A Pacifist Response to
*In Defense of Creation*

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I have discovered that most people when asked about United Methodist Council of Bishops' statement on nuclear war, *In Defense of Creation: the Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace*, say they are happy that the Methodist bishops have spoken out on this most pressing issue. Moreover, they are happy they have done so with courage and forthrightness holding up to our society an alternative to the MAD policy that seems to have captured us. Methodist bishops have unequivocally condemned nuclear war and deterrents and consequently have called on the Methodist people to live more faithful by challenging us to be an alternative community capable of witnessing to God's shalom.

While I have no intention of denegrating the bishops' courage and/or passion, I fear I must dissent from this general praise of their action. It is indeed good for the bishops to have addressed this issue, but I fear I am not happy with what they said, or how they said it, and in particular, whom they said it to. It may seem quite odd for me as a pacifist to be unhappy with the bishops' pastoral since it certainly seems to be more on the side of peace than war. However, not all who cry peace are speaking in the name of the peace that I think is embodied in Jesus' cross and I fear that the bishops' rhetoric has not been determined by that theological reality.

The bishops note in their pastoral that the overview and foundation document are not meant to be a consensus opinion of the Methodist church or a policy statement on the nuclear crisis. Rather it is given from the bishops to the church as a prophetic word calling us to deeper study, prayer, and action concerning Methodist response to nuclear war. It is that spirit that I critique *In Defense of Creation* since, like the bishops, I care deeply that the Methodist people develop the capacity to sustain the moral discourse necessary for them to be witnesses to God's peace in a world at war.

Yet I fear this is exactly what is wrong with *In Defense of Creation* as the bishops have failed to be clear about who their audience is to be. In my testimony in Washington I strongly urged the bishops to turn from the wider American public as determined by the media and instead to address the Methodist people as a Christian people. If they addressed the wider public, the natural temptation would be to use the crisis rhetoric of the current moral and political discourse of Americans about the issue of nuclear war. The bishops resisted that advice, I suspect, because they continue to assume that there is no fundamental tension

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between being a Methodist and being an American citizen. It has long been the case, particularly since the nineteenth century, that Methodists have thought of themselves as the state church of America. I do not mean that in a legal sense, but rather in the sense that Methodists believe that if there is any church that is representative of the great experiment in democracy, we are it. We therefore have a stake in supporting that experiment, both in terms of the social ethos necessary to sustain the American public as well as the state policy of America.

These assumptions are obviously operative in the bishops’ pastoral as they see the primary practical force of their work to equip Methodists to engage in a “political ministry” by exercising political power in the interest of nuclear disarmament. We should get involved at every level of government in order to nurture political action that can turn our commitment to shalom into an effective foreign policy (p. 88). Though the Methodist bishops claim that they are addressing the Methodist people, they assume those people are American citizens as much as they are Christians. They certainly did not address the Methodist people as the alternative community which they say we Christians are to be. It simply does not seem to occur to our bishops that the sanctificationist emphasis, that they rightly stress as central to the Methodist way of life, creates a fundamental tension between the Methodist people and the wider society.

Therefore the image of shalom becomes but a covert form of a Protestant natural law that assumes that everyone, Methodist and pagan alike, is committed to peace. So the peace of which they mainly speak is not that which comes from being schooled by the cross of Christ but rather is a peace that seeks survival rather than justice. I do not hear our spiritual leaders speaking from the church to the church to remind us what we must be not as citizens of America, but as citizens first and foremost of the church of Jesus Christ.

Does not In Defense of Creation address the church primarily as a people who have been trying hard to be good citizens of America and, like most citizens of America, have been overwhelmed by “nuclear numbness” (p. 6)? So our bishops set out to oppose that “psychic numbing” that “nuclearism” creates by using the frightening prospect of the destruction of the human species, if not all life, to call us to renewed responsibility for our world. They thus call us to be conscientious citizens working for the survival of the globe.

