

The Protestant Churches and the Nuclear Freeze

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In this article, J. Ronald Newlin discusses the role of the Protestant Church — the traditional center of worship in conservative middle America — in the nuclear freeze movement. The author first discusses the differences within the Church, concluding that the nuclear freeze represents the one point on the spectrum of options which can be supported by both conservative and liberal members of the Church. He then compares the religious freeze movement to its secular counterpart, arguing that the Church's accessibility and moral authority provide it with important advantages which the secular movement does not have. Newlin concludes by arguing that while disarmament advocates in the Church will not be able to convince middle America to support disarmament, they can serve an important educational role in the nuclear freeze debate.

I think there's no question but that the nuclear freeze movement is a grass roots movement. South Dakota is as conservative and, in the public's mind, as remote a spot as there is in the country, and yet you have town meetings there in which the inhabitants of small farming communities have gone on record supporting the nuclear freeze. I was preaching at First United Methodist Church in Hammond, Indiana, some months ago, following the introduction of the resolution in Congress. They had tables set up in the narthex of the church and were getting signatures on the nuclear freeze. So I think this is typical . . . all across the country, from California to New England, there has been this kind of an upsurge in town and community life.¹

Bishop A. James Armstrong
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of Churches of Christ

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1. Interview with Bishop A. James Armstrong, conducted 15 February 1983. Bishop Armstrong is the spiritual and administrative head of the United Methodist Church, Indiana area. He is currently serving as President of the National Council of Churches of Christ.

Events such as the September 14, 1982, referendum in Wisconsin, in which the freeze was approved by a three-to-one margin and carried every county, substantiate the claim that there is support for the freeze at the local level, even in the basically conservative American Heartland.² The freeze has growing institutional support, largely from the churches. The pastoral letter of the Catholic bishops in 1982 captured national attention. In the Midwest, however, where the "grass roots" grow deepest, the representative church voices are those of the mainstream Protestant denominations — traditionally middle class, conservative and intensely patriotic. Many of these churches, acting individually and ecumenically through such associations as the National Council of Churches of Christ, have endorsed the nuclear freeze.

Because of the high visibility of fundamentalist religious figures in the 1980 elections, it has become common to assume that conservative churches are on the ascent and that the mainstream, reformed-tradition Protestant churches are on the wane. Whether or not the upsurge in influence of fundamentalist churches represents a true shift in religious preferences remains to be seen, but to dismiss mainstream Protestantism outright would be an error. Critics of the ecumenical movement are quick to point out that attendance in many of the mainline denominations is declining while that of the conservative choices is growing. These critics often link these trends to the supposed unpopularity of the liberal tone of the Protestant churches' ecumenical statements and activities. It is no secret that small-town congregations in the Midwest often find the activities of their national offices in New York to be too liberal. But changes in attendance figures are actually more indicative of demographic than theological trends. Just as the conservative churches are most firmly established in the burgeoning Sun Belt, the traditional mainline churches are predominant in the Midwest, where population growth has slowed considerably and is even decreasing in many areas. Mainstream denominations continue to be predominantly middle-class churches, in a region where that class has stabilized. Outside of the largest urban areas, the socially and ethnically homogenous heartland is overwhelmingly Protestant. Moreover, while the local church may not exert the same force it once did, it remains the largest and most influential social institution in middle America.

These Protestant churches have all taken a stand, in one form or another, on the issue of the arms race. In this respect they reflect the mood of middle-America, because concern over national defense and the threat of nuclear war is almost universal. This concern does not necessarily express itself in a call for a nuclear freeze; indeed, this very concern motivates

2. *Hoosier United Methodist* 12 (October 1982): 4.

those who endorse deployment of the MX missile under the euphemism, "Peacekeeper." The churches, in their effort to address such concerns in a pastoral manner, have, in fact, been by no means unanimous in proposing solutions. It is the freeze statement, however, that comes nearest to being a consensus position among the ecumenically oriented Protestant churches.

