

Facing the Nuclear Heresy:  
A Call to Reformation

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## Nuclearism as a Religion

For Richard Barnet, it was the scene with the general that was the eye-opener. He remembers it vividly, for it drew to a focus a disillusionment that had grown during his two years in Washington D.C.-first in the State Department and then in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. The time was during the Kennedy administration. Barnet was fresh out of Harvard, having finished a graduate research project eventually published as *Who Wants Disarmament?*. Now he was getting an unsettling answer to his question. The more he worked in corridors of governmental power, the more it appeared that, in effect, very few want it-even among those who nominally are in charge of such matters. It was for him a shock to see the casual, even arrogant manner in which colleagues discussed plans which assumed many millions might die in the course of advancing our own national interest. Barnet felt surrounded by symptoms of a profoundly spiritual sickness.

It came to a head when this Air Force general arrived to demonstrate a new early warning system. He was proud of a technology which allegedly would give the President several extra minutes to decide about launching a massive nuclear reprisal. For Barnet, who is now a senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, this incident crystallized a new insight that would last him a lifetime: "There was no way to argue with the man or his system, to make him see that he was offering illusion instead of security. The biblical language of idolatry made far more sense as a

description of what was happening than the language of nuclear strategy. There was no way out of the race to destruction except somehow to transcend it."

The young policy analyst had just found himself in the intractable presence of what is, in effect, an alternate religion—a self-contained complex of faith assumptions, complete with reinforcing rituals, codified lifestyle, and a missionary zeal. "Within the hermetic system of nuclear rationality, there were no solutions"; indeed only an altogether new vision could provide a "way out," a means to "transcend" the dilemma. Barnett concludes, "The idea that profound conversion was necessary before a sane national security policy was possible made me very uncomfortable and still does."<sup>2</sup> And well it might! The clash of incompatible belief systems is always disquieting, and conversion is painfully exacting in its drive to reintegrate the self in all its aspects around a new vision. But herein also lies hope for the nuclear age.  
*The Bomb as a Religious Issue*

It is curious that the growing threat of major nuclear war is not widely perceived as more than a moral problem, but indeed a directly religious one. Religion, of course, deals with our relationship to the Holy and with the redemptive consequences that follow, while morality deals with more derivative matters of valuing and behaving. Since 1945 the Bomb has often been debated as an ethical issue, but rarely as a religious one. Why is that? Why this reluctance to push a discussion of values and their adjudication to its source: a tenacious underlying view of ultimate reality?

By two functional criteria of religion, namely wholeness and ultimacy, our preparations for planetary suicide would appear to a neutral observer as quite devout. The claim to deal with the whole of reality, first of all, is a trait that distinguishes religion from other facets of culture. The sacred does command an all-encompassing vision and it plumbs the totality of our being. What is merely partial or fragmentary cannot qualify. And whatever lays counterclaims to the wholeness of life, such as totalitarian ideologies aspire to do, should logically be renounced—not as simply a cultural phenomenon but as an outright religious rival.

The Bomb comes close to such an encompassing claim. Alan Geyer, for instance, recalls that Karl Barth criticized the churches' failure to condemn nuclear armament as the greatest infidelity since the failure of most Christians to take a firm stand against Nazism. "That comparison is appropriate," Geyer continues, "because it points to the totalitarianism of both Nazism and nuclear weapons." The "totalitarianism" of the Bomb derives from our recognition of not only the unprecedented magnitude of its explosive power, but also a widening range of thermal, electromagnetic, and ionizing radiation effects. These consequences are so vast and so complex in their interactions that the very life support systems of the planet may be undermined. It is the potential "totalism" of these fearful weapons, the boundlessness of their likely impact on global life, that distinguishes them from other modern devices of mass destruction. This is what also confers upon them a virtually religious status.

A second functional characteristic of religion is ultimacy: whatever is acknowledged finally as affecting our deepest weal or woe and on which we accordingly lavish our utmost loyalties. In expounding on the First Commandment, Martin Luther put it bluntly: "a god is that to which we look for all good and where we resort for help in every time of need: to have a god is simply to trust and believe in one with our whole heart. . . . Now, I say, whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God. . . ." Luther, together with many sixteenth-century Reformers, would insist that if the heart clings to a misplaced absolute, the resulting idolatry not only is expressed in false beliefs but also a false heart. Calvin would add that the true knowledge of God and the true knowledge of humanity are closely related. The converse would be that idolatry and an existence in estrangement are corollaries, that worship of false gods both expresses and reinforces the distortion of human life. The Old Testament, for instance, is keenly aware of this mutuality in fallenness. Not only are idols merely human artifacts of lifeless metal or stone, but "their makers grow to be like them, and so do all who trust in them" (Ps. 115:8, NEB; see Isa. 44:9-20). False ultimates exact a heavy cost indeed on the lives of their proponents!

