

The Moral, Spiritual, Legal, Practical Response to Humanity's Greatest Threat: Nuclear Weapons

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**Address to Panel at
Parliament of the World's Religions
Toronto, November 5, 2018**

The very title of this panel — “The Moral, Spiritual, Legal, Practical Response to Humanity's Greatest Threat: Nuclear Weapons” — conveys the multidimensional work required to rid the world of the ultimate evil, nuclear weapons. No single perspective seems capable of eliminating nuclear weapons. A holistic vision is needed — which, of course, embraces many disciplines.

Nuclear weapons reach into the depths of our consciences, yet as the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recede further into history, the public today seems to have forgotten their massive killing power. Nuclear weapons produce lethal levels of heat and gas, exterminate civilian populations, produce radiation and radioactive fallout, induce cancers and related afflictions, cause congenital deformities, continue for decades to induce health-related problems, contaminate and destroy the food chain, imperil the eco-system, and threaten all life on the planet.

The use of even a tiny fraction of the 15,000 nuclear weapons in the world today could cause worldwide climate disruption and global famine. A large-scale nuclear war would kill hundreds of millions of people directly and decimate the natural environment that has sustained humanity since the beginning of time.

These descriptions of the overwhelming deadly effects of nuclear weapons are not put forward in governments' budgetary allocations. They were, however, emphasized by Judge Christopher Weeramantry when the International Court of Justice ruled that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would contravene every aspect of humanitarian law, and when the head of that Court, Judge Mohammed Bedjaoui, said that nuclear weapons challenge “the very existence of humanitarian law.”

New generations should ponder the words of the distinguished American diplomat George Kennan, who originated the U.S. “containment” policy towards the former Soviet Union: *“The readiness to use nuclear weapons against other human beings — against people we do not know, whom we have never seen, and whose guilt or innocence it is not for us to establish — and, in doing so, to place in jeopardy the natural structure upon which all civilization rests, as though the safety and perceived interest of our own generation were more important than everything that has taken place or could take place in civilization: this is nothing less than a presumption, a blasphemy, an indignity — and indignity of monstrous proportions — offered to God!”*

Although this appeal to conscience does not, unfortunately, resonate within the military-industrial complex, it is at the core of the humanitarian movement, which has produced the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The Treaty is dismissed by the powerful states because it will not by itself eliminate nuclear weapons, but it does stigmatize them as both immoral and illegal. Naming the evil, as Pope Francis has done in firmly condemning the very possession of nuclear weapons, is a prerequisite to banning it.

The renewed focus on the immorality of nuclear weapons comes just at the time when their utility is being severely questioned. The military effectiveness of nuclear weapons is increasingly being challenged. They cannot be used against military targets without enormous civilian damage. They are not only useless in stamping out terrorism but would worsen the conditions that produce terrorism in the first place.

The proponents of nuclear deterrence, with its accompanying modernization programs soaking up vast amounts of money needed for economic and social development, seem not to care that there is no logic to support their case. Nuclear weapons have become the currency of power, and the five permanent members of the Security Council retain their status in no small measure due to their continued possession of nuclear weapons. These adherents are essentially pessimistic about the future of humanity, believing that, since history is filled with accounts of warfare, war will continue to characterize human relations. Thus they have, to date, been successful in painting nuclear abolitionists as well-meaning but naive in the ways of the world.

The moral objection to nuclear weapons has been consistently depicted as idealism. No longer. For a distinguishing feature of our time is that morality and pragmatism have intersected. What we have long known we should do for our brothers and sisters on the planet, we now know we must do to ensure our very survival. Humanity has no other option. The two overarching issues of the 21st century – the need to abolish nuclear weapons and curb global warming – are profoundly moral and existential problems.

It is not news that moral teaching emphasizes the core values of respect for life, liberty, justice and equity; mutual respect; and personal integrity. What is news is that technology has brought us to the point where we all stand on one planet, breathe the same air, are affected by one another's problems and possess the power to annihilate each other. The physical integrity of all human life today demands public policies that enhance, not diminish, life. The common good requires policies that promote sustainable and socially equitable development and peace in all regions of the globe.

The gathering global conscience points to a world that is human-centred and genuinely democratic – a world that builds and protects peace, equality, justice and development; a world where human security, as envisioned in the principles of the U.N. Charter, replaces armaments, violent conflict and wars; a world where everyone lives in a clean environment with a fair distribution of the earth's resources, and where human rights are protected by a body of international law. The agenda I have just outlined is precisely what the Sustainable Development Goals are all about. A hunger for social justice is at the core of these Goals. That is the holistic vision that will make the abolition of nuclear weapons possible.

The moral case against nuclear weapons, built on humanity's growing rejection of violence as a means of resolving conflict, is gathering strength. But our title enjoins us also to consider a "practical" approach. Consider, therefore, the resolution adopted in 2018 by the Senate of the State of California, a very pragmatic institution. The resolution urged federal U.S. leaders to embrace the Prohibition Treaty "and make nuclear disarmament the centrepiece of our national security policy." The Senate of the largest state in the U.S. said: "The planned expenditure of more than \$1 trillion to enhance our nuclear arsenal will not only increase the risk of nuclear disaster but fuel a global arms race and divert crucial resources needed to assure the well-being of the American people and people all over the world." The California vote came just weeks after the Los Angeles City Council unanimously passed a resolution to support the Prohibition Treaty.

Political action against nuclear weapons is indeed possible. But such action, on a global scale, requires the emergence of a global ethic based on the common good. Let us not despair at the magnitude of this challenge. The very existence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an expression of global conscience. So are the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Global Compact on Migration.

When a new caring for the human condition permeates political decision-making, the end of nuclear weapons will follow.