In contrast, I want to suggest the bishops should call us to be the church, because our problem is not being nuclear numb but being numb to the demands of the Gospel. We should be called to be the kind of alternative community to which the bishops refer so we will be able to speak the truth to the world with courage and hope. The fundamental issue facing Christians is not that mankind may commit species suicide in the name of national sovereignty, but that as Christians we find ourselves in a country whose war strategy involves murder as intrinsic to its survival. The question of paramount importance is how Christians can remain good citizens of such a superpower without compromising our witness to be, first, members of the church and only secondarily citizens of the country in which we find ourselves. Once the question is phrased in that way, calls to the church to be an alternative community take on a real seriousness.
Uncertainty about who is to say what to whom leads the bishops to the extraordinarily odd and confusing claim that the nuclear crisis "poses fundamental questions of faith that neither the pacifist or just war traditions have adequately addressed" (p. 13). The bishops never make clear exactly why the pacifist and/or just war traditions are seen as inadequate. They say that they continue to value both positions and wish to take a little from each, but it is not clear how one can do that. Indeed one has the impression that their attempt to transcend these traditional alternatives makes In Defense of Creation something like a lawyer's brief on behalf of a client. It does not matter that the arguments be entirely consistent and/or coherent, so long as they are persuasive. Then one can draw on mutually incompatible positions as long as by doing so you help make nuclear war less likely. That is a nice example of the end justifying the means, which both the pacifist and just war traditions stand against.

Perhaps the bishops seem to mean that neither the just war or pacifist traditions deal adequately with the issue of how nuclear weapons threaten the very survivability of God's creation. So the issue is fundamentally the question of survivability, not the moral question of whether war can be institutionalized by the state in a manner that can make it distinguishable from murder and/or whether Christians should disavow war entirely. In the spirit of Jonathan Schell's famous book, The Fate of the Earth, the bishops buy into the contemporary humanistic assumption that if death is the end not only of the individual but of the human species, all life loses its meaning. That, of course, is a form of atheism that one can only hope the bishops unintentionally and unreflectively presuppose.

These suggestions may seem extraordinary. But we live in extraordinary times when the church has difficulty maintaining the integrity of its witness. Thus, for example, the bishops tell us that "the Gospel command 'love enemies' is more than benevolent ideal; it is essential to our own well-being and even to our survival" (p. 37). They may well be right about that, of course, but it is also possible that love of enemy may make our individual and social survivability less sure. In any case it would be extraordinary for Christians to think that love of enemy is any less an obligation because it may not work out well for our ability to survive. On this issue the just war and pacifist traditions stand together on the common conviction that Christians must be ready to die rather than to act unjustly toward their neighbor.

Moreover, what kind of witness can we make as Christians if we lead our neighbors, including our enemy-neighbors, to believe that there is nothing more important than their personal survival? That would surely be a strange witness of a people who have been given new life by a God who was willing to die on a cross. If we Christians have a witness to make in the face of nuclear destruction, it is one that will draw on our confidence that we have a destiny given to us by God that cannot be eradicated by our death and even the death of the human species. That is surely a witness that needs making today.

Yet that is not the witness the bishops made. Instead we have a pathetic moral position dependent on computer models about the possibility of nuclear winter. Pathetic indeed is any moral position based on computer models. Such an argument may seem more convincing to the wider public but it surely is not what
the church ought to be about. The pastoral uses fear to drive people into action that should be taken, not because we fear our deaths but because we fear doing wrong to our neighbor. Fear, as the prophets often exhibited, is not inappropriate pastoral strategy but the question is what kind of fear one legitimates. I fear that the bishops have underwritten a general anxiety about the threat to our existence that is little schooled by Christian virtues.

Once you make survivability the issue that allegedly challenges the adequacy of past just war and pacifist approaches to war, you have made the fatal move that cannot help but distort Christian theological thinking about war and peace. For survivability lacks the theological control that is crucial to Christian thinking about war. In particular, it loses the eschatological perspective necessary to sustain pacifist and just war thinking. I suspect the bishops may have singled out the issue of survival because, like 11 Corinthian Christians, they think the new age has dawned so war is no longer necessary. By concentrating on the issue of survival they can avoid facing the question of the moral status of war and in particular the agent of war—the nation state.

It must be admitted the bishops’ false step in this respect may be due to ambiguities in the just war doctrine itself. In particular, it has remained unclear what and how war is understood by defenders of just war. The bishops may have been concerned about this though it is not reflected in their text. In particular, I am referring to the assumption that we can talk about just war, or war fought in a justifiable manner, in a way that is distinguishable from what we might call justifiable adultery. If the church thinks it important to develop a theory of just war, why is it that we also don’t anticipate the possibility of just adultery? That we do not try to develop criteria for such adultery I think indicates the assumption that many Christians have thought war is more morally ambiguous than adultery. That seems to be an extremely odd suggestion since adultery is so less destructive than war. On the other hand, the very existence of a Christian tradition of justifiable war may indicate that war is not easily or straightforwardly condemned as an unqualified evil.

