ADVOCACY ETHICS AND THE NUCLEAR ARMS RACE

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This occasion of installation reminds me of the first time I attended such an event. I was in my first year at Union Seminary in New York. Two well-known theologians were installed: Paul Lehmann and John Macquarrie. It was an afternoon of formal lectures. The date of this installation was the latter part of October, 1962. As you will recall, this was the period of the Cuban missile crisis. I remember sitting in the lecture hall wondering what I was doing there when at any minute New York might be devastated by nuclear attack. In part it was hard for me to face the possibility that this might really happen. Charles Osgood has stated this feeling well: "Seated in the backyard on a nice spring day, drinking a can of beer, watching the kids at play and enjoying the trees and flowers, the Neanderthal within us simply cannot conceive of the trees blackened, the flowers suddenly withered, and the voices of the children stilled—or there being no more beer."[1]

Yet I also remember being struck by the incongruity between the hope for future represented in the rituals of installation and the prospects of imminent destruction, prospects which were at that time completely out of my hands. Perhaps to participate in a ritual of hope at such a time was a particularly appropriate response. Yet such a time also raises for us in a radical way the question of the vocation of intellectuals. Is there any relation between the kind of intellectual work we do, as represented in formal lectures, and the everyday possibility of nuclear annihilation? Rarely is this question posed as sharply as it was in that installation event twenty years ago. So it is that as I seek to communicate to you something of the state of the discipline of Christian Ethics and my sense of vocation as a worker in this field, I shall focus on the nuclear arms race.

It strikes me as very strange that the sense of reality about nuclear war that came into our lives for several days twenty years ago had such little impact on the way we subsequently viewed the nuclear arms race. To be sure both the United States and Soviet Union were sufficiently sobered by the 1962 showdown to seek limited agreements. Yet the prevailing interpretation of those days is that the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis was a great victory for President Kennedy. He combined firmness and flexibility. No nuclear

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[1]John C. Bennett & Harvey Seifert, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), p. 37.

weapons were fired, and Khrushchev pulled his missiles out of Cuba. What had earlier brought us face to face with the terrors of nuclear war now became a confirmation of the intelligence and rightness of defending one's interests through the threat of such a war. We survived; we faced Russia eyeball to eyeball and Khrushchev blinked.

But what if one asks, as surprisingly few have asked: what kind of cause or objective justifies assuming the risks of nuclear catastrophe? Then one's interpretation of the Cuban missile crisis and one's assessment of Kennedy's decisions take on a different cast. John Stoessinger makes the point:

> "A deeply ingrained reaction against the 'Munich syndrome'; and the determination not to appear weak...made Kennedy risk nuclear war over missile bases in Turkey, which by his own admission, were obsolete and useless and which, by his own order, should have been dismantled two months earlier. Thus, after twelve days of almost incredible balance and restraint, he risked nuclear Armageddon on the thirteenth day over what appeared to be a side issue."[2]

I began with the Cuban missile crisis not only to dramatize the genuine possibility of nuclear war but also to highlight the conventional American viewpoint about nuclear weapons, a viewpoint so powerful on the American mind that only a small minority inside and outside academia have in the intervening years called it into question. The Cuban missile crisis has been absorbed in the national narrative that justifies the nuclear arms race rather than stimulating a counter narrative that would lead us in a sharply different direction. Even many of the most acute critics of United States' policy in Indochina did not raise dissenting voices against the arms race. Only those radical social critics such as the Berrigan brothers were trying to warn of the connection betwen the oppressive use of American power in Vietnam and a military-industrial system addicted to weaponry. Even when these social critics and prophets were admired for their courage, their views were more dismissed than heeded. It is difficult to exaggerate the power of the consensus that has dominated American life: that a nuclear arms race is necessary to counter the threat of Soviet aggression, and nuclear deterrence is the only practicable and, therefore, hopeful basis for international peace and security.

