The ethics of nuclear war

Introduction
Throughout Christian history some outside of the main stream of Christian orthodoxy have opposed all forms of war and violence. They are called "pacifists" or "people of peace." Often they appeal to texts in the Sermon on the Mount in which the Lord spoke of the blessed peacemakers and to His command to "turn the other cheek" when one is slapped on the side of the face (Matthew 5:39). This philosophy of non-resistance to evil has always been condemned as a serious error by Christian orthodoxy.

New objections to war
Now we find a new development. We find many in "main stream" Christianity taking the position that nuclear weapons put a new dimension into the subject of war, and that while "conventional" war was acceptable in the past, the nuclear era has made the very concept of war unacceptable to the Christian conscience. For example, in 1983 the Catholic Bishops of the U.S. produced a 150-page pastoral letter to U.S. Roman Catholics condemning nuclear war. This letter was subject to much national debate but was approved by a 238 to 9 vote.

Among the Protestants, most liberals seem to be of the opinion that nuclear war is immoral and unthinkable. Even many evangelicals are of the same opinion, as was indicated at the Sweden Conference on Nuclear War held in 1983. This was co-sponsored by Evangelicals for Social Action and the left wing Sojourners magazine. This conference declared that "the possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence is immoral and contradicts the will of God."

At a Mennonite Bible Camp which we used this summer we saw a poster which read: "It is a sin to make a nuclear weapon." (One of our Reformed pastors commented, "It is a sin to tell a lie — as that poster does!")

We are being subjected to a great deal of propaganda on the subject of nuclear war, and the "Nuclear Freeze" movement is on the march trying to convince this nation that we must cease building and deploying any more nuclear weapons — even if we are in a position inferior to that of the Soviet Union in our nuclear capabilities.

What are we to say about this subject? Is it too complex for us laymen to understand and evaluate? Must we simply retire to our closets and pray that nuclear war will never happen? It is the position of this writer that we can and must analyze the problem in greater depth than that. We shall consider the ethics of nuclear war biblically and factually by considering:

1) The Biblical doctrine of war;
2) That nuclear war is not a unique category of war; and
3) A positive approach to our national defense.

1. The Biblical doctrine of war
A. The Bible is a Book of war! From Genesis 3 to Revelation 20 we read of war — wars that are unholy and wars that are holy. The Lord even designates Himself the Lord of Hosts (armies). The Lord destroys His enemies and often does this by means of human warfare. Abraham had his own private army and sent it out to rescue Lot (Genesis 14). The Lord ordered Israel to
invade and smite the Canaanites and to leave no survivors. The capture of the promised land was a very bloody affair. Israel often found itself in war (cf. Judges) and David was a distinguished general, honored for his bravery in killing Philistines.

All of this is mentioned to illustrate that God and war are intimately connected. It should be pointed out, however, that Israel had specific revelation from God to exterminate the Canaanites, but no modern nation today has a list of nations that God orders to be exterminated. The "holy war" of Israel in her conquest of Canaan is carried out in the New Covenant era by means of the Gospel. See 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

However, this spiritual warfare is not to be confused with and does not cancel the duty of every nation to defend itself against aggression. The Bible teaches clearly that it is the specific purpose of civil government to bear the sword so as to defend the citizens against aggression, both internal and external. Every nation must have defensive forces for the same reason it must have policemen: to protect life and property from aggressors. This is the teaching of Psalm 82, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1, 2, 1 Peter 2:13, 14, etc.

**B. All the Reformed Confessions, where they speak about the subject of war, teach the necessity of just war, that is, defensive war against aggression:** See, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith (23:2), the Belgic Confession (Art. 36), and the Heidelberg Catechism (105, 106) teach the sword power of the Civil Magistrate.

**C. We may summarize the Biblical Doctrine of the duty of defensive war by stating the following Biblical propositions:**

1) Nations are legitimate entities in this world and have the right to national independence (Genesis 17:4-6; Isaiah 60:3; Act 17:26; Revelation 21:24 ff.).

2) Preserving national independence sometimes requires the violence of defensive war. Violence is not in itself sinful (Psalm 82; Proverbs 20:18; 24:5, 6; Ecclesiastes 3:8; Luke 3:14, 14:31; Matthew 8:9, 10).

3) The justice of defensive war is determined not by the righteousness of the nation attacked, but by the unrighteousness of the act of aggression (Ezekiel 38:10-13).

4) Just war must be waged according to God's laws for warfare (cf. Deuteronomy 20:1-20; Numbers 1: 2, 3, etc.).

5) Defensive war does not justify the extermination of non-combatants, nor the amalgamation of the conquered nation (Deuteronomy 20:14; Revelation 21:24, 22:2).