In any case, in order to deal with the “classical” alternatives, just war or pacifism, the bishops needed to raise the question whether war should be unqualifiedly denoted as sin and/or as incompatible with “the teaching and example of Christ.” War may be the result of sin or a manifestation of our sin, but the very fact that the church has wanted to speak about justifiable war may indicate that war itself cannot be straightforwardly said to be sin. Rather war may simply be complex and therefore a form of life that is not entirely foreign to Christian support. War may be as Paul Ramsey has argued—a strange work of love as we seek to defend the violent brother and sister from their destructive intent and to protect their victims.

An exploration of this set of problems by the bishops would have been a deep service to the church. For the bishops might then have argued that nuclear war is holocaust undeserving of the honorable description “war” because it is impossible to subject such violence to recognizable political purposes. I am not convinced that nuclear war is actually devoid of possible moral formation, but this at least is
an issue well worth discussing.

A more significant objection to the bishops’ belief that nuclear war transcends the categories of pacifism and just war is that the peace to which they appeal is based upon survivability and is not the peace brought by Jesus through the enactment of the kingdom. Indeed my strongest criticism of *In Defense of Creation* is its failure to develop a theological case for how the church must think about nuclear issues. By shaping the document in terms of shalom, an admittedly rich category in the Scripture, the bishops tend to short-circuit the need for much more profound theological reflection on the church and war. Put differently, what the bishops have done is rhetorically appeal to shalom as a vague and undifferentiated sense of peace such that Jesus is defined by shalom rather than vice versa.

Failure to wrestle with the fundamental theological issues at stake in addressing the issue of war and peace in a nuclear age is indicated by the fact that *In Defense of Creation* spends much more time with the strategic and policy issues than with the theological. The document’s ideal combination of peace with justice produces a laundry list of social and economic injustice, a list of all the many human needs it would be good to meet if we had unlimited resources. But in the process we are given little sense of how we need to change our lives to do some good when we cannot do everything it would be good to do. Being against nuclear weapons is a far too easy way out to propose to end all the world’s injustices.

In spite of their disavowal of being experts about nuclear strategy, one almost has the sense the bishops feel more comfortable condemning SDI than they do in proclaiming God’s sovereignty over our existence. In particular, nothing could be more outrageous than for the bishops of the Methodist church to underwrite the human presumption that nuclear weapons have now given mankind the power to destroy God’s creation. No claim could be more promethean and theologically scandalous than the assumption that human beings, through the development of nuclear weapons, have in fact taken control of their existence. To underwrite that assumption is equivalent to underwriting the claim that the power to commit suicide means that we finite beings can determine the meaning of our lives. The church does well to stand against all such claims, for the peace to which we witness cannot be based on the assumption that humankind is capable of determining the outcome of human history, the meaning of our individual lives, or God’s end in creation.

This issue again reminds us of how important it is for the bishops to have kept in mind the church as their primary audience. For their lack of theological reflection *In Defense of Creation* is but an indication that they were more interested in the influence they might have in wider society, or in exciting Methodists to exercise such influence, rather than on how the Church can be a peaceable community in a warring world. Perhaps as Christians we have not thought hard enough about the issue of war for determining our lives as the church. If the bishops had spoken for the church to the church they would have spent much more time with the theological challenge that war in and of itself has always presented to the church. Instead they have used our theological language to underwrite the idealizations and senti-
mentalties generally accepted by our culture about the importance of peace for
our lives without subjecting those idealizations and assumptions to theological
examination.

If the bishops took an appropriate theological stance toward their task, they
would need to deal with the eschatological focus of the claims of peace that are
integral to Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom. For the peace made possible through
Jesus’ inauguration of God’s kingdom is not the peace that promises to translate
into the foreign policy of nation-states. Rather it is the peace of the new aeon that
makes possible the creation of a new people not captured by presumptions of the
world. Put as starkly as I can, the peace that Christians find in Christ Jesus is not a
guarantee that we can create a warless world but the confidence that, as disciples of
Jesus, we can be peaceable in a world at war.

As John Howard Yoder has argued in his The Original Revolution,

Christian pacifism does not guarantee a warless world. ‘Peace’ describes
the pacifists’ hope, the goal and the light of which he acts, the character
of his action, the ultimate divine certainty which lets his position make
sense; it does not describe the external appearance or the observable
results of his behavior. This is what we mean by eschatology: a hope
which, defying present frustration, defines a present position in terms of
yet unseen goal which gives it meaning.¹

Therefore Christians are not pacifists because we have a high view of human
possibilities but because we have a high view of Jesus, and consequently a high
view of congregations gathered in his name. We believe that through the work and
person of Jesus, God’s new age has been born so that a new way of life has been
made possible. We believe that in Christ we have seen God’s self-giving, non-
resistant love that is the very life to which we are called. Again in Yoder’s words,

