

FROM CONFLICT TO THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL 15.10.06

When the news broke that our U.K. Trident fleet was due for replacement, the short Press notice that it merited was soon swept away in the media Tsunami which followed, when Wayne Rooney broke his metatarsal months before the World Cup.

In his book of essays, 'Parkinson's law'. The author, a former civil servant, describes three points on the agenda of an imaginary business meeting. Point one is about the installation of a nuclear reactor on the premises, costing many million pounds. Point two is on the building of a bicycle shed for the workers, and point three is to decide the charge for a cup of coffee in the canteen. The nuclear reactor proposal is voted on and passed in a few minutes with no objections, no questions. The bicycle shed question, of more interest to more people, takes twenty minutes. The remaining hour is given over to settling coffee prices in the canteen.

There is great wisdom in all Parkinson's essays. The wisdom from the business meeting can be summed up in, 'The public attention devoted to any question tends to be in inverse ratio to its human importance.' The most striking illustration of this truth is not in fiction, but in our national attitude today to possession of a nuclear deterrent. The question is too great, too baffling, too terrifying, so we ignore it or, neglecting the complexities, we choose simplistic answers to which we adhere with all the passionate zeal of a frightened fundamentalist. It is not a subject we care to examine in any depth. There are occasional articles, and Press correspondence sometimes follows, but the controversy never lasts long, not because it has been exhaustively treated, but because there is a deep seated reluctance to pursue the question in any depth. The very language we use veils the reality we profess to be discussing. Aldermaston, 'The Atomic Weapons Research Establishment', sounds harmlessly academic. It could never be called 'The Production Centre of Mobile Ovens for Mass Human Vapourisation', nor is it any longer true that the Ministry of Defense is about defense. Britain and the U.S. refuse to accept a 'No First Strike' policy, judging that in nuclear matters, the best means of defense is to strike first at the enemy's real, or suspected, nuclear bunkers.

In Britain no political party has any hope of election unless it pledges support for our possession of a nuclear deterrent. Just recently, Gordon Brown has assured the British electorate of his support for a Trident replacement, so we can all now relax.

What is it we are voting for when we vote for a Trident replacement? The details are known only to a few and exact details cannot yet be given because the renewed version of Trident is still on the drawing board. A thousand extra places for scientists have recently been advertised for work in Aldermaston. Our present U.K. nuclear fleet has four Trident submarines. They are totally dependent for operations on U.S. Each vessel has 16 nuclear missiles and each missile can carry up to three independently fired warheads. Each vessel carries 48 nuclear warheads and each warhead is at least six times as powerful as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, a bomb that devastated the city in seconds, caused c.100,000 immediate deaths, with another 100,000 fatally wounded and dying within the next few months. Present generations still suffer from inherited genetic deformities as a result of the nuclear blast. The firepower of one nuclear submarine could devastate all the major cities of Europe in seconds, destroying all human life, leaving radiated rubble and the shadows of incinerated human beings as a memorial of Britain's

resolve to defend its values of democracy, freedom and truth itself against the forces of darkness! Despite all the major international conferences about nuclear defense in the last sixty years, there are still reckoned to be 27,000 nuclear warheads available worldwide, more than enough to put an end to all life on earth many times over. The numbers are growing as other nations demand the right to have their own independent nuclear deterrent, using the same arguments as the nuclear powers for their present possession.

Advocacy of nuclear deterrence is not the preserve of ‘the bad and the mad’: it transcends all classes, races and categories of human society, including the great and the good, those in positions of highest responsibility in Church and State, and it has its supporters among some well known academics. Why is this? Are these people the wise of our day, the realists, the men and women with their feet on the ground? This is a life and death issue for the future of the human race, an enormous, complex and very threatening question: consequently, it is rarely raised at any depth and tends to remain at a numbers- game level.

Why do we avoid discussion at any depth? Could it be that we all suffer from a split spirituality, including those who deny adherence to any form of spirituality and declare themselves to be totally immune to religion in any form. By ‘split’ spirituality’, I mean a spirituality which is split off from its roots, which is ‘the Spirit’, God, in whom all creations has its being. Split spirituality is spirituality uncontaminated by anything material: it is inhuman. Collins Modern Dictionary (1979) gives the following under SPIRITUAL: 1. *relating to spirit or soul, not to physical nature or matter, intangible.* 2. *of, relating to, or characteristic of sacred things, the Church, religion etc. -----* 4. *having a mind or emotions of a delicately refined quality.* The word spiritual itself is contaminated by the split nature of our spirituality! Our religious vocabulary includes many distinctions, valid in themselves, but usually misunderstood to suggest that we live in a two-layered reality, one material, and therefore for the religious believer of little importance, the other spiritual, and of infinitely greater worth. So we distinguish natural from supernatural, secular from sacred, material from spiritual, nature from grace etc. a distinction which we are very careful to avoid in practice, because of its unpleasant consequences.