Paul Tillich took up this functional characteristic in his well known definition of religion as "ultimate concern." "Ultimate," moreover, is analyzed as having both objective and subjective dimensions: that which is in itself unconditional and holy, and also the centering passion and awe which a person directs towards it.' Various loyalties may approximate either of these two dimensions, but only the (genuine) Ultimate can unite them into an ecstatic, centered act of the whole person. Again the critique of idolatry is implicit: when any finite object or lesser cause is elevated to the status of absolute, it will have a fragmenting effect on the believing self.

The Bomb verges on claiming such ultimacy, in both the dimensions described by Tillich. First, objectively, it certainly affects that which is ultimate—at least of this finite and habitable world. That is, the cumulative effects of thousands of nuclear explosions would not only injure the *totality* of the biosphere, but also put at *ultimate* risk its very continuation. Such hypothetical fears have reached the level of virtual certainty since 1983. It was then that scientists announced the results of a wide range of studies using computer analyses of various physical models. They predict that any large scale nuclear war could damage irreversibly the earth's climate and ecology by triggering a "nuclear winter."<sup>6</sup> The widespread fires from the ruins of targeted cities and industries would send pillars of smoke and soot into the atmosphere; these would spread until at least the northern hemisphere was plunged into darkness and freezing cold for a period of many months or years. Water supplies would freeze, vegetation and crops die, and then the animals and humans who depend on them. Even when the atmosphere became clear enough to allow some sunshine to return, it would also permit the earth's surface to be bathed with dangerous ultraviolet-B radiation. Little life could withstand this combined onslaught on the environment.

Objectively, therefore, our world could end because of nuclear war. Within history, at any rate, there could be nothing more ultimate. To be sure, most of us have contemplated our personal deaths, or pondered the mass death of many people. This mental exercise, unpleasant though it is, is possible because such death occurs within the ongoing

context of survivors and societies. But it is almost incomprehensible to try to imagine human extinction. There is neither a framework nor precedent for it.

It is one of Jonathan Schell's more original contributions in *The Fate of the Earth* that he is able to bring some clarity to this mental limit. "Death is only death; extinction is the death of death," however, or the "second death—the death of mankind." That would be categorically different from a mass slaughter, no matter how numerous the victims. It would extinguish our irreplaceable "common world," that fragile web of culture, meaning, and human response which alone gives some sense to any aggregate of individual deaths. That is why Schell argues so eloquently against the arms race. There can be no grounds whatsoever, either in national selfinterest or in morality, to risk human extinction, since both national interest and morality presuppose ongoing human existence.<sup>8</sup> True, nuclear war *might* not kill us all; but it very well could. To behave in ways which even remotely increase the possibility of human extinction is to gamble with the final crime against the future, against the waiting generations yet unborn. Nothing, says Schell, is worth the heightened risk of such finality, although he writes as a social scientist and not as a theist. But through his discussion we can see that the nuclear threat does indeed raise the issue of ultimacy in its full objective sense, at least within the limits of history. Extinction cannot fail to be a religious question.

The other dimension of ultimacy is the subjective—as Tillich puts it, whatever ultimately concerns a person. Here it is even more clear that religious allegiance is at work. Each of us can testify that our sense of awe is aroused by these genuinely "awe-ful" weapons. We find a numinous fascination in watching the film footage of test explosions, or the special effects contrived by film makers in fictionalized stories of holocaust. In our hearts most of us experience a vicarious thrill of forbidden boundaries transgressed when we hear of new instances of scientists or national leaders dabbling with human destiny, or skirting another crisis which might well have unleashed global catastrophe. While custom and etiquette frown on open discussion or emotion about such topics, the images of annihilation nevertheless are stored up

in the public memory. Often it is in unconscious ways that they break through and surface-in dreams, for instance, or art, or in the simple yet candid drawings of young children, unskilled in dissimulation.