Just how liberal are the "liberal" churches? What are some of the positions that the voices of these institutions are advocating? One way to discover where the Protestant churches stand is to look at the resolutions and statements drafted by elected church leaders and submitted to the rank and file for endorsement or approval. Such statements usually represent the official position of a particular denomination and are relatively representative of the opinions of the constituencies that support those denominations.

A more complete view of the theological foundations of the liberal Protestant freeze movement can be found in the published professional literature of the church, including journals and scholarly works on Christian ethics. Virtually every denomination and mainstream publication from the evangelically oriented *Christianity Today* to the liberal journal *The Christian Century* has taken a position on the arms race. But while these positions are all categorized in the churches' agenda as "peace issues," they in fact cover a broad spectrum of political viewpoints ranging from the conservative side of middle-of-the-road to the radical left.

One "peace issue" that has widespread support by the denominations is arms control. Of course the paradigm of arms control in the past decade has been the unratified SALT II treaty. The governing bodies of the mainline Protestant churches have consistently called for ratification in their written public resolutions. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) affirmed its support of building on SALT I at its General Assembly in 1981. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved a resolution to "commend the efforts made at the SALT talks to limit the number of nuclear weapons and delivery systems in the arsenals of the major powers" in 1976. A 1980 statement of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches urged "an early ratification of the SALT II agreement." The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States adopted in 1978 the somewhat equivocal statement "urging that [government officials] be guided only by the aggressive and forthright pursuit of peace in the handling of the SALT II treaty."³ Arms limitation through the SALT process clearly is an option which the Protestant laity supports.

3. Robert Heyer, ed., *Nuclear Disarmament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982). This is a useful compilation of statements on the arms race, with particular emphasis on the Roman Catholic Church.

The Christian literature, however, has been reserved in its support for SALT-type arms control packages. In 1979, the quasi-religious journal *frying pan* refused to endorse the SALT II accords "because it countenances a *stabilized* arms situation which does not for an instant cease to be an *arms* situation. . . . SALT II does *not* mean support for disarmament. It means explicit support of the Trident."⁴ Francesco Calogero wrote in *Christianity and Crisis* in 1982 that present arms control policy, with the emphasis on negotiating from strength, "empowers the hawks."⁵

Most Christian activists interpret current arms limitation as ineffectual reform, if reform at all. Arms control as now practiced is not moving toward a reversal of the arms race but toward maintaining the status quo on a regulated basis. The Reagan Administration's "zero option" plan for strategic weapons in Europe is an example of this: while there is talk of real reductions in the size of nuclear arsenals, the guiding principle is not disarmament but maintaining strategic balance. The "zero option" debate thus places disarmament proponents in a quandary. The "bargaining chip" of new U.S. Pershing II and cruise missiles scheduled for deployment late this year may yet be cashed in for a reduction in the Soviet arsenal. Were a meaningful freeze implemented, such a concession would not be possible. The Christian disarmament position is that apparent progress achieved in the interest of one side's self-interest is not real progress — at some point, someone must take a step more meaningful than simply locking in a current advantage. Some Third World Christians have suggested that even the Non-Proliferation Treaty is great-power self-interest masquerading as progress toward security. *Christianity and Crisis* has quoted India's K. Subrahmanyam's reference to the treaty as "a reassertion of the doctrine of the 'white man's burden.'"⁶

The point on the spectrum where the pronouncements of the governing bodies and the sympathies of the church intellectuals meet is represented by the nuclear freeze statements. Resolutions calling for a ban on further development and deployment of nuclear weapons have been endorsed officially by the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., the United Methodist Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Church of the Brethren, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church, U.S., among others.⁷ Even liberal Christian ethicists, who find arms treaties which merely regulate a still-potent arms race unsatisfactory, have rallied in

4. "Saying NO to SALT II," *frying pan*, November 1979, p. 12.

5. Francesco Calogero, "Why Arms Control Empowers the Hawks," *Christianity and Crisis*, 18 January 1982, p. 381.

6. K. Subrahmanyam, "Non-Proliferation is a Sham," *Christianity and Crisis*, 18 January 1982, p. 392.

7. Heyer, pp. 245-78.

support of the freeze movement, with one qualification — that meaningful reductions must follow.