Therefore, it is of great significance that there are so many persons now who are repudiating that consensus and calling for a reversal of the arms race. The so-called "freeze" movement may bring together a diverse group of people, but their unity is more important than their diversity. They reject the notion that the continuation of our present strategic policies is the only prac-

[2]John G. Stoessinger, *Nations in Darkness* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 179.

ticable way to ensure international security; and they are united in their conviction that to continue on our present course will not provide such security but will, instead, lead to disaster. The long prevailing consensus is unravelling. Church activist groups identify this as an opportune moment, "kairos," a favorable or "decisive point of time."[3] Indeed, it is a remarkable characteristic of this moment that historic peace churches, the United States' Roman Catholic Bishops, and the representative assemblies of mainline Protestant churches, who have often enough fought with each other over pacifism and war and any number of other matters, are remarkably unified in their belief that Christians today are called to enter the political struggle to reverse the arms race. In a short period of time those views which five and ten years ago were regarded as "fringe" or "alarmist" or "utopian" are now at the center of American life with genuine potential for redirecting the course of American policy.

What is the import of these developments for the way Christian Ethics is understood and for the way we in Christian Ethics do our work? Immediately, I am faced with the relative paucity of substantive ethical reflection on the nuclear arms race. Whatever ethicists have been up to over the past twenty years, nuclear questions have had low priority. Apparently, the discipline has shared with the wider public the assumption that nuclear deterrence is the taken-for-granted reality within which we work rather than the existing reality we call into question. One might well wonder what happened to the discipline that originated in Walter Rauschenbusch's commitment to a humane urban civilization and Reinhold Niebuhr's zeal for economic justice. The thesis I want to explore with you this evening is that Christian Social Ethics needs to recover this advocacy heritage, and to reconsider the character of its inquiry in the light of the nuclear arms race. In developing this thesis, I shall argue that the dominant orientation to social ethics in recent years, the analytic approach, is incapable of providing the kind of reflection that is required.

First, I shall critique the analytic view of ethics, rather briefly, and then present more fully an advocacy interpretation. Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion of analytic ethics is to lift up two works by Ralph Potter, Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard Divinity School. In the middle of the Vietnam War, Potter wrote a book in which he sought to interpret the vocation of a Christian ethicist in that time of social conflict. His conclusion was that we should not so much argue a position on the war as do the relatively neglected work of evaluating the reasoning people used in making value judgments about war.[4]

Now, notice the focus that Potter proposed here. Instead of providing an ethical evaluation of United States' policy in Vietnam, Potter argued that ethicists should analyze the reasoning employed in the debate. Vietnam as a

[3] *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. IV (New York: Abingdon, 1962), p. 645.
[4] Ralph Potter, *War and Moral Discourse* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), p. 8.

grim, immediate reality which day in and day out exacted a grievous toll in human lives, receded into the background as the ethicist in a rather detached way considered Vietnam as an occasion for reflecting more generally on moral reasoning about war.

Then several years later Potter wrote an essay in a similar vein which has provoked a great deal of discussion among social ethicists. He attacked the lack of precision and clarity in the discipline. He lamented that we ethicists are spread out all over the intellectual map with little agreement about what our primary task is and about where our distinguishing expertise resides. His proposal was that Christian social ethics "should seek to specialize in the critical analysis and justification of the logic of moral discourse employed by Christians..."[5] We as ethicists are to help to reduce the perplexity of Christians by analyzing and clarifying moral arguments so Christians are better equipped to make decisions.

This proposal of Potter's is what I am calling the analytic mode of social ethics. Many agreed with his view. Many agreed that we need to nail down this strange discipline with precision, and overcome dilletantism and the propensity to make sweeping moral generalizations about complex social phenomena. Although some aspects of his critique are important, I believe this quest for narrowness in scope and methodological precision reflects the disillusionment of modernity about the possibilities for significant social change. The whole of social reality is beyond our plate and even our boarding house reach. Instead, bite off a small piece of subject matter which we can sink our teeth into and really digest.