It is quite understandable why the Bomb elicits such reverence. Ultimate concern, in its subjective dimension, is always directed toward that which is perceived to affect us ultimately, for good or for ill. The words of Bernard Brodie, one of the earliest and most influential nuclear strategists, contain an unexpected tone of wonder and awe: "Everything about the bomb is overshadowed by the twin facts that it exists and that its destructive power is fantastically great." On several levels such profound feelings of ultimacy toward nuclear weapons are shared by the public. They resemble, for instance, many of the classic descriptions of religious experience. There is a sense of mystery before the incalculable, a fear and yet fascination with unknown and invisible forces of enormous potency, apprehensions of creaturely helplessness mingled with a vicarious sense of sharing in exhilarating power, and the thrill of veiled anticipations of cosmic nemesis.<sup>10</sup>

These feelings also resemble themes common to the mind's dream life. Psychoanalyst Edward Glover points out that images of world-destruction are familiar to those who study the unconscious mind and especially the fantasies of the insane. He worries that modern weapons of extermination are so "well adapted" to these secret lusts. "The capacity so painfully acquired by normal men to distinguish between sleep, delusion, hallucination and the objective reality of waking life has for the first time in human history been seriously weakened."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, John Sanford comments from his Jungian perspective on the life of the psyche that a cleavage has been developing for some time in the Western mind. "Rejected and separated from consciousness, the unconscious turned hostile and in our century has erupted in barbaric wars, crime, and the sickness of soul so characteristic of our times."<sup>12</sup> The struggles of the unconscious are perceived by the ego as something invaded by death. So our society is pervaded by fantasies and dreams of menacing invasions-by criminals, aliens from outer space.

or an enemy nation . . . and finally by Doomsday itself. Further evidence is found in those TV productions, popular films, comic strips, and other forms of mass entertainment which attest and play upon such intimations in the public mind. Indeed the more successful ones are those which are best attuned to preconscious hopes and anxieties, images and ritualized acts, and which go on to articulate them in satisfying detail. Direct portrayals of nuclear holocaust are considered too horrific by film producers. But they well know the public fascination for dramatizations of smaller, more manageable catastrophes, perhaps mere components of a holocaust, suitably scaled down or sublimated. So our mass entertainments often feature plots about natural disasters, invasions of earth by extraterrestrials, violence originating from the supernatural, or purgation and rebirth through some sort of bloodbath. Fans of pop culture will recognize, of course, that such themes also existed before Hiroshima. But certainly the years since 1945 have seen these scenarios and images increase substantially-both in frequency and in explicit portrayals.

Clearly then, if these criteria of religion (wholeness and ultimacy in both objective and subjective forms) are placed alongside descriptions of the clusters of mythic images and attitudes commonly held concerning nuclear weapons, there is a striking congruence. It appears that, in effect, a new religion has been born in our time.

Indeed the Bomb confronts us with far more than a moral dilemma ("What should we do?"), perplexing and urgent though that is. We are confronted also with a religious challenge ("Who are we?" "To whom/what do we owe final allegiance?"). It is this dimension which has all too seldom been recognized since the day the first mushroom cloud rose over the New Mexico desert-the climax of the project to which Robert Oppenheimer had enigmatically given the code name "Trinity."

Accordingly, on the grounds both of totalism and of ultimacy, we are thrust by nuclear technology into the arena of outright theological controversy, whether we like it or not. We dare not ignore this challenge any longer. Least of all should we be lulled by the frequent claim that religion is no

longer a factor in our secular age. As Gibson Winter says, in reviewing his lifework as a social ethicist,

The pretension to "secularity" merely conceals the "faith" of the Western world, its belief in progress through domination and accumulation. As long as this faith is concealed, the technological elites can purport to operate with a purely neutral, instrumental reason as they reckon the tens of millions that they will have to destroy in order to save their way of life. Every people lives its symbols, some symbols that further life and some that destroy life. Talk about secularity merely conceals the symbols and leaves them unreflected.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Uncertain Quests for a New Vision*

The covert idolatry of our situation is recognized clearly by Dale Aukerman, in his moving and provocative book, *Darkening Valley: A Biblical Perspective on Nuclear War*.

"War, now nuclear war, is the key issue not only for survival but also for coming to grips before God with who we are."<sup>o</sup> So who are we? On the one hand, war has always been the most extreme unveiling of the sinister depths of the human heart. As Karl Barth also pointed out, "It only needed the atom and the hydrogen bomb to complete the self-disclosure of war in this regard."<sup>s</sup> Just as the boundaries to human existence were symbolically burst in Eden by the primal sin committed by our ancestral parents, so now the boundaries of human disobedience have been physically burst at Almagordo by the limitless destruction achieved by our human intelligence.