It may well be that the freeze's greatest strength in the context of Christian debate is that it can be supported as a meaningful first step toward an eventual reduction in the world's arsenals and away from holocaust or that it can be supported as an end in itself. The freeze can be acceptable even to conservative communities and congregations because the mere act of ceasing further deployment does not call into question the basic morality of possessing nuclear weapons. Many persons who are concerned about the possibility of nuclear war do not question the traditional deterrent value of nuclear arsenals. Arguments that stress overkill statistics and the dangers of a launch-on-warning policy are the most effective in attracting church-goers who support national policy. A freeze could be enacted without abandoning established national policies of the last thirty years. The U.S. would maintain an effective deterrent force as the capability for mutual assured destruction would remain a certainty. The question of whether deterrence is a morally defensible (or even valid) policy would not have to be addressed, or, if addressed, a congregation would not have to agree on the answer to support a freeze.

Yet the consensus among the authors of mainstream church literature is that the policy of deterrence and the maintenance of nuclear arsenals even for defense purposes is morally questionable. *Christianity Today* (which has considerable circulation among laity as well as clergy) has published an essay by the English theologian John R.W. Stott which asks pointed questions: "Could it ever be justifiable to buy national defense at the cost of millions of civilian lives? Is not national morality in the end more important than national security?"⁸ Though Stott's specific suggestions for action — a no first-use pledge and a temporary moratorium on developing new systems — are not particularly radical, the appearance of the debate in a magazine with such conservative credentials could be more important, in terms of garnering support for the freeze, than any number of similar articles in more esoteric literature.

Many peace advocates in the church, convinced of the answer to the question of deterrence morality, have moved beyond support for a freeze to call for nuclear (and sometimes conventional) disarmament. Of course, mutual disarmament is the ideal, but if moral imperatives are the motivation for disarmament, then the next difficult question is what to do if mutual disarmament cannot be negotiated. Some individual Christian writers have taken the step of advocating unilateral disarmament, if necessary, but

8. John R. W. Stott, "Calling for Peacemakers in a Nuclear Age," *Christianity Today*, 7 March 1980, p. 44.

such announcements by church bodies are very rare. One of the most radical resolutions ever adopted by an Annual Conference of a Protestant denomination was the 1977 resolution adopted by the Church of the Brethren which stated that "we place a high priority on changing political structures in order to reverse the present spiral of violence, militarism, and the armaments race" and called on the United States to "dismantle its nuclear arsenal," as well as to "end its secret intelligence gathering and its political intervention in foreign countries."⁹ The statement was unique for its lack of references to mutuality and multilateralism. Interestingly, in 1980 the Brethren Annual Conference issued a much less sweeping resolution, calling only for a unilateral freeze (not disarmament) and urging Soviet reciprocity.

So far, no mainstream Protestant church is actively pursuing a policy of true pacifism. The scattered voices proposing pacifist options do not always agree on what the consequences would be. Few individuals are willing to accept publicly the likelihood that national pacifism would cost the United States its sovereignty although the concept of a new "Babylonian captivity" on the way to attaining the Kingdom of God is occasionally mentioned.

Some writers, however, offer a more optimistic view of a pacifist future. In *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope*, Ronald J. Sider and Richard K. Taylor outline an extensive national program of non-violent civilian-based defense. Citing World War II Denmark, Germany during the 1923 Ruhr occupation, and Gandhi's India as examples, they propose a system of coordinated non-violent resistance. Sider and Taylor claim that such a defense would be effective both in meeting actual aggression and as a deterrent.

Military and political leaders . . . must calculate that the operation will bring gains that outweigh the human and material costs of military engagement. What if these leaders foresee that invasion may bring negative results — increased dissent and disruption at home, opposition and diplomatic losses abroad, rebellion in satellite nations, disaffection and mutiny in their own invading army, and the inability to achieve meaningful control of the invaded country. Might they decide that the potential risks outweigh the advantages?¹⁰

While a shift to a non-military defense has not been specifically endorsed by any church, many denominational resolutions have called for the es-

9. Heyer, p. 258.

10. Ronald J. Sider and Richard K. Taylor, *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 281.

establishment of a National Peace Academy where such alternatives to military solutions could be studied and evaluated.

