

# THE 'GNADENFRIST APPROACH' AS A CONTRIBUTION TO RAISING THE MORAL NUCLEAR THRESHOLD<sup>i</sup>

## The positions of the Netherlands Reformed Church and the World Council of Churches

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### 1. Pacifism and 'just war' teaching

Since about 16 centuries Christian moral reflection on war and peace is dominated by two traditions:

- pacifism (which rejects any kind of armed violence)
- 'just war' teaching (which tries to restrict violence, sometimes inevitable for justice's sake, by formulating criteria both for starting a war -*ius ad bellum* - and for the conduct of war - *ius in bello* -).

Naturally, both traditions have developed in the course of these 16 centuries. Pacifism, for instance, has begun to distinguish more clearly between police violence (within a state) and military violence (between states). And more recently, some pacifists tend to view military interventions under a U.N. mandate against brutal violations of human rights (genocide, ethnic cleansing) as a form of international police action.

The doctrine of 'just war' has developed as well (and continues to develop, reason why the word 'doctrine' is too static: 'tradition' or 'teaching' are to be preferred). For example, one of its criteria since Augustine and Thomas Aquinas is that a war can only be declared and begun by a legitimate, duly constituted authority. In the course of the centuries the interpretation of who represents the proper authority has been limited: it has moved from the sovereign local ruler or the monarch to, today, the U.N. as the sole representative. Recently, the question has emerged who is the legitimate authority when the Security Council fails. For instance, is NATO allowed to intercede on its own authority in the Kosovo matter?

The most important criteria through which the 'just war' tradition tries to limit violence are:

1. *The war must be declared and waged by the legal authority (private parties or persons are not allowed to take the law into their own hands).*
2. *The war must be waged for a just cause and with good intentions (i.e. no revenge or an urge to conquer).*
3. *There must be a reasonable chance for success (the expected situation after the war must be better than before the war).*
4. *All other means must have failed (war as a last resort).*
5. *The means must be in proportion to the aims (i.e. the criterion of proportionality).*

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<sup>i</sup> Reprint from *Nuclear Arms: From Yes to No and Vice-Versa*, IKV, The Hague 1999. Only minor corrections have been made.

<sup>ii</sup> At the time of writing, Laurens Hogebrink headed the Dept. on Church and Society of the Netherlands Reformed Church and was a member of the board of the Dutch Interchurch Peace Council (IKV).

6. *There must be a distinction between combatants (military troops) and noncombatants (civilians) (i.e. the criterion of discrimination).*

Since in our time acts of violence by states are in fact only permitted as a defense to external aggression, the suggestion has been made - particularly in Roman Catholic circles - to substitute the term 'just war' for 'legitimate defense'. However, this is not very helpful. Also with this terminology the international community (i.e. the U.N.) actually has the right to initiate acts of war in reply to serious threats to peace.

## **2. Nuclear pacifism**

The so-called 'nuclear pacifism' after the Second World War is no variation on pacifism but on 'just war' teaching. It finds the use of nuclear weapons morally unacceptable, particularly on the basis of the two last mentioned criteria of this tradition:

- The criterion of *proportionality*. In this argumentation, nuclear weapons cannot be regarded as a means to wage war, due to the total character of the destruction they cause as well as their effects on future generations.
- The criterion of *discrimination*. Distinguishing between civilians and combatants is impossible when dealing with mass destruction weapons. In so far as this distinction might be theoretically possible with the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield, 'nuclear pacifists' argue that, once the nuclear threshold has been crossed, further escalation to employing heavier weapons is quite likely.

Naturally, there are also variations within nuclear pacifism. The most important difference exists between those nuclear pacifists who unconditionally reject both the *use* and the *possession* of nuclear weapons, and those who accept the *possession* of nuclear weapons, but only in so far as this is aimed at *preventing their use*. The first party argues that the rejection of the *use* of nuclear weapons will also lead to a rejection of their *possession*, as threatening with nuclear weapons indicates the willingness to use them. The second party argues that the *use* is never allowed, but the threat of nuclear weapons does not necessarily mean that they will actually be used. Since nuclear weapons exist, the main objective is to prevent the use. The deterrent effect of nuclear weapons - and therefore the *possession* of these weapons - can be seen as morally acceptable to a certain extent: as a means of preventing their use (any use).

