons are possible, they will always be useable.

There are parallels in this discussion to campaigns against landmines and cluster-bombs, where it is becoming increasingly 'thinkable' to avoid their manufacture and use. In a broken world, these weapons may well reappear; yet there may also come a time when the military commander who employs these means of warfare is denounced by all as dishonourable, even

criminal. Something like this is already the case with weapons of chemical warfare. The 'geopolitical realist' argument only becomes true when enough people fail to say 'no'.

**What does this have to do with me?** Like other global problems such as world poverty, terrorism and climate change there is sometimes a disconnection between what needs to be done at an international or governmental level, and how this could possibly relate to each of us as individual citizens and as Christians. But two factors bring the issue closer to home:

1. Australia is a major player in the nuclear fuel chain with over one third of the world's known uranium reserves. We currently export uranium to France, USA and the UK, all of whom are (in the terms of the non-proliferation treaty) 'nuclear weapons states'. In 2006 the previous Government signed agreements paving the way for exports to China, and in 2007 signalled interest in selling uranium to India and Russia. Russia and China are treaty 'nuclear weapons states', but their safety compliance is far from assured. India is not even a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty.
2. With the announcement in June that the Australian Government will establish a Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Commission to be headed by Gareth Evans, Australia will play a key leadership role in revamping the non-proliferation treaty in the lead up to its five-yearly review in 2010.

Your response to this issue could then include any of the following:

- joining an anti-nuclear campaign group;
- asking your local member of parliament for [bipartisan] opposition to nuclear proliferation;
- approaching your mayor to establish a nuclear free zone (not a 'solution' as much as a symbolic awareness-raising exercise); or
- opposing the building of nuclear reactors (on the basis that increased nuclear technology and expertise may contribute to weapons proliferation).

We realise that some of our readers won't agree with all these suggestions. So even simply to take the time reading and considering the arguments in our 'Sources' section below would be a good start.

**A challenge to God?** The U.S. President who authorised Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Harry Truman, exulted that humanity was witnessing 'the harnessing of the basic power of the universe'. This ominous turn of phrase shows how nuclear war confronts us with the very best and worst of humanity: our ingenuity, and our capacity to destroy.

Are nuclear weapons the ultimate challenge to God? Not exactly, for even armed with such power, puny humans can never succeed in dislodging the final power of God both to direct history and to justly judge the makers and users of these weapons. Christians accept the wisdom of the bible that humanity cannot control its ultimate destiny, and may delude itself in thinking that we control the fate of the planet.

However as we humbly accept our limitations, under God we can nevertheless advocate for a world that is safe and just and where money is spent on feeding people rather than producing nuclear weapons. Christians look forward to a new heaven and earth that will be established for all eternity. But it does not follow that we must meekly stand by and accept the arguments of those willing to slaughter and burn millions on the planet as we now know it.

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## Appendix: The Regulatory Framework for Non-Proliferation

The international community has put in place a non-proliferation regime that is meant to halt the spread of nuclear weapons and to provide a framework for disarmament by the nuclear weapons states. The key platform of this regime is the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The treaty opened for signature on July 1, 1968 and entered into force on March 5, 1970. There are currently 189 states party to the treaty, five of which have nuclear weapons. Australia became a party to the NPT in January 1973.

The NPT recognizes two forms of state:

**Nuclear Weapons States (NWS)** – USA, Russia, UK, China, France

**Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS)** – the other 184 signatories to the NPT.

**Only four nations are not signatories:** India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea. India and Pakistan both possess and have openly tested nuclear bombs. Israel has had a policy of opacity regarding its own nuclear weapons program. North Korea ratified the treaty, violated it, and later withdrew.

The treaty takes the form of a three-way bargain between these states.

1. the NNWS (in articles I & II) agree not to acquire or manufacture nuclear weapons.
2. The NWS (in article VI) pledge to work to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.
3. Article IV allows for the use of nuclear technologies for peaceful purposes and provides for international trade in nuclear materials and technology, subject to Articles I & II. (Illusion of Protection).

The NPT also defines the responsibilities of NNWS to apply International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards to all nuclear activities carried out within their territories (Article III). Australia signed the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA in July 1974.

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### Sources/Further Reading:

International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN):

<http://www.icanw.org>

Medical Association for Prevention of War: <http://www.mapw.org.au>

'Understanding the Nuclear NPT': [http://www.mapw.org.au/files/downloads/NPT\\_booklet\\_Sept07\\_print.pdf](http://www.mapw.org.au/files/downloads/NPT_booklet_Sept07_print.pdf)

A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: was the Allied bombing of civilians in WWII a necessity or a crime?* London: Bloomsbury, 2006.

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<http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/programguide/stories/200806/s2271005.htm>

Rory Medcalf, 'India's Disarmament Drive, an idea worth pursuing,' *The Australian*, 12 May, 2008

[http://www.lowyinstitute.com/Program\\_IntSecurity.asp](http://www.lowyinstitute.com/Program_IntSecurity.asp)

Australian Uranium Association briefing papers:

<http://www.uic.com.au>

Ian Lowe, 'Reaction Time: climate change and the nuclear option,' *Quarterly Essay*, issue 27, 2007.

George P. Shultz et al, 'Toward a Nuclear free world,' *Wall Street Journal* 15 Jan 2008

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120036422673589947.html>

World Council of Churches minute on the elimination of nuclear arms, 2006.

<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/1-statements-documents-adopted/international-affairs/report-from-the-public-issues-committee/nuclear-arms.html>

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