What *is* apparent is that there is no single voice representing Protestant Christianity on this issue. The nuclear freeze is not so much a groundswell of grass-roots conviction as it is a hybrid position on which concerned laity and church leaders can agree. With that kind of qualification, what is the extent and importance of the church's role in the freeze movement as a whole?

Segregating the freeze movement in the churches from the secular, political freeze movement would make a false distinction because the ecumenical branch is only one aspect of the movement as a whole. Proponents of the freeze from religious and secular backgrounds share an immediate goal and many of the same resources and tactics. But because the church is an institution, it has unique problems and possibilities as a contributor to the movement.

One difference between the secular and religious branches of the movement is that in the Protestant churches the impulse for reform is less a groundswell in origin than it is in the political arena. The commitment toward change seems most solid at the national level, and actions to endorse the freeze apparently gravitated down to local congregations. In 1981, the National Council of Churches of Christ, which contains most members of the "liberal" denominations, adopted in a meeting of the Governing Board a Resolution on the Nuclear Weapons Freeze which "urges both the United States and the Soviet Union to halt the nuclear arms race now by adopting promptly a mutual freeze on all further testing, production, and deployment of . . . nuclear weapons."¹¹ Since that date, many of the general assemblies of NCCC member denominations have endorsed the same or similar proposals. Yet while the arms race has been an issue at national assemblies and conferences for many years, endorsement of the freeze by local congregations has advanced at a much slower pace. In the United Presbyterian Church, for example, the freeze resolution was endorsed by 170 of the 228 individual congregations that considered action by December 1981. By May 1982, 564 congregations had endorsed the Resolution,¹² and in February 1983 the count stood at 1,464 for and 98 against the freeze.¹³ Despite the obvious trend toward greater acceptance at the local level, these numbers represent only a fraction of the 8,500 United Presbyterian congregations nationwide. Endorsements far outnumber rejections, but it is likely that in many parishes where the freeze is not a popular issue the resolution has been intentionally left off the docket. Letters to the editors of Christian

11. Heyer, p. 258.

12. *Presbyterian Outlook*, 3 May 1982, p. 4.

13. *Missionscope* 7 (March 1983): 1.

newsletters and magazines leave little doubt that there are sincere misgivings about the freeze among the laity.

If the freeze movement in the Protestant churches is indeed less populist than pastoral, this is by no means a shortcoming. Genuine grass-roots movements often lack the organization, the structure for disseminating information and coordinating action and the materials resources that an institution such as the church provides. Nor is it right to suggest, as have recent reports in *Readers Digest* and on "60 Minutes," that there is anything dishonest about pastors advocating positions that their parishioners have not endorsed. The Christian pastoral tradition has always been, in word if not in practice, that the minister's first allegiance is to God and to the Scriptures, not to political expedience.

Another difference between the ecumenical and the secular branches of the freeze movement is that religious appeals to enact the freeze are couched in a different language. Secular and religious freeze advocates both have ample opportunity and justification to play on public fear of the horrors of nuclear destruction, and the religious freeze movement certainly has no monopoly on compassion, hope or morality. But the major difference in approach is that the religious freeze advocates can point to the Bible as a higher Authority. The Scriptures are filled with mandates for peace; one oft-quoted phrase is Isaiah 2:4, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Liberal Protestant commitment to these words should not be downplayed simply because the mainstream churches do not place the same emphasis on literal interpretation that fundamental churches do.

Of course, relying on Biblical authority is an imperfect non-science. Opponents of the nuclear freeze who are no less committed to the Scriptures also have recourse to Biblical references that support their positions. The Old Testament is largely a history of warfare. And, in the New Testament, Jesus told his followers, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet" (Matthew 24:6).

