

Keynote Lecture

Moral Leadership and Nuclear Weapons

By

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I am greatly honoured to have this opportunity to address this distinguished audience on the subject of moral leadership and nuclear weapons. Before proceeding, I would like to thank Tyler Wigg-Stevenson for having invited me on behalf of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, and I also wish to congratulate its director, Miroslav Volf, and Dean Harry Attridge of the Yale Divinity School, for their efforts in organizing this event.

This is not my first visit to Yale—I was here last February to speak at the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization on the many challenges facing the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. The fact that two of Yale’s Centers have demonstrated a keen interest in disarmament is indeed gratifying, as is the fact that several renowned scholars at Yale—including Paul Kennedy and Bruce Russett—have long had an active interest in United Nations issues.

My remarks today will not be those of a scholar, philosopher, or theologian, however much I appreciate their own contributions to disarmament and the other great goals of the United Nations. I will instead speak as a practitioner, someone who has worked on disarmament and non-proliferation issues both in multilateral arenas and in the Brazilian foreign ministry for over forty years—in various capacities, sometimes more actively than others. Such is the nature of the professional life of a career diplomat.

I am reminded that Jane Addams once said, “Action indeed is the sole medium of expression for ethics”—and this is a good introduction to what I wish to say today, for while many words are spoken or formally adopted at the United Nations, it is in the realm of actions and results where our real contribution to history and human welfare will ultimately be made. We should all recognize, however, that the UN organization may not be to blame for the lack of such progress, nor may it receive credit for genuine achievements. The heaviest responsibilities in the realm of action remain with our member states, whose own citizens are ultimately responsible for ensuring that those actions serve the common good.

Let me begin, however, by summarizing the formal goals of the United Nations in the field of disarmament. Many people might not know that disarmament is one of the longest-standing goals at the UN—when Dag Hammarskjöld referred in 1955 to disarmament as a “hardy perennial” at the UN, it was already a decade old, appearing twice in the UN Charter.

The Charter, however, was negotiated before any nuclear weapon had even been tested, so it was perhaps not surprising that the General Assembly included the elimination of nuclear weapons and all other “weapons adaptable to mass destruction” as a goal in its first resolution, adopted in January 1946. In 1959, the General Assembly put “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” on its agenda—a term that encompasses the total elimination of all weapons of mass destruction and the limitation of conventional arms to specific purposes of self-defence and peacekeeping. The Final Document of the General Assembly’s first special session on disarmament in 1978 referred to general and complete disarmament as the “ultimate objective” of the United Nations in this field, a goal that remains today.

A great deal of what the UN does in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation is dedicated to the pursuit of these goals, along with other such mandates that we receive from the

states parties to multilateral treaties. One could say that the various institutions that comprise what we call the “UN disarmament machinery” perform, in effect, as a kind of assembly line for the creation and maintenance of global norms in these fields. It is the job of the Disarmament Commission to meet once a year to deliberate two agenda items, typically dealing with nuclear and conventional weapons, and to seek agreement on voluntary “guidelines” at the end of a three-year cycle of such meetings. The First Committee of the General Assembly considers specific resolutions, which, though non-binding, carry additional political weight. It is the job of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, the world’s single multilateral forum for disarmament negotiations, to produce legally-binding obligations in this field.

My own Office for Disarmament Affairs advises the Secretary-General and undertakes numerous activities to promote disarmament. These include, for example, our assistance to member states—on their request—in pursuing their own disarmament-related activities, our extensive administrative and substantive assistance at gatherings of states parties to multilateral treaties, our educational programmes and publications, and our relations and cooperation with non-governmental groups.

This is essentially what we are doing at the UN in the field of disarmament—and I have given only a brief introduction to some of the structures and processes by which we pursue this work. What immediately stands out in our work is that our goals are global in scope, and the norms we seek to pursue have been the subject of deliberations by all our member states, and have been converted into recommendations or binding commitments accepted by all. We are not in the business of promoting discriminatory norms. We are not seeking to outlaw certain weapons only in some countries, while certifying their legitimacy elsewhere.