In the next paragraphs two examples of a development towards the first form of nuclear pacifism will be described: the Netherlands Reformed Church (which had a vanguard role in this development) and the World Council of Churches. In both cases this development took place in interaction with the peace movement. This was also the case, although the role of the peace movement was less prominent, in the development of the Roman Catholic view, which mainly represents the second form of nuclear pacifism (see Ben Schennink's article).

## **3. The Netherlands Reformed Church**

At the beginning of the sixties, the Netherlands Reformed Church (with at the time over 3 million members the dominant protestant church in the Netherlands) was the first large national church in Europe (and probably in the world) who took the position of nuclear pacifism, in its first form. In 1962, in a Pastoral

Letter of some 90 pages, the general synod declared nuclear weapons "totally *unsuitable for any purpose for which armed force could possibly be used in a legitimate way*".<sup>1</sup>The synod called its radical rejection of nuclear weapons "*a no without any yes*". It argued that even if it would be true that nuclear deterrence has secured peace so far, it does not exclude the possibility that nuclear weapons will be used at some time. Christians are not allowed to participate in using nuclear weapons, even if the government demanded this of them. This should already now be known to the world.

This new synod position was preceded by ten years of discussion, written down in several synod documents on war and peace (starting with a Pastoral Letter in 1952), which warned against the arms race and criticized the government's policy. However, particularly the pacifist peace organization 'Church and Peace' thought that the Netherlands Reformed Church had not been radical enough in its proclamations. It was the beginning of the fifties, the time of the first H-bomb tests, the time of the 'bomber gap' and the 'missile gap' (Sputnik, 1957). 'Church and Peace' did not think the new Reformed position of 1962 radical enough (see below). However, this new position directly opposed the prevailing NATO strategy and raised most criticism from another side: politicians and the military. Particularly within the military chaplaincy stormy debates took place.

In this Pastoral Letter of 1962, the synod also said that its "*no without any yes*" could not be realized from one moment to the next. It needed a political process. Suggestions for this were also made. Naturally, this provoked the question - again strongly expressed by 'Church and Peace' - whether this 'no' to nuclear arms included a kind of 'yes' to their function to prevent war. In a new document in 1964, with reference to the Pastoral Letter of 1962, the Reformed synod maintained that its 'no' indeed meant an "*no without any yes*". It had not been its intention to condemn the use of nuclear weapons and allow their presence. Nevertheless, some of the wordings used in the new document of 1964 suggested that the 'no' to the *use* of nuclear weapons was stronger than the 'no' to the *possession* of nuclear weapons (in their role of deterring any use).

Still, also in retrospect such a distinction between the *use* and the *possession* of nuclear weapons was not a characteristic of the 'Gnadenfrist'-approach, as the approach by the Netherlands Reformed Church has been called (the word 'Gnadenfrist' - term of grace - was borrowed from the German debate at the time). The essence of this approach was a plea for accepting responsibility in the time still granted to us, before it is too late. In this context, the synod spoke of God's patience with humanity: we are living in an interim period which is granted to us. The synod's plea for taking responsibility was the plea for searching for a political way to abolish nuclear weapons.

#### **4. The Dutch Interchurch Peace Council (IKV) campaign and the Netherlands Reformed Church**

As a result of the international detente after the Cuba crisis of 1962, society lost interest in the nuclear arms issue and, consequently, the churches did as well. Third World problems, colonialism and racism got priority. To keep the peace issue on the agenda - and also as a consequence of the papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) - the Dutch Interchurch Peace Council (IKV) was founded at the end of 1966. In 1977, it launched a large campaign in the Netherlands with the

slogan "*Help rid the world of nuclear weapons and let it begin in the Netherlands*". The campaign coincided with the controversies on the neutron bomb, soon to be followed by the so-called NATO double track decision of December 1979 on the modernization of 'theater nuclear forces' (esp. intermediate-range missiles) in Europe. In the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe the peace movement boomed, resulting in record mass demonstrations. In the U.S. the so-called 'Freeze' movement unexpectedly emerged.