But on the other hand, continues Aukerman, the figure of Jesus Christ has always been the most profound unveiling of God. Here is the divine self-disclosure of judgment and yet of boundless compassion. To this merciful unmasking of God's very presence, we humans in our defiance responded in turn by unmasking ourselves-in direct violence against God. The last word, however, comes not from the anguish of the cross but the victory of the resurrection. So now in the nuclear age, to talk about war means that we must also talk

about God. That means reflection on just who God is, who we are and who we shall become, and what is after all the final reality in a world within which Christ both died and rose to new life.

It was of course this religious dimension of the nuclear threat which Richard Barnet had finally recognized in his frustrating years in Washington: "There was no way out of the race to destruction except somehow to transcend it." The nuclear peril stems from our conventional models for understanding the way the world works, and so these models themselves must be transformed or replaced. To "transcend" an insoluble dilemma, we need a new vision of what is "really real." But a transcending vision is already a virtual definition of religion. That is, it is a mode of understanding which is in some sense "ecstatic," or "standing outside of" the customary ways of perceiving what is around us.

In the nuclear age the classic formulation of this need is an early statement of Albert Einstein: "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our ways of thinking. Thus we are drifting toward a catastrophe beyond comparison. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking, if mankind is to survive."<sup>o</sup> Similar calls for a new approach to thinking have recently been issued, for instance, by leading psychologists, scientists, teachers, and statesmen." On a more immediate level, this quest is reflected in the "Avoiding Nuclear War" program of the Carnegie Corporation, which since 1984 has made large grants to several academic centers of international studies. "What is being attempted, in effect, is a remapping of the entire field of study . . . with the intention of disclosing new ways of defining and maintaining security in a world brimming with nuclear weapons."<sup>e</sup> Such "remapping," however, can only transform the concept of security if it is grounded in a more encompassing vision, a vision which in the last analysis must be religious-that is, wholistic and ultimate. The Second Vatican Council, for instance, recognized this twenty years ago, stating that the technology and likely effects of total warfare now "compel us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude."<sup>9</sup>

But just how has Christian theology responded to the

urgent need to rethink things in the nuclear age? The answer must be that, its response has been immediate, but sporadic and primarily at the ethical level.

From the first announcements of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, clergy and theologians of all faiths raised a mighty chorus of warnings of the awesome power and unprecedented responsibility now resting in human hands. As early as March of 1946 the "Calhoun Commission," appointed by the then Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, reconvened and issued a document, *Atomic Warfare and the Christian Faith*. Participants included some of the great names of North American religion of the time, such as the Niebuhr brothers, John C. Bennett, Nels Ferré, and Douglas Steere. After observing that human freedom "is more decisive and dangerous than we had suspected," the report gave one of the first articulations of the terrible question: "If a premature end of history should come . . . the problem then is whether beyond the end of history God's justice and mercy are still a ground for hope, or whether the stultification of human life by a premature end is to be feared."<sup>z</sup>

After the early years of the atomic age, however, theology for the most part found little new to add, and its interest in the nuclear threat did little more than coincide with the periodic rise and fall of public attention to such matters. Moreover, throughout the subsequent decades it is clear that most religious discussion has remained at the level of ethics, rather than theology as such. That is, the churches have contributed to the moral debates on possible uses, misuses, or even renunciations of nuclear weapons, and they have repeatedly exhorted decisionmakers to accountability and caution. The forces unlocked from the atom have been viewed as one more problem in the application of morality, comparable for example to arguments about population control or genetic engineering. But rarely has such discussion considered the Bomb as a challenge to fundamental concepts of God or humanity.

This has been typically the case, even in the latest spate of religious publications about the arms race, which began in the late 1970s. It has been the *moral* issues that have dominated the churches' ventures in peace education or in

scholarly exchange-issues such as MIRV'd missiles, a nuclear freeze, counterforce targeting, arms control, first strike technology, economic and psychological effects of the Cold War, and now proposals for outer space ("Star Wars") weaponry.