The norms we seek to advance at the UN are universal in scope—they advance the ideals and concrete self-interests of our member states by their very function of serving the interests of all humanity. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has often referred to disarmament and non-proliferation as global public goods precisely because their benefits are indivisible and enjoyed by all member states—indeed, by all people.

Disarmament, of course, is not the only option available to states to advance their security interests. Other choices include the balance of power, the resort to military pre-emption, ever-expanding military expenditures, arms exports, and other such measures. In terms of weapons of mass destruction, however, disarmament has two advantages over these other options: first, it conforms to the ideals of a universal, non-discriminatory standard and to the longstanding international desire to eliminate certain types of horrific, indiscriminate weapons; and second, it happens to be the most effective practical way to ensure against any future use of such weapons.

Disarmament, in short, represents the fusion of idealism and realism—it is the right thing to do, and it works. As for nuclear non-proliferation, it gains its own collective legitimacy from its intimate connection with disarmament. The UN is not merely seeking a world in which nuclear weapons remain in fewer hands, but a world in which no such weapons exist. We are not seeking just to reduce the risk that nuclear weapons will be used, but to eliminate both the possibility and the motivations for any such use. We are not seeking just to limit the damages

from a future nuclear war, but truly to achieve a world in which such a war cannot occur. And we are sure that this is what the world community wants us to do.

In my work as High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and in my earlier efforts in other disarmament-related arenas, I have consistently been impressed by the diversity of groups that have supported this great goal. While arms races and unfettered military competition may produce material benefits for certain constituencies in society, disarmament produces benefits that cut across all sectors of society. All the great goals of the United Nations—including poverty reduction, protecting the environment, promoting justice, and striving to protect and defend the dignity of the human individual—all of these tacitly assume the non-existence of a nuclear war. In a very real sense, the constituency of disarmament includes not just all of humanity, but also future generations.

It is a small wonder that religious groups have consistently supported progress in this field. I recall in particular the historic gathering at the United Nations for the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in September 2000. In a joint statement issued after this event, the participants underscored that humanity stands at a critical juncture in history—and I quote—“one that calls for strong moral and spiritual leadership to help set a new direction for society.” This statement acknowledged that violence, war and destruction “are sometimes perpetrated in the name of religion,” yet also pointed to numerous ways that the world’s religions can work constructively together in service of the well-being of the human family and peace on earth.

Among these various ways of serving the human family, the participants agreed “to join with the United Nations in the call for all nation states to work for the universal abolition of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction for the safety and security of life on this planet.” I have seen this or similar calls issued by religious leaders across the globe.

Now, in surveying this brief history of disarmament efforts at the United Nations, one can easily see signs of leadership. Sometimes the agent of this leadership was a Secretary-General, sometimes it came from leaders or representatives of our member states, sometimes it came from coalitions of states, and sometimes it emerged from individuals or groups in civil society—and in the field of disarmament, I would certainly include the work of former Canadian Senator Douglas Roche, who is with us today, in this category.

Leadership is essentially a human quality to inspire, direct, and sustain collective action. It can be instinctive, but can also be learned, yet is difficult to teach. It can be performed by individuals with great charisma, by people performing official responsibilities, or by people who inspire others to act based more on appeals to custom and received traditions. A leader can lead by reason, emotive appeals, or strength of character. What distinguishes a leader from a mere dictator is the element of voluntary support from the followers.

As I’ve used the term, leadership clearly applies to a capability, rather than an end. One can quite effectively “lead” others to oblivion. Moral leadership, on the other hand, brings in the issue of legitimate ends—goals that are both fair and adopted through an open process of voluntary consent. In my field, the individuals I would regard as true leaders are not simply

those who prevail in conflicts, but those who can inspire hard work for a noble goal, and this requires followers who do not just understand, but who fully embrace the basic legitimacy of the destination toward which their leaders are heading.

As it applies to nuclear weapons, moral leadership means something quite different from the ability to ensure the triumph of might over right. It involves much more than seeking to deter aggression or to avoid a nuclear war by threatening an adversary with total annihilation. It involves the capability to inspire the mighty to pursue righteous ends, as much as it involves efforts by the mighty to pursue such ends through collective action. With respect to the actions of public officials, moral leadership is not limited to any specific level of government. It can be exercised by city mayors, governors, national legislators, civil servants, leaders of intergovernmental organizations, and even by ordinary citizens.