Opponents of the freeze within the church have ammunition to use against the movement not only in the church's tradition of adherence to Scripture, but in its intellectual tradition as well. Though there has always been a genuine pacifist strain in Christian thought, the majority of Christian thought has departed from pacifism since the time of St. Augustine through what has been known as the "just war" theory. It seems foreign to modern readers that Augustine would feel compelled to justify Christian participation in the defense of the Christianized Roman Empire against the northern barbarians, but such was the early Christian commitment

to pacifism. According to just war theorist Paul Ramsey, "for almost two centuries of the history of the early church, Christians were universally pacifists."¹⁴ Since Augustine, the role of the Christian Church in sanctioning and even promoting wars, just or otherwise, is all too familiar. The development of thermonuclear weapons has been slow to change the accepted position of Christian thought on this matter. In 1954, Pope Pius XII included nuclear warfare in the just war tradition:

. . . to launch such a war other than on just grounds (that is to say, without it being imposed on one by an obvious, extremely serious, and otherwise unavoidable violation of justice) could be an "offense" worthy of the most severe national and international sanctions. One can not even in principle ask whether atomic, chemical, and bacteriological warfare is lawful other than when it is deemed absolutely necessary as a means of self-defense.¹⁵

The Pope went on to say that "under no circumstances" would it be permissible to allow nuclear war to escalate to the point of "simple annihilation of all human life within the radius of action."¹⁶ Given the dramatic increase in the number of nuclear weapons in the last three decades and the current skepticism over whether nuclear war could remain limited, Pope Pius' statement seems outside the present Protestant dialogue. Many writers consider the use of or the threat to use nuclear weapons to have eclipsed the validity of the just war theory. As the grim pun goes, "A just war is no longer just a war."

Is rejecting the just war tradition on the grounds that modern warfare has become too destructive an arbitrary distinction, a politicized perversion of a tenet of Christian ethics? Not at all, because although Augustine could not have imagined the devastating power of nuclear weapons, his original writings were concerned with the reasonable limits of war as well as the justification for engaging in war. James Turner Johnson writes: "The power of the original just war question meant that Augustine had to address Christian responsibility in this crisis by means of the twin themes of permission and limitations."¹⁷ The just war theory has been used throughout history to justify and dictate when to go to war, but since its inception it has also been a guideline for when to stop.

14. Paul Ramsey, *War and Christian Conscience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1961), p. xv.

15. Heyer, p. 14.

16. *Ibid.*

17. James Turner Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. xxvii.

Two advantages that the religious branch of the freeze movement does have are accessibility and palatability. Few Americans consider the nuclear freeze resolution in itself to be subversive, but when the disarmament argument is pressed to some of its logical consequences — reevaluation of defense strategy and greater dependence on international means of problem-solving — patriotic Americans may bristle. A book like Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*, with its general call for a new world order, can slip by, but specific frameworks for any of the extended scenarios of a non-nuclear world are suspect. Redistribution of the world's wealth and non-military alternatives to national defense, for example, are subjects that have almost no fora for debate in America's heartland. But ministers can speak to congregations in terms of the universal brotherhood of the human race and the church's mission in the world, and Christian bookstores can carry such books as Sider and Taylor's advocacy of non-military defense alongside the traditional ethics of Richard Niebuhr. Christian advocates can appeal to a higher authority — one that is accepted by many Americans.

There are those speaking from a Christian perspective who are committed to change, who feel disarmament is essential and who feel that the real key to peace is a more just and equal international political-economic system. They will probably never convince the majority of American Christians of their beliefs, but so long as their motivation is moral and Christian, the majority of the American laity will tolerate them and even learn from them. This is not to say that churches can or should convert members to support such radical changes. But the churches do have a unique opportunity to educate and inform the electorate about such alternatives, giving citizens a broader understanding of exactly where the nuclear freeze proposal stands on the spectrum of alternatives.

The fact is that very few Americans, particularly in the Midwest, consider themselves Christians first and Americans second and especially not world citizens first and Americans second. It is not likely that any amount of church-goer support for the stance advocated by church hierarchies will usher in the Kingdom of God, to use the religious vernacular, or in itself alter the world's political structure. No appeals or arguments based on Scriptural authority or the Will of God are going to sway opinions or votes among those in the political structure who will formulate policy. What religious and theological arguments *can* do is persuade enough of the Protestant middle-American middle class to back up the institutional church so that the church can complement the genuine political groundswell calling for an end to the arms race.