Let me summarize the analytic mode of social ethics. The subject matter is the logic of moral reasoning. What we reason about is less important than the way we reason. Fundamental social realities like the Indochina War or the nuclear arms race are less interesting than the kinds of reasoning people engage in in making moral judgments about them. So the task of Christian social ethics is to clarify assumptions, analyze alternative positions and arguments, identify where disagreements lie, and clarify the meaning of moral principles and the methods whereby these principles are related to moral questions. As I assess this approach to ethics, I am struck with the aptness of Bernard Williams' comment about moral philosophy: He says,

> "Contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all...the desire to reduce revealed moral commitment to a minimum and to use moral arguments in the role of being uncontentiously illustrative leaves an impression that all the important issues are off the

[5]Ralph Potter, "The Logic of Moral Argument," *Toward A Discipline of Social Ethics,* ed. by Paul Deats, Jr. (Boston: Boston University Press, 1972), p. 105.

page, somewhere, and that great caution and little imagination have been used in letting tiny corners of them appear."[6]

Williams' expression is precisely on target. When Christian social ethics is preoccupied with the logic of moral reasoning, the crucial issues "are off the page, somewhere" or are merely illustrative of fine points of argumentation. Such, of course, is the fate of the nuclear arms race. Analytic ethics treats it as one among many social questions which presents interesting challenges to moral reasoning. The nuclear arms race is not examined in its whole systemic character, but in isolable parts which are amenable to analytic ethical methods. For example, one of the questions about nuclear deterrence discussed by ethicists is whether or not the United States is justified to maintain nuclear weapons as a threat and even to threaten to use them even though *actually* to use them would be unjustified. In a benign world, this might be an interesting intellectual puzzle to linger over. What I believe is immediately apparent, however, is how politically antiseptic discussion on that kind of question is. Whatever formal conclusions ethicists arrive at, meanwhile back at the Pentagon, strategists are developing varied plans for nuclear war.

Questions do not come to policy makers in a formal way or in isolation. Decisions about weaponry emerge out of a social context. They are greatly affected by the cumulative impact of prior planning and the momentum of established direction. So, as soon as the atomic bombs were ready, President Truman authorized their use on Japan. The historian, John Toland, tells of an interview he had with Truman in 1958, in which Toland said that the "decision must have come after considerable soul-searching," and President Truman replied, "Hell, no, I made it like '—(he snapped his fingers)—' that!"[7] President Kennedy deliberated more but experienced similar momentum when he acquiesced to the Bay of Pigs invasion plans early in his presidency. Even as analytic ethics is very rigorous in its attention to moral argument, it seems relatively indifferent to the broader social context in which moral questions are embedded and to the actual political dynamics that are shaping our future.

One more example of how analytic ethics deals with the nuclear arms race: Recently there has been a shift in strategic doctrine from targeting Soviet cities to aiming at Soviet forces, military bases, weapons industries, and so forth. New kinds of nuclear weaponry have been developed, such as the cruise missile and the neutron bomb, that are considerably more accurate than previous weapons. According to the new doctrine, nuclear weapons can be used effectively against military targets without the kinds of catastrophic losses that would be involved in launching weapons against cities. This is part

[6]Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973), p. x.

[7]John Toland, *The Rising Sun* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 862.

of the reason we have been hearing more over the last several years about a thinkable and winnable nuclear war.

For analytic ethics, this becomes an interesting occasion to employ the just war theory about justified means of conducting a war.[8] The conclusion of some is that the shift to a counterforce nuclear strategy is morally preferable to previous strategies. It better conforms to the moral requirement that means of warfare must discriminate between the civilian population of an enemy and its military forces. What is striking about this kind of analysis is the acceptance of the nuclear paradigm for national security. One isolates issues within this paradigm to deal with but does not call the paradigm itself into question. The choice between counter city or counter force nuclear war is a very narrow and misleading way to present the options. Thus, it seems to me that the analytic approach to social ethics, even when it is not intended by its proponents, has tacitly accepted and reinforced the dominant social consensus about the necessity of the nuclear arms race to provide peace and security in the world.

Let us turn then to a consideration of an advocacy interpretation of social ethics.[9] Advocacy ethics is not only "taking a position" on the nuclear arms race but is an entirely different way of viewing the discipline. However, it is the nuclear arms race which more than anything else has convinced me that this turn is critically important. It is a vocational decision (what does one study and teach?) (how does one study and teach it?) and it is a political decision (with what social forces will one's work be aligned?). As liberation theologians have taught us, we can be assured that our work is not and cannot be politically neutral.