I have seen many examples of this moral leadership over the years in dealing with nuclear weapons issues. The persistent and enlightened efforts of the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to advance the goal of global nuclear disarmament deserve special recognition—few can speak with greater moral authority of the devastating effects of nuclear weapons than the people who live in the cities that were attacked by such weapons. These leaders have spearheaded the “Mayors for Peace” initiative, which has now gained the support of leaders from over 2,400 cities worldwide—a demonstration of moral leadership of the highest order in the cause of nuclear disarmament.

From my vantage point in the UN, I see moral leadership among our own member states not just in articulate statements and resolutions, but also in the formation of broad-based coalitions and alignments of states that share the common desire to free this world from global nuclear threats. Indeed, moral leadership is limited neither geographically nor by a country’s wealth, which helps to account for the dedicated efforts of developing countries over several decades to seek the elimination of nuclear weapons. I can see moral leadership even in the efforts of an individual person to convince another to support the elimination of weapons that can destroy this planet.

The difficulty of achieving a world without nuclear weapons goes without question. As difficult as it is, however, by far the greater challenge is in trying to explain how the continued—indeed indefinite—possession of such weapons by some countries will guarantee against the use of such weapons in the future. Such possession will surely not guarantee against either the future spread of such weapons or the improvement or expansion of existing arsenals. It didn’t do so yesterday, and won’t tomorrow.

Yet I do believe that disarmament—with all of its safeguards and guarantees—does offer a brighter future for humanity than the perpetuation of a world whose security is based on the threat of mutual destruction.

I do not believe, however, that disarmament will spontaneously appear in this world without the agency of human action, nor do I believe that its achievement should be viewed as an inevitable destiny of human history. Quite the contrary: it will occur only as a result of willful action by national leaders and their respective citizens. I do not believe that disarmament must

await the prior achievement of world—or regional—peace, nor the final solution to the threat of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, nor the elimination of all conventional weapons, nor the perfection of missile defences, nor a fundamental change of human nature, nor the inauguration of world government.

It can instead be achieved as a result of leadership that rests on the pursuit of a legitimate goal—disarmament as a common good, by legitimate means—a process that allows for universal participation. I must emphasize that this type of leadership is as much moral as it is utilitarian—it serves both the ideals and interests of humanity. As I said, disarmament is the right thing to do, and it works.

Such leadership is, however, quite rare, though I doubt it will take the appearance of a new Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, or a moral leader of similar historic stature. Though no one can possibly predict who will rise to this leadership challenge, or when, it is useful at least to consider the type of environment that may be conducive to the appearance of such leaders and the success of their work.

Nuclear disarmament will certainly require considerable leadership from inside the group of states that possess nuclear weapons, especially those with the largest stockpiles—the United States and the Russian Federation. Yet it will also require understanding, support, and leadership not just by—but within—all countries. I believe the ultimate foundation for moral leadership derives from a political culture that has its roots in the family and schools, for they play an invaluable role in helping us all to perceive and understand our world. Spiritual and religious convictions can powerfully reinforce the foundations for such leadership. This is one reason why supporters of disarmament among UN member states and the UN secretariat itself, have been so interested in promoting disarmament and non-proliferation education in recent years. And this is also why we in the secretariat have actively reached out to religious groups for their support in this great cause of nuclear disarmament. I can hardly over-emphasize the crucial role of academic institutions in this debate.

Moral leadership in eliminating nuclear weapons requires a troubled conscience, a dissatisfaction with the status quo, and a profound sense of repugnance for these weapons of mass slaughter—but it also requires the hopeful vision of a better world, an awareness of the concrete and spiritual benefits of achieving a world free of such weapons, and an appreciation that we will together leave for future generations a world that is safer and more peaceful than the imperfect one we share today.

I wish to thank the Yale Divinity School once again for sponsoring this event, for I believe we have all taken a small but important step toward that better world—here, today.