At the cross this non-resistance, including the refusal to use political
means of self-defense, found its ultimate revelation in the uncomplaining
and forgiving death of the innocent at the hands of the guilty. This death
reveals how God deals with evil; there is the only valid starting point for
Christian pacifism or non-resistance. The cross is the extreme demon-
stration that agape seeks neither effectiveness nor justice and is willing to
suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience.²

The victory Christians celebrate in Christ’s cross is not that of a weak God who
masochistically is ready to surrender to the world’s purposes. Rather the victory of
Christ’s cross is celebrated in the affirmation that Christ has become lord of
history, reigning at God’s right hand such that the principalities and powers of the
old order are now subservient to God’s purposes. The great good news of Christ’s
resurrection is that evil, though still present, is not put to service in God’s kingdom
in spite of itself. Vengeance instead of creating chaos is harnessed to preserve order
and give room for the growth and work of the church. Vengeance is not redeemed
or made good but it is made subservient to God’s purpose as an eschatological anticipation of God’s ultimate defeat of sin. The consummation of Christ’s victory will mean the fulfillment of the new age begun in Jesus and the complete collapse of the old. In between time it means if the world wants to know the ultimate meaning of history, it has only to look at the work of the church. And if it does not, it cannot know of its own history. For “the victory of the Lamb through his death seals the victory of the church. Her suffering, like her masters’, is the measure of her obedience to the self-giving love of God. Non-resistance is right, in the deepest sense, not because it works, but because it anticipates the triumph of the Lamb that was slain.” Such is the basis of Christian peace as our pacifism in effect entails a view of history that claims it as God’s. That we are able to be peacemakers in a world at war entails the claim that the church and not nations and empires is the true history of the world.

The problem with the bishops’ pastoral is that they want peace without eschatology. In effect, they want to be Constantian pacifists fusing church and world so that they can speak to the world without the embarrassment of Christ’s cross. Absent the cross, appeals to shalom cannot help but border on mysticism or nature romanticism. God’s peace is not the sunny optimism of pastoral scenes but the rough and hard peace that knows truthful witness to the world bent on war may only invite further violence.

The bishops make the fundamental mistake of believing that the peace we proclaim as Christians can be progressively realized through a transformation of the nation-state system. From such a perspective, the threat of nuclear war is almost salvific as it becomes the means of forcing states to make peace in the interest of species survival. Such a strategy cannot help but be idolatrous since it makes the state the agent of God’s reconciliation, rather than the church. The bishops’ call for the church to be an alternative is only rhetorical unless their account suggests how or why the world demands such an alternative to it. A call for the church to be an alternative community is a correlative of a theological perspective based on Jesus’ cross and resurrection. For the alternative the church is derives from worshipping a God the world either claims not to know or denies. To be such an alternative certainly does require, as the bishops suggest, for the Methodist people to be sanctified and disciplined. But such a sanctification is not some general desire for peace, but a people shaped by the virtues of forgiveness, hope and patience.

That the church, as Ramsey suggests, often does not look very sanctified is not a sufficient justification for legitimating continuing Christian support for war. Rather it is a reminder that if the church is God’s alternative to war, such a task is indeed demanding. All the more reason for the bishops to address the Methodist people as our chief pastors calling us to more disciplined lives. If there is animosity in our hearts we cannot, at least if we are to live as we are told in Matthew 18, let it linger. Rather we are required to challenge one another, believing Jesus has made it possible for us to be a reconciled and reconciling community.

Such a stance is often dismissed because it is assumed that if the church, and not just individual Christians, was pacifist we would have no basis to speak to the
wider society. That conclusion, however, simply does not follow, since the Christian, as well as the church, is committed to serving the world insofar as the world will let us be of service as peacemakers. For it is not the Christian’s task to make the world more violent by withdrawing, but rather to offer the world an alternative to its feverish concern to secure its own significance through violence.

If with fuller theological discussion our bishops had taken their task to be speaking for the church to the church, many crucial issues would need to be resolved or at least addressed. How is the state understood theologically? For example, the bishops note,

The powers of government are legitimate expressions of the creation’s natural order of political community among God’s children, as well as constraints upon human sinfulness. Their authority is thus from God—at least provisionally. Rulers are ordinarily to be obeyed. Taxes ordinarily to be paid. But the moral law implanted in creation transcends the laws of any state or empire. When governors themselves become oppressive and lawless, when they presume the earth’s sovereignty that belongs to God alone, they are rightly subject to criticism, to correction, and ultimately, to resistance.

