

The ethics and advocacy of a nuclear free world

A personal reflection from the Right Rev Andrew Norton, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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In 1977 I walked into a room with red lights flashing, ‘Danger Radiation’! I was laid on a hospital bed, lined up and braced into position. “Is this safe?” I asked. Assurances were given and everyone left the room as a received radiation treatment for cancer. I still bear the scars of that treatment some 38 years later. It is my blast from the past I’m truly thankful for.

Years later, I still ask, “If it was so safe why the danger signs? Why did everyone else in the room flee, leaving me alone?” Is it safe?

Yes, it is safe BUT **it is only safe when safety, security and greater good of this power can be assured.** To assure safety we must be 100 per cent convinced of the operator’s skill and the greater good of this amazing power. If not the warning sign applies to all: DANGER RADIATION! This stuff could destroy you!

Seven years later in 1984, New Zealand took its place on the world stage represented by the booming voice of Prime Minister David Lange.

A lot was at stake in New Zealand during the early 1980s; locally we were in an economic crisis but at a deeper level we were a nation, as historian Jock Philips described, with “a postcolonial yearning for a new nationalism”.

New Zealand rallied behind David Lange’s voice with intelligence, faith, passion and fervour; our “nuclear free” stance came into being.

The debate was of biblical proportions which even the blind could see. David and Goliath! Little New Zealand located in a far flung corner of the world taking on the giant of nuclear power! Facing the enemy - nuclear proliferation - meant taking a stand against our friend and ally the United States of America.

In the terms of the Scripture, we were in a battle “not of flesh and blood but against principalities and powers in this Dark Age”.ⁱ We were, and still are “a voice crying in the wilderness”ⁱⁱ of a world hell bent on violence, terrorism and destruction.

During the Oxford debate on 1 March 1985, David Lange said:

“I hold that the character of nuclear weapons is such that their very existence corrupts the best of intentions; that the means in fact perverts the end. And I hold that their character is such that they have brought us to the greatest of all perversions: the belief that this evil is necessary – when in fact it is not.

“The weapon simply has its own relentless logic, and it is inhuman. It is the logic of escalation, the logic of the arms race. Nuclear weapons make us insecure, and to compensate for our insecurity we build and deploy more nuclear weapons.”

When David Lange spoke, his kairos had come, giving all New Zealanders a voice. There was a belief that one voice could make a world of difference. That when the voices of the people united a revolution of peace could follow.

“In May 1983 no less than 25,000 women gathered to celebrate a Day of Action in Auckland. It was fired by the passionate vision of a different future, by the **coiled energy of despair** about the consequences of nuclear holocaust, not least among young parents. There was **moral** outrage at the diversion into the arms race of resources desperately needed elsewhere.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Ecumenical Church leaders set aside their differences and spoke with a clarion voice. The church had come of age as a prophetic voice to the nation.

From a New Zealand perspective, this policy forged our national identity. We were prepared to pay the cost, to stand up for what we believed and to take our place among the nations as leader and advocate for a nuclear weapons free world.

So what has changed since 1985? Nuclear bombs have not been used. The cold war has come to an end. Nuclear treaties have been signed. But are we any safer? No.

The very weapons designed to keep us safe are now placing us all in grave danger. The philosophy of nuclear arms as a means of nuclear deterrence assumes no one wants to be first to fire; no one wants this to happen. It assumes Super Powers are able to engage in diplomacy first. Can we be that confident in diplomatic solutions?

New Zealand has come to the fore again on the UN Security Council 2213 historic agreement with Iran. A UN Press release on 20 July 2015 stated:
“Murray McCully, Minister for Foreign Affairs of New Zealand, who presided over the session, said in his national capacity that the agreement represented a triumph of diplomacy and cooperation over confrontation and mistrust. That message, he stated, should guide the Council in tackling the extraordinarily difficult challenges in the Middle East.”^{iv}

While resolution 2213 is a significant move in the right direction it will take far more than ink on paper to keep us safe. The world has changed and is changing fast, the assumptions of the past no longer hold. We are now facing an even greater danger than we did in the 1980s. We can no longer be assured of **safety, security and the greater good of this evil power.**

The world of “Super Powers” no longer exists. There is a massive move of power from big to small, from West to East and from North to South. We are naïve to believe historic and current agreements can hold when the legitimacy and morality of power is in question.

Terrorism places no value on human life; a suicide bomber is saying, “you cannot stop me, because I am ready to die for this cause.” This mentality seriously undermines our sense of security; in the heart of all people is a reluctance to use nuclear weapons.

With the world’s changing geo political and economic landscape we can no longer guarantee the weapons we already have are secure and are not able to be traded from one nation or political group to another.

With growing separatism across Russia and the radicalism of Islamic State diplomacy is no longer able to keep us safe. If nuclear weapons were once the weapons of the Super Powers to deter one another from using them, this is no longer true.

Without a common moral and ethical understanding we lack confidence in diplomatic solutions. The red signs are flashing “DANGER” brighter than ever, but who is reading the signs? The way ahead is not easy and is becoming more complex by the day. Yet we must take action and now:

- Let us engage in international diplomacy that upholds the laws of human dignity, rights, freedom and justice.
- Let us seek peace and reconciliation between all peoples; foster the work of peacemaking and reconciliation between North and South Korea.
- Let us continue the work of eliminating all nuclear weapons, and
- Let us proclaim of the Shalom (Peace) of God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We desperately need more voices from the wilderness.
We need more David’s to stand up to the bully-boy Goliath.
We need to wrestle against principalities and powers.

At every level of our society - politically, socially and spirituality, in families, communities, churches and in national and international forums - we are called to be peacemakers. The role of peace making doesn’t start with “them”. It is a deeply personal conversation between you and I and other. **The greatest evil in our world today is our willingness to avoid the eyes of another and in the absence of a shared humanity among us to objectivise, or even worse, demonise the other.**

More than ever we need a new world view of a sacred and shared humility, where North and South, East and West, Islam, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, rich and poor live together with dignity and shared respect for the other.

Adrienne Rich sums this up in her poem:

In Those Years

*In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to*

*But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I.*

I appeal to you, let us not be judged by the dark birds of history. Let's be captured by a vision of a sacred and shared humanity, created in the image of God where swords become plough shears, where the terrors of fear become shalom and "I" becomes "we".

It is into this context I call the church to rediscover its prophetic voice, to step up and speak up for the Shalom of God, for this is the hope of the world!

Andrew Norton
South Korea, September 2015

ⁱ Ephesians 6:12

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 40:3, Mark 1:3

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Matheson "Prophet at the Gate?": The Churches and the 1980's Peace Movement.

^{iv} UN press release <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11974.doc.htm>