**2. Nuclear war is not a unique category of war**

Since the Word of God is our only rule for faith and practice, and since the Bible does not envision nuclear war as an exception to its teachings on war, we conclude that the use of nuclear weapons in warfare, however frightening they may be, does not make war "unthinkable" or in itself immoral. Nor is it a sin to build a nuclear weapon. The erroneous charge that it is a sin could have been made against producing gun powder, the submarine and the airplane.

The morality of defending national sovereignty remains the same in the so-called "nuclear age" — despite contrary assertions of pacifists and appeasement politicians. The greater threat posed by foes armed with nuclear weapons simply requires greater preparedness to meet that threat.

The doomsday argument that a war fought with nuclear weapons means a nuclear holocaust and the destruction of all life on this planet is fallacious. It is refuted by both Biblical eschatology (the doctrine of the end of the world) and by conservative scientific thought. With respect to biblical eschatology, the Lord declares that the nations will be present for judgment when He returns (Matthew 25:31, 32), and that they will be talking about "peace and safety," not nuclear annihilation (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 5:1-4; 2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 21:24).
As for conservative scientific and military thinking, it questions or denies many of the ideas that are now popularly repeated as true! For example, consider the following:

The claim is made that: "any use of nuclear weapons would rapidly escalate into a strategic exchange that would leave both countries in ashes."

This commonly believed assumption rests on no factual foundation. The escalation theory assumes that if one side fires a missile at a ship or port or missile base that the other side would retaliate with two missiles. Then the first side would fire four more, the second side 10 and so on. It assumes that the men running the countries are petulant children who would launch missiles as a grotesque game of personal revenge. This could possibly happen, but it is far more likely that a missile exchange would be tactical and limited to specific targets.

Again, the claim is made that "a nuclear war would produce a 'nuclear winter' for the planet Earth for at least 10 years." This theory, promoted by astronomer Carl Sagan and some of his colleagues, assumes that the dust and smoke resulting from a nuclear war would so becloud the atmosphere that a "winter" would set in for the entire earth preventing any crops from growing! This assumption has been challenged by others. Stephen Cole, for example, points out that the massive eruption of Mt. Tambora in 1915 did indeed affect the weather on a global scale for over a year, but it was regarded as an inconvenience, not a major disaster (S. Cole, Review of the News, June 13, 1984).

3. A positive approach to national defense

A. Our nation must operate on the age-old axiom that aggressive attacks can be avoided only by maintaining superior military strength. Weak powers do not attack those whom they know will defeat them (Luke 14:31). Our safety cannot be guaranteed by our superior strength, but our defeat is assured if we discard or neglect our defenses against the Communist aggressors who are determined to conquer the world.

B. There must be a halt to the building up of our sworn enemy's military capability. Strange as it seems, the powerful threat posed by the Soviet Union has been accelerated by our carelessness. While on one hand we spend multiple billions of dollars to defend this country, we at the same time have provided technical and strategic hardware to this same enemy (as well as military secrets which were stolen from us).

C. The United States must build whatever defensive nuclear weapons are necessary to defend this nation. That is the primary function of our civil government according to God's Word.

D. There are viable alternative programs for building a sound defense. One of the most promising is the High Frontier Anti-Missile system. It is receiving favorable attention by President Reagan. Although it has been ridiculed as "Star Wars," it is under discussion as a plan to avert a Soviet First Strike. (For those who wish to read further on this subject, you may obtain the informative paperback, We Must Defend America, A New Strategy for National Survival by Ret. Gen. Daniel O. Graham, Project Director for High Frontier, Address: High Frontier, 1010 Vermont Ave., Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20005. $2.95.)

Conclusion

Nuclear war could be a horrible catastrophe for millions of people, though every war is a major catastrophe for those who are directly involved. The devastation wrought at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was indeed extensive and horrendous, though for the record there was greater devastation and more lives were lost in the "Conventional" bombing of Dresden, Germany, than in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

War is an expression of the righteous judgment of God on sinful nations (Deuteronomy 28:7, 25; Psalm 9:17). The best method for preventing war and insuring national survival is to disciple the nations with the Word of God so that God's protective blessings will be present (Deuteronomy 28:7). The means God requires for the defense of a nation are military weapons. Israel had to use
them, David had to use them and the Lord commands their use in the New Testament age (Romans 13:4).

In the providence of God, we are in the age of nuclear weapons. This is no accident. The sovereign God ordains and controls all events that transpire. Though warfare has become more sophisticated, it is not obsolete. We are in a world in which aggressors also dwell. We must be prepared to defend ourselves against them at whatever cost. Not only must we be prepared to resist an aggressor, we must work for the conversion of all nations so that they will have leaders who will "beat their swords into plowshares." Our best offense is the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ which destroys the fortresses of sinful, proud, ambitious men, and "every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5). Until that time occurs, we must trust in God and keep our nuclear powder dry.

Norman L Jones

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Sources:

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- Schlafly, Phyllis, "The Phyllis Schlafly Report" (monthly); Also, her address to the Naval War College, 1983.