This split affects not only our religious beliefs: it affects the way we interpret our thinking and our feeling, with disastrous results for both. We have debased feeling and divinized thinking. Feeling is considered a sign of weakness, best ignored by the resolute. In male society, women may express feelings, but not men. This view is still so common that we are no longer aware of it in ourselves. It is a view which can have alarming practical consequences. We can be aware of this in other people: it is rare that we spot it in ourselves. The world was horrified when details of the Nazi genocide of the Jews emerged at the end of the Second World War. Those who invented, installed and serviced the killing machines of the death camps were intellectually gifted and scientifically trained men, many of them forced into a job that they found repellent, but which they fulfilled out of a sense of duty to the Fatherland. The rest of the world stood aside in horrified amazement. How could people of such an intelligent, cultured and religious country sink to such appalling barbarity? It is not wrong to experience that horror: it is a sign of our humanity. What is wrong is to fail to recognize that we are just as capable of such barbarity, and just as capable of convincing ourselves that our

murderous intentions and actions spring from loyalty to God, if we are religious, and to Queen/King and country. Dorothy Day, journalist and Founder of the Catholic Worker movement in the U.S., once put this question to all supporters of nuclear deterrence, 'What is the difference between throwing innocent people into ovens, and throwing ovens at innocent people? The question is being put to us today: Have you ever heard a clear, rational answer to her question? .

This split in our spirituality lies so deep that we are not, normally, aware of its existence, yet it affects every aspect of our lives. One of its manifestations is our national attitude to possession of nuclear arms. The root of the problem is that we have discounted our feelings, devaluing and debasing them without realizing that in so doing we are doing the same to our humanity. There is not space in this article to develop this point in detail. Briefly, our feelings can be far more intelligent than our logical minds. Many people can grasp the truth of things in an intuitive moment which many more educated, intelligent people, who have lived close to the problem for many years, have never been able to grasp. In general, our bodies are far more intelligent than our conscious, thinking minds. One respected medical writer has claimed that there are, approximately 6 trillion chemical changes taking place in the human body per second! How does our body know how to deal with the food we place in our mouths? How do the billions of cells in our body know what to do with the food, how to break it down and distribute it in such a way that the whole body is energized, continues to grow and develop in due proportion, so that we do not develop simply into head, or stomach, or ears? The body may not give precise information, but it will normally give felt warnings if the body's most complex transport and communication system is going wrong. What folly it is to ignore the feelings. It is a gross and dangerous misunderstanding to think that feelings should be ignored: it is like advising a learner driver to ignore traffic lights.

There was an article which appeared many years ago in one of the Sunday papers in which Leonard Cheshire V.C., war hero and bomber pilot, wrote of his wartime experience of being in an observer plane over Nagasaki when the second atomic bomb was dropped. Till the end of his life, this heroic, generous man believed that the dropping of the bomb was justified. In the article, Cheshire put to himself this question, 'While in the plane, did you ever try to imagine what was happening to the people underneath?' His reply was that he could not afford to do such a thing, for he was in a wartime situation. In explanation of his action, he told the story of an acquaintance of his, a British army man, who caught sight of a German soldier, aimed to shoot, but the German, unaware of the enemy, began to relieve himself. This action was so human, the enemy so vulnerable, that the British officer could not shoot a luxurious surrender to feelings which a true warrior must never imitate, otherwise war becomes impossible! A retired naval officer once told me, 'Ratings are allowed to have feelings, but not officers', a saying confirmed on a recent TV programme, showing life on a nuclear submarine. The officer interviewed informed viewers that officers were trained not to think about, or question, what they were being asked to do. I have read that in today's nuclear submarines, the submarine commander himself, was he to obey the order to fire, would never know the missiles' destination. I can well understand this, for officers are being ordered to perform actions which could lead to the immediate death of millions, the lingering deaths of many more, the genetic deformation of future generations, the possible triggering of an exchange of fire which could bring about a nuclear winter and a

possible termination of life on this planet. The more submarine commanders think about and imagine the results of their obedience, the less likely they are to obey

How rooted in our Christian faith can we be if we choose to preserve our lives and, what we are pleased to call our values, with nuclear weaponry? With our unacknowledged split spirituality, is it possible for us to face these questions with our logical minds, and emerge feeling strong and convinced in our faith and also in our support for a renewal of Trident? It is certainly possible because it happens – frequently.