What is the subject matter of Christian social ethics? We have seen that for analytic ethics it is moral reasoning. But for advocacy ethics the primary subject matter is the social world in which we live. We are interested in studying the features of our social context that bear most profoundly on people's lives and the shape of our common future. We study these matters not as detached observers but as persons who seek to discern the right or the good, that we might be its advocate.

For advocacy ethics, to engage social reality today is to engage the nuclear arms race. It is not just another issue or topic in a laundry list of contemporary questions. It is not even just a very influential policy of national security. The nuclear arms race is the predominant characteristic of our social context and it is the primary determiner, perhaps destroyer, of the world's future. It is a way of perceiving and constructing our world. It is a world view with a comprehensive set of assumptions about human beings, human communities, social conflict, the United States, the Soviet Union, international relations, security, and

[8]See James T. Johnson, "The Cruise Missile and the Neutron Bomb: Some Moral Reflections," *Worldview,* Vol. 20 (December, 1977), pp. 20-26.

[9]I have been influenced in my views by Joseph Hough who responded sharply to Potter's essay by asserting that Christian social ethics should be marked by advocacy. See Hough, "Christian Social Ethics as Advocacy," *The Journal of Religious Ethics,* V (Spring, 1977), 115-133.

the future. One simply cannot grasp the moral significance of the nuclear arms race without confronting its all-pervasive character. As Max Stackhouse has shown brilliantly, it is a faith with a quasi-theology of its own, including an ecclesiology which is the military-industrial complex; and an ethic too, in Stackhouse's words, "The ethics of necropolis," a civilization bent on death.[10] If Christian social ethics does not have methods to study such a comprehensive set of perceptions, commitments and social phenomena, then we shall have to discover or create them, rather than retreat to more precisely manageable projects. And if we study these phenomena without advocating a different theology, a different politics, an alternative future, we shall have abdicated the very moral responsibility that presumably our discipline seeks to nourish.

How then will advocacy ethics reflect on the social context? What will the shape of our study be? It seems to me that there are two interrelated tasks. One is the critical/analytical task which I shall call the *inquiry of suspicion.* The second is the constructive task which I shall call the *inquiry of possibility.* Both suspicion and possibility are reflective responses to a transformative vision of human community which is the theological basis for Christian social ethics. In advocacy ethics one studies the social context suspiciously and hopefully in order to contribute to its transformation.

First, then, let us examine the inquiry of suspicion. Analytic ethics engages in analysis primarily to clarify moral arguments. Advocacy ethics engages in analysis because of suspicion that conventional views and patterns are hiding morally intolerable realities. We are especially suspicious, as Tom Ogletree has put it, of "those fancies and popular conceptions which function to legitimate special privilege, or which justify violence, exploitation and oppression, however grandly universalistic they appear to be!"[11]

Thus advocacy ethics will analyze the nuclear arms race suspiciously, submitting it to probing criticism. The kinds of inquiries born of suspicion are these: the assumptions and perceptions of an arms race orientation to the world; nuclear deterrence theory and the presuppositions which drive it; the role of the United States in the arms race; the way the nuclear national security orientation has led to the increasing militarization of American society and the militarization of our policies in the world; the system of power and privilege that maintains and perpetuates the arms race. Advocacy ethics approaches the nuclear arms race with fundamental suspicion, not moral neutrality. Suspicion shapes the questions we ask and what it is that we analyze. Suspicion also affects the purpose of analysis which is to make others suspicious also. Suspicion breeds critique and critique breeds transformation. It is the purpose of Christian social ethics, then, to analyze critically the nuclear arms race not merely to clarify the issues but to weaken its hold on us, its sovereignty over us, its claim

[10]Max Stackhouse, *The Ethics of Necropolis* (Boston: Beacon, 1971).

