

Dr. Teller on ethics and nuclear weapons

The following is the translated text of an article by Edward Teller in Il Tempo, "The Threat of a War; Ethics and Nuclear Arms." The article appeared on Jan. 2. Coincidentally, on the same day, Il Tempo published a half-page ad with the Schiller Institute's Declaration of the Inalienable Rights of Man.

Ethics is fundamental in every function of human society, and religion is the principal path by which the moral code is perpetuated. . . .

Having affirmed the obvious, it is easy to consider the absurd. A moral society renounces a particular type of weapon just because it is too destructive. An amoral society develops, installs and is ready to use these same weapons. In such conditions, the presence of morality jeopardizes the survival of morality itself.

The roots of my religious convictions belong to the Jewish tradition. Jewish law . . . must be obeyed, but it admits human imperfection. For example, it does not ask that in case of injury one turn the other cheek, but it establishes that never in any circumstance should one do more harm than that which is received. An eye for an eye, but not two eyes for one. The civil law of a Christian society is very similar to Jewish law. . . .

On this basis, I maintain that the commandments taught by the Christian church tend more toward idealism, while the Jewish ones tend more toward realism. Both standpoints are needed for the well-being of a moral community. Idealism spurs betterment; realism prevents the disaster which would make betterment impossible. Their extremes—romanticism and formalism—really have little to offer a society.

During this century, the United States has made an effort to maintain peace. About 20 years ago, because of the technical gap between new destructive weapons and old defensive systems, deterrence came to be based exclusively on the threat of reprisal, a strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction. For a Christian society, this doctrine was a moral failure from the outset.

The only way out of the dilemma seemed that of staying ahead of the Soviets in the arms race. . . . But history has taken a different course. From superiority we have passed to equivalence, only to discover that this equivalence could not be verified or defined. In the end we have been confronted with the probability that the Russians have surpassed us in the quantity and perhaps also the quality of their armaments.

A few years ago, a fundamental change came into the technical situation. Thanks to ingenious inventions and dili-

gent efforts (more diligent on the Soviet side), it has become probable that we can build effective defenses against a nuclear attack.

The scenario evoked by "Star Wars" has little to do with what should be done. Space stations are costly to install and relatively easy to destroy. A defense should be realized with the opposite criteria. Defensive systems should be less costly than the countermeasures that could penetrate them or the attack that could destroy them.

The official name of the effort going on today is Strategic Defense Initiative, but it would be more exact to define it as "Strategic Defense Response." There exist proofs showing how much more seriously the Soviet Union is engaged in the development of defensive systems, and not only in those officially admitted by Moscow, but on a much larger scale, achieving considerable results in this sector. Today, Mutual Assured Destruction is a failure from the practical as well as moral standpoint. Our reprisal capacity is becoming less and less trustworthy.

The potential development of defensive systems poses a different moral question. In their famous letter of May 1983, the American Bishops clearly affirmed that weapons are justified when they are used to defend the innocent. It is a shame that the Bishops did not recall that President Reagan had preceded them by two months, asking for a strengthening of defense in March of that same year.

Given that defense is justified, the Bishops still went on to condemn all types of nuclear weapons, regardless of what use they are put to. These statements are not completely consistent.

This omission, together with the lack of a serious discussion on defense, turned the Bishops' letter, understood as a contribution to a moral problem of crucial importance, into a political statement. In fact, the letter is an example of what I would not hesitate to define as a simplistic romantic approach, little more than a summary appeal to broad public opinion.

What should be fought against, on a moral basis and with all available technical means, are all the means and methods of mass destruction, fire bombing, nuclear missiles launched against cities, and biological warfare. To attempt to destroy weapons aimed against the innocent, it is necessary to use any valid means: lasers, missiles, small nuclear weapons, or any other effective system. And every nation of solid moral fabric should collaborate in efforts in this direction. Whether with bow and arrow or hydrogen bomb, aggression is always to be condemned, and defense is always to be supported, whether it uses particle beams or the energy enclosed in atomic nuclei.

A unity of view on this subject could help us make a step forward in the solution of the most fearlessly moral problem of our day, in assuring the protection of the innocent and the survival of a society which so strongly appreciates moral values, that it calls them human rights.