Such sentiments are fine but insufficient. For at the same time, the bishops quote the general conference statement of social principles to the effect that war is rejected as “an instrument of national foreign policy.” I certainly do not want to suggest that war is integral to the very existence of the nation-state but to deny the state war-making capacity seems to make impossible the lawful and ordered justice so integral to the very nature of the state. Do we believe or don’t we that governments can be governments without war-making capacity?

This is a crucial issue that divides pacifist and just war advocates. It is the latter’s contention that in this time between the times Christians must use the admittedly less than just order of the state to protect the neighbor. From the pacifist perspective, such a stance fails to be realistic about the state’s penchant for destroying those who it claims to protect. Just war theories have a disturbing tendency to make what is fundamentally an attempt to articulate criteria for a limited range of exceptions to Christian non-violence into a formula for ready acceptance of violence in the name of state-necessity. As a result the necessary tension between church and state is abandoned.

I am not suggesting that the Christian stance of non-violence requires Christians to believe that the essence of the state is violence. Rather I am suggesting that Christians take a realistic view of the state and simply note empirically that most of the governments we know fight wars and require those that serve in leadership positions to prepare and plan for war. Therefore the question of whether Christians can serve in state functions depends on a realistic analysis of the states we actually confront.

These are obviously serious and complex theological questions requiring much reflection and scriptural defense. I would not pretend they are easily resolved. Yet
what is troubling about *In Defense of Creation* is how little they were discussed. By ignoring such issues the bishops simply conform to the world’s presumption that our theological convictions are but ideologies to support positions arrived at on secular grounds. The bishops might have simply listed a number of issues we must discuss as Christians if we are to be the church in today’s world. That would have been an invitation to genuine discussion of the Christian life rather than simply asking us to choose up sides on public questions. That would have been a real address to our contemporary situation. Instead of speaking as if the church has a better foreign policy than Ronald Reagan, we could have been called to witness that even in the face of nuclear weapons we believe we have the time to be a community that believes truth is more important that survival. For what must be said is the reason the church has done little to show our political leaders that they need not to go on with an ever-spiraling weapons policy because we are a people—all there among the American people—who are ready to take the risk necessary for living in a world less determined by spiraling war policy. The bishops’ task was not to speak to the nation-state but to the Methodist people, calling us to be loyal to Jesus’ kingdom so that our political leaders might know they could find support from us to take such risks, since we are a community that would rather suffer wrong than do it.

I cannot help but draw the conclusion that the bishops in *In Defense of Creation* have created the impression that Christians should care more about the state than the church (p. 61). They note that America for young people must be a nation that is lifted above the relentless barrage of aggressive, competitive, and chauvinistic sentiments to one that works for peace and disarmament. They remind us that America has a heritage of humane values such as fairness, pluralism, compassion, generosity, internationalism, rallying to the disadvantaged, a readiness to overcome past enmities, and a respect for the rule of law and for peaceful change that are resources for this new vision of our country. They suggest that these could again become the main marks of American nationhood. Their call is thus for a new vision of peace that can inspire the people of our nation and other nations so that an imaginative and constructive defense of creation can be made (p. 73). They care so much more for the nation than for the church that the call is for a politicized ministry.

The problem with such calls is they forget, or are perceived to forget, that the church already has a vision of peace that puts it at odds with the world. For if the church, as the bishops suggest, is “called to serve as an alternative community to an alienated and fractured world,” then the church does not need or have an alternative vision of world peace but a proclamation of God’s peace providing the world with an alternative it cannot otherwise know. And that is why the bishops’ most fundamental audience is the people called Methodist; their task is to call us to faithfulness. They should do so truthfully, reminding us that it is an illusion to believe that America is less prone than other states to resort to war. Indeed they might have done well to remind us that America’s utopian visions of a peaceful world are in fact one of the reasons that Americans are so inclined to believe they are justified in possessing nuclear weapons in the name of peace. That is certainly
the kind of truth that is the necessary foundation of peacemaking that is not easily said.

In conclusion, I believe the bishops have not shown us that the issue of nuclear war requires the church to develop a position beyond just war or pacifism. Indeed I think they would have helped us be more faithful as Christians if they had challenged the church to think through both the common commitments and differences between the just war perspective and the pacifist. For both positions draw more determinatively from the Gospel and from appeals to fear in the crisis created by nuclear weapons. For the crisis we confront is not that created by nuclear weapons but the continuing crisis of unbelief in a world redeemed by the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Notes
2. Ibid., p. 59.
3. Ibid., p. 62.
4. Ibid., p. 64.
5. For a fuller account of this argument see my *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (New York, NY: Herald Press, 1972) p. 56.