[11]Thomas Ogletree, "The Activity of Interpreting in Moral Judgment," *The Journal of Religious Ethics,* 8 (Spring 1980), 15.

on our allegiance. Only then will we be free to pursue a different historical course.

A powerful example of ethical suspicion and criticism directed at the nuclear arms race is Jonathan Schell's book *The Fate of the Earth.*[12] Schell's approach is to give a detailed description of a full-scale nuclear war. Relentlessly, he gives us picture after picture of the near total destruction that would occur. He concludes that in all likelihood the only life that would survive would be some insects and grasses. Everything else would die. But Schell does not stop with this description. He wants to probe the meaning of such a catastrophe. To grasp its significance, Schell argues, it is not enough to recognize that nuclear war would mean the death of us who are living now. We must push further to face the meaning of extinction, that is, the death of the future, the end of the human species and the obliteration of human history.

Some critics of Schell have charged him with psychological violence.[13] They claim he is trying to manipulate readers by fear to join the political movement to get rid of nuclear weapons. Now, of course, this is really a diversionary critique because it does not address the truth of his description. But it does raise for us the question: why must we face his profoundly horrifying descriptions of nuclear war? I believe the answer is because of our tendency to self-deception. As a people during this nuclear age, we have deceived ourselves and let ourselves be deceived about the nature of this weaponry. Some of the deception has been intentional, such as the dangers of radioactive fallout from testing, for example, or evacuation plans for cities like Denver in the event of nuclear attack that read more like a two week ski holiday than a Hiroshima writ large. But much of self-deception is more subtle. I believe Schell is right that it is not because we value life too little that we have accepted uncritically the nuclear arms race; it is because we love life so much. Because we care deeply about life, we are prone to squirrel away from our consciousness the annihilating potential of the weapons we are depending on for our security. Not many persons are interested in willful flirtation with extinction in order to compete with the Russians. Many more will tacitly accept nuclear weapons and the justifications for them because we are unable or unwilling to face the realities of their awesome destructiveness. It is too frightening, painful and depressing; so we refuse to let our suspicions surface in our consciousness.

Advocacy ethics engages the social context suspiciously, suspicious not only of the conventions that dehumanize, but, even more fundamentally, suspicious of our own interrelation with them. Only as we recognize our tendency to self-deception and become suspicious of our acquiescence in the

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[12]Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

[13]See Edward N. Luttwak, "How to Think About Nuclear War," *Commentary,* 74 (August, 1982), 28, who labels Schell's book "intellectual terrorism."

[14]See the brilliant essay on self-deception by Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "Self-Deception and Autobiography: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Speer's *Inside the Third Reich,*" *The Journal of Religious Ethics,* 2 (Spring, 1974), 99-117.

arms race will we be empowered to pursue a different course. Theologically understood, this movement in Christian social ethics is the dialectic of confession and new life: confession is a precondition for new life; yet it is the power of God for new life that enables us to face rather than run from that which needs to be confessed.

The constructive task of Christian social ethics, I am suggesting, can best be understood as the *inquiry of possibility.* In analytic ethics the constructive task is viewed as providing rational justification for one's conclusion about a discrete moral question. In advocacy ethics, it is to discern in the social context possibilities for morally responsible action. It is to investigate possible openings in the present that can lead to a transformed future. By rejecting the arms race worldview and strategy of national security, advocacy ethics seeks to project an alternative way of envisioning the world and struggle with what is necessary to be its witness and agent.

I believe it is in relation to this constructive task that the theological dimension is especially critical. Daniel Day Williams has written that: "Religion is openness to the possibilities of life viewed in the light of a universal goodness at work in all things."[15] Theology helps us to understand how goodness may be disclosed in unfolding possibilities. Sometimes it is lamented that we have no major theological debates any more. Yet it may be that the debates are there. They are just not the traditional ones. At least so far as Christian social ethics is concerned, the major theological questions are not the Trinity or the two natures of Christ, but the vision we have of the world, or the character of hope that shapes our living, or the possibilities that evoke our commitments. These theological issues are vigorously contested today although not often in traditional theological language. Advocacy ethics arises out of a theology of possibility. It rejects prevailing deterministic viewpoints that we are fated to live in a future dominated by the nuclear arms race. A theology of possibility envisions an alternative future which fires our intellectual and political imagination to look for historical alternatives to our present course. Advocacy ethics will seek to discover and create the comprehensive range of responses which renders this future realizable. Consequently in this approach to social ethics there will be less preoccupation with human tendencies to self-righteousness and the pretensiousness of pride, and more to the fatigue and apathy which immobilize. There will be less attention to universal human sinfulness and more to particular manifestations of sinfulness which oppress and destroy. And we shall focus on how the grace of God empowers us to move along an alternate road of historical possibility than the avenue of the arms race.