In 1979, as a result of the IKV-campaign that was started in 1977, the synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church published a new discussion report on nuclear weapons, inviting responses. Besides the technical and political developments, developments in the ethical debate were also described. The term 'Gnadenfrist' was now defined as "*the interim period of God's grace and mercy, which has been granted to us to come to another security system without weapons of mass destruction, for which the period of armed peace created by the system of deterrence must be used.*"

'Gnadenfrist' did not refer to an actual situation, as if there would be an interim period of God's patience in an objective sense, of which the time span could be known beforehand. 'Gnadenfrist' meant a faithful interpretation of the reality that thus far the great catastrophe has not yet occurred, allowing us to still alter our direction. In the 1979 report the question was raised whether, although we believed this interpretation, our belief was turned into blasphemy by our failure to draw the consequences for our own behavior. What could be faithfully interpreted as a period granted to us by God's patience, had in fact served to turn deterrence into a system, of which the planning reached far into the nineties. Thus according to the Reformed discussion report of 1979.

Together with the IKV campaign, this report (which had no less than seven editions) led to thousands of congregational meetings, discussion groups and so on. The synod received 700 letters. At the end of 1980, the synod accepted a new *Pastoral Letter on Nuclear Weapons* (4 pages, together with an *Elaboration* of some 30 pages), in which the conclusion was drawn that the road, advocated by the synod in 1962, had not been taken. That is why another road was to be promoted, i.e. unilateral steps (as was suggested by the IKV). It was also made very clear that no longer any distinction was to be made between the (unconditional) 'no' to the *use* of nuclear weapons and a (presumably less radical) 'no' to the *possession* of nuclear arms. The *Elaboration to the Pastoral Letter* of 1980 stated that we can only speak faithfully of God's patience, "*when our 'no' unequivocally applies to rejecting any form of use or preparation for use of nuclear weapons. Consequently, this means that we, as synod, declare ourselves also against the storage of nuclear weapons and against relying on them in the context of deterrence. Therefore we join those who actively strive after the abolishment of nuclear weapons, in the quickest possible way.*"

Of course, this position and the intensive discussions that preceded it in the local congregations meant an important support for the IKV campaign. The same goes for the positions that other Dutch churches took at the time. Naturally, there were vehement responses from politics and society, even considerably more than in 1962.

It is worthwhile to mention that the discussion report of 1979 and the *Pastoral*

*Letter* of 1980 were also published in German and that they contributed to the development of an independent peace movement in the GDR churches and to strong anti-nuclear deterrence positions taken by official bodies of the Protestant churches in the GDR.<sup>2</sup>

## **5. The World Council of Churches**

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a *council*, not a church or a form of hierarchical church leadership. For the member churches (more than 300) its statements do not have the same authority as the Vatican's among Roman Catholics. Moreover, when it was established in Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches was not really a *world* council. It was dominated by white, Western churches. Only in 1961 (the year of the New Delhi Assembly) many churches from the Third World as well as from the communist half of Europe joined. The most important one to join was the Russian Orthodox Church.

Furthermore, one should bear in mind that the first 40 years of the history of the WCC coincided with the Cold War. As early as 1948 there were warnings against the destructive power of nuclear arms, soon to be followed by pleas for banning nuclear tests. In 1961, the New Delhi Assembly declared itself against the use of nuclear weapons on population centers. But declarations against the system of deterrence as such were not yet feasible.

The breakthrough came when a large Hearing was organized in Amsterdam by the World Council of Churches in November 1981. Among the 40 witnesses for the Hearing and in addition to well-known politicians, scientists and military, there were two representatives of the peace movement: Randy Forsberg (Freeze, U.S.) and Ben ter Veer (IKV, the Netherlands). The conclusion of the panel was firmer than expected: "*We believe that the time has come when the churches must unequivocally declare that the production and deployment as well as the use of nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity and that such activities must be condemned on ethical and theological grounds.*"<sup>3</sup> The report acknowledged that evil cannot be removed merely by condemning it, but a clear moral stance may contribute to setting a standard and may give a new sense of urgency to the process.<sup>4</sup>

In joining the conviction expressed by the Hearing, the WCC Vancouver Assembly (1983) declared itself openly against any form of nuclear war, against the concept of nuclear deterrence as "*morally unacceptable*" and against the production and deployment of nuclear weapons. As with former declarations, the suggestions to realize this 'no' matched the political agenda of that time: a 'freeze', no new nuclear weapons in Europe, denuclearization of the Pacific, a total ban on nuclear testing, 'no first use', and multilateral negotiations as well as unilateral initiatives. The Canberra Assembly (1991) and the Harare Assembly (1998) added little to this. On the occasion of the NATO summit in Washington in April 1999, several regional ecumenical bodies have called on the NATO governments to ensure that the new NATO Strategic Concept commits the Alliance to the rapid global elimination of nuclear weapons, to reducing their alert status, and to renounce 'first use'. The World Council of Churches has addressed the same appeal to non-NATO nuclear states and asked churches in Pakistan, India, China and Russia to support the appeal.