I have frequently in the last twenty five years asked this question about the relationship between Christian faith and support for a Nuclear Deterrence policy. One thing has become clear to me: I can judge another's words and actions: what I can never do is to condemn another human being, because I can never have knowledge adequate to justify such a complex judgment. My Christian belief convinces me that no human situation, no human person can ever be hopeless. This is an aspect of my belief in Christ's Resurrection. I also know that people in support of nuclear deterrence, although I am convinced that they are profoundly and dangerously mistaken in their view, may well be light years ahead of me in technical knowledge, in logical intelligence and may turn out to become more responsive to the compassion of God than I am ever likely to be. This is Christian teaching, but life's experience has also taught me the truth of it.

So, what am I saying – that Christian belief itself cannot give us any answer to the question of the morality of Nuclear Deterrence? No, but if we do not recognize, acknowledge and work on the split nature of our spirituality, then the split will enable us to adopt, and put into practice with a clear conscience, policies that are destructive not only of our enemies, but also of ourselves, all peoples and all creation.

How are we to begin to recognize and work on this split in our spirituality? One sign of the split is in the way we think of intelligence, which we tend to limit to logical intelligence, as in I.Q. tests. To have a high I.Q. can be a great gift, but if it is not accompanied by emotional and spiritual intelligence, it can be the characteristic of a monster, as in the film 'Dr Strangelove'. Emotional intelligence concerns the way we relate to other people. Spiritual intelligence concerns the scope of our human vision, our ability to grow in awareness of our essential relatedness to one another, whoever the other may be, and to all creation, to know that what we do to the other, we are also doing to ourselves.

Through focusing our attention on the nuclear issue, then bringing the whole question into prayer, we can begin to see the Gospel's challenge and promise in a new way. It becomes more challenging than we ever thought it was, but it also becomes more attractive. God is no longer a distant, threatening entity, to be kept at bay by my following certain rites and rituals, or by trying to forget the God question altogether, but God is becoming 'nearer to me than I am', a God who is vulnerable, who is always in the now, whose love is limitless and includes all creation.

If you are a Christian believer and a believer in the morality of nuclear deterrence, try writing out a prayer for peace, letting God in on your vision.

There is an essential difference between Christ's peace and peace as the world understands it. The Romans had a saying, 'If you want to preserve peace, prepare for war'. It was a policy which enabled them to expand, and hold the largest Empire in the known world for many centuries. It was peace through domination, through control. It is a policy which nations are still attempting to practice today in many parts of the world.

In St John's account of Jesus' appearance on Easter Sunday evening to his frightened disciples, 'Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them "Peace be with you", and showed them his hands and his side'. (John 20.21) The world's peace is about invulnerability, domination and control: Christ's peace is about vulnerability, cooperation, freedom. To which kind of peace do the plans for Trident Renewal belong?

In the prayer which follows, I imagine myself to be a believer in the rightness of nuclear defense, and I have been invited to lead prayers for a large gathering of like minded people on Peace Sunday. In this prayer, I let God in on the reasoning which lies behind my requests.

Dear Lord, grant peace to our country and all who dwell legally within it. Inspire our scientists that they may invent yet more lethal weaponry, for the more lethal it is, the more it will ensure our safety. Preserve us from any unfortunate accident in their testing, lest we annihilate millions of our own people, and render our own lands uninhabitable through radiation. Bless our economy that we may put these weapons into plentiful production lest we run short of nuclear warheads

Have a special care of the poor, the homeless, the sick and the hungry of our own land and of other lands until such time as our defence commitments allow us to contribute a little more to these worthy purposes. Strengthen our leaders in a strong defence policy. Drive out from our midst any who by thought, word or deed, undermine our national security, and grant us the protection of nuclear weaponry now and forever. Amen.'

Was it prayers of this nature that led the prophet Isaiah to write:-

'Hear the word of Yahweh,
 You rulers of Sodom---
 When you stretch out your hands
 I turn my eyes away,
 You may multiply your prayers,
 I shall not listen.---
 Take your wrongdoing out of my sight.
 Cease to do evil, Learn to do good,
 search for justice, help the oppressed ---'?