More concretely, in this proposal, the constructive shape of advocacy ethics is a commitment to nuclear disarmament as that alternative historical

[15]Daniel Day Williams, "Changing Concepts of Nature," *Earth Might Be Fair,* edited by Ian Barbour (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 60.

possibility. One of the very important developments in just the last couple of years has been a new alignment of ethicists around the nuclear disarmament option. This new grouping includes both traditional pacifists and traditional just war theorists. For pacifists, this has meant not only a strategic alliance but also an ethical compatibility with non-pacifists who are also opposing the nuclear arms race. Principled differences over the use of revolutionary violence in situations like Nicaragua or El Salvador are for many contemporary pacifists not as critical as the moral agreement that the nuclear arms race must be reversed. Simultaneously, numerous so-called ethical realists have arrived at a position of nuclear pacifism based on traditional "just war" theory, and are advocating disarmament as the most convincing way, after all, to ensure that nuclear weapons will not be used.

This new coalition of advocacy oriented ethicists rejects the assumption that the nuclear arms race is the only practicable way to ensure security in the world. Alan Geyer has recently argued in a very convincing way that disarmament has never been treated as a serious possibility in the United States government.[16] Disarmament proposals have never been genuinely tested. Massive political, economic and intellectual resources have fueled the arms race. But little comparable energy has been devoted to the pursuit of alternatives. Advocacy ethics understands its constructive task to be precisely to investigate and advocate such alternatives, to pick up the intellectual challenge posed by George Kennan: "...to help us break out of those sterile, futile and fateful fixations, to put (ourselves) to a task of the creative imagination, and to come up with bold, generous and realistic concepts...which would reveal to us all at least a conceivable route of exit from the pit into which we have recently been descending."[17] Ethicists will need to examine carefully various proposals for disarmament, looking not only for those which seem most practicable, but for those which would most profoundly transform the relations of nations and peoples.

A discipline of social ethics that is characterized by advocacy for nuclear disarmament will have its scholarly reflection and research shaped by this commitment. I want here only to identify without further development a number of areas which will need investigation: in general and in specific terms what is involved in reducing levels of hostility between peoples; in establishing conditions in which war is less likely; in rooting out and overcoming socio-economic injustices that perpetuate violence and war; and what is involved in nurturing and creating international structures appropriate to an interdependent world? There are another set of questions for advocacy ethics as well. These are already being worked on within American church life, most notably the Catholic Bishops. I am speaking of such matters as tax resistance, jobs and in-

[16]Alan Geyer, *The Idea of Disarmament* (Elgin, Illinois: The Brethren Press, 1982).

[17]George Kennan, "US-Soviet Relations: Turning from Catastrophe," *Christianity And Crisis,* 40 (May 26, 1980), 158.

vestments in institutions involved in the development and production of nuclear weapons, civil disobedience, non-violent patterns of life and methods of communal empowerment, and the demilitarization of American society through economic conversion. The relative lack of substantive engagement of these questions by ethicists clearly shows the need for such advocacy oriented research.

In conclusion, I believe the central purpose of Christian social ethics is through disciplined reflection to aid in the empowerment of the Christian community and its members for social transformation. The powers that seek to maintain the nuclear way of life are massive indeed. Those who would resist these powers and seek to pursue a different course can expect to face difficult days ahead. I can think of no greater challenge not only for Christian ethics but for theological education as a whole than to equip us all for faithfulness in such a time.

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