Does this imply that an international ecumenical consensus on the rejection of both the *use* and *possession* of nuclear weapons has been reached? Formally yes, but one should bear in mind that a) the statements of the World Council of Churches are not binding to the member churches, and b) that its main statements date back to the period of the Cold War. The churches in the communist countries did not have freedom of speech and often had to voice the opinion of their regimes. Therefore one can ask oneself to what extent they familiarized themselves with these statements. And would it be unthinkable that the Russian Orthodox Church could change its view, considering its identification with Russia? Clearly, there is a new significance of nuclear arms for Russia (as a compensation for its current conventional weakness, as a means to be taken seriously in a political sense or to obtain loans from the IMF, and so on). There are reports that Orthodox clergy blessed missiles at a nuclear basis.

## 6. Conclusions

- a. In the Netherlands Reformed Church, the aim of the 'Gnadenfrist' approach was to translate the responsibility for an unacceptable security system into measures for abolishing nuclear weapons. The measures advocated were relevant for the actual situation. In 1962, the emphasis was on detente between East and West, in 1980 it was on unilateral steps. The question of what the approach should be like nowadays, has not been asked for too long. The main reason is that, since the end of the Cold War, concerns about nuclear deterrence have hardly or not been expressed by institutions in society. Also for most peace movements, including IKV, the priority has been on other peace questions (civil society in Eastern Europe both before and after 1989, the Gulf War in 1990/1991, and subsequently the wars in Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus).
- b. The thought of a 'Gnadenfrist', or an interim period of grace, granted to us in order to come to another security system, loses its credibility when the sense of urgency has disappeared and the involvement in our own government's policy is gone. This is also true for the 'interim ethics' of the Roman Catholic approach. There is a striking parallel between the conclusion of the Netherlands Reformed Church in 1979 that in the years since its nuclear report of 1962 God's patience has been transformed into a system (the planning of nuclear deterrence stretching into the next decades) and the conclusion of the American Pax Christi bishops in 1998 that nuclear deterrence has been institutionalized and can no longer be seen as an 'interim' period (see Ben Schennink's article).
- c. The difference in moral judgment of *possession* and of *use* has ceased to exist in the position of the Netherlands Reformed Church's position as well as the World Council of Churches, unlike in Roman Catholic thinking. This gap is wide in a moral sense, because it is the difference between *unconditional rejection* and *conditional acceptance* of nuclear deterrence. In practice however, the gap is not so wide, as approximately the same measures for banning nuclear weapons are advocated.
- d. That nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945 is the key element of the moral barrier to using them. One may call this the 'moral nuclear threshold'. The most important function of church statements - as well as the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice in 1996 - is that

they raise this 'moral nuclear threshold'. Unconditional rejection contributes more to raising the 'moral nuclear threshold' than conditional acceptance. Therefore, the Roman Catholic approach continues to be under pressure.

- e. At the same time, churches that unconditionally reject both the *use* and the *possession* of nuclear weapons are under pressure of time as well, when their recommendations for abolition fail to work or are not supported in politics. Their moral conviction forces them to plead for more radical actions or to develop these themselves.

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive analysis of the developments described in this and the following paragraph, cf. Philip P. Everts and Laurens J. Hogebrink, *The Churches in the Netherlands and Nuclear Disarmament*, in: James E. Will (ed), *The Moral Rejection of Nuclear Deterrence*, New York 1985.

<sup>2</sup> *Kirche und Kernbewaffnung, die Handreichung der Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, Neukirchen 1981, and *Wort an die Gemeinden zur Kernbewaffnung*, Neukirchen 1982. An English translation of the pastoral letter of 1980 has been published in *The Ecumenical Review*, July 1981. The same issue contains a background article by Laurens Hogebrink, *A New phase in the Nuclear Arms Debate?*

<sup>3</sup> Paul Abrecht and Ninan Koshy (ed), *Before It's Too Late. The Challenge of Nuclear Disarmament*, WCC Geneva 1983, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Id., p. 30.