A case in point is the well known 1983 pastoral letter on war and peace from the U.S. Catholic bishops.<sup>21</sup> There are of course a number of respects in which it has made a landmark contribution: in weighing the limits of the strategy of deterrence, in coming close to discrediting any conceivable use of nuclear weapons, in struggling to balance traditional Catholic moral theology with renewed attention to biblical principles, in its recognition of pacifism as a genuine Christian option (for individuals, anyway), in its publicly open style of writing and revising the several drafts, including the solicitation of testimony from all sides, and in its irenic presentation as a teaching tool for Catholics and non-Catholics alike.<sup>22</sup> The creative substance of the pastoral is contained in its middle two sections, under the headings of "problems," "principles," "proposals," and "policies." Here, as these topics suggest, the subject matter is ethical: the morality of deterrence or possible uses of atomic weapons.<sup>23</sup> The distinctively religious challenge of the Bomb, however, is not examined. References to God, Christ, fallenness, and redemption are brief, conventional, and confined almost to the extent of quarantine to the early pages of the opening section of the pastoral. We can be thankful that the Catholic bishops recognized the urgent need to address public policy and to educate the laity, and that they have risen so well to the occasion. By default, however, the Bomb is viewed as a moral problem, not really as a religious one.

### Two Apocalyptic Visions

Although this trend has continued through four decades, recently the exceptions have been growing. To these we now turn our attention.

A pioneering work is *Darkening Valley* by Dale Aukerman, pastor and peacemaker in the Church of the Brethren. While pondering various biblical images in a post-Hiroshima world, he raises basic theological topics such as idolatry,

eschatology, an analysis of the dynamics of sin, and the relentless question of theodicy: "Why the possibility for the Bomb?"<sup>14</sup> The book is a collection of essays, largely in the style of meditations, and using the primary language of devotion and straightforward biblical imagery rather than the analytical language of systematic theology. Here it is the age-old foes of sin, death, and idolatry which are named, but with their familiar menace heightened by the newly unleashed power of the atom. Here too are the biblical themes of shalom, judgment, the gift of faithful obedience, and final consummation as God's response.

With understated elegance Aukerman reflects again and again on the momentum and self-deceit of sin, and on our solidarity with Cain as murderer and with Jesus as the ever present victim. There is a fine discussion of Romans 13, and of the fallacies behind the common argument, "What if an intruder molested your family?" The depth of Aukerman's convictions is reflected in the apocalyptic intensity with which he writes. This style, together with the clear and principled pacifism of his Anabaptist heritage, may have the effect of limiting his readership to the already convinced. But those who delve into his pages will find they can no longer postpone grappling with the nuclear issue on a theological level. As such this marks something of a breakthrough in our generation.

Another exception, at least in part, comes from an unlikely source. Jonathan Schell, as we have noted, is certainly no theologian. Indeed his few references to religious concepts suggest that he has little interest in biblical matters, or theism of any sort. Concerning the latter, he manages to recommend to his readers the ungainly principle of "respect for God or nature, or whatever one chooses to call the universal dust that made, or became, us." Schell's undergirding philosophy is aptly characterized by Stanley Hauerwas as "apocalyptic humanism," a branch of the wider segment of anti-nuclear thinkers he labels as "Survivalists."<sup>26</sup> This broader group is so named because they make a sharp distinction between conventional and nuclear warfare, and they do so to underline their supreme appeal for humanity's survival as a recently endangered species. Without that survival, it is said, there can be no ground or norm for any values in an

otherwise amoral, uncaring universe.

Schell's tone is apocalyptic, and his style eloquent. Within his admittedly humanist framework, however, and indeed because of it, he does illuminate a topic that is properly theological: the singular status of the possibility of human extinction. This theme lends a stark clarity, as we have noted already, to the dimension of ultimacy—one of the functional fundamentals of religion. Surely, therefore, believers in the Incarnation can join with believers in humanism to this extent: we must recognize the absolute finality and possible nihilism with which nuclear extinction threatens the precious gift of life on earth.

It may seem that Aukerman and Schell, therefore, offer a study in opposites: the religious pacifist and the urbane humanist. But it is all the more remarkable that each in his own way represents some sort of breakthrough of the irrepressible theological question into discussions of the nuclear threat. Whereas, formerly, this was recognized mainly by premillennialist preachers and by the holocaust fantasies of pop culture, now we are witnessing the emergence of the latent religious claims of the Bomb to a wider audience.

### *Autonomy and Critical Reason*

It was a dramatic moment at the 1982 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the major gathering of college and university religion professors from around the nation. At the podium was Gordon Kaufman of the Harvard Divinity School, who used the opportunity of the AAR presidential address to reflect publicly on Jonathan Schell's description of humanity's "utterly new historical situation." A challenge was issued to scholars in religious studies to lend their talents to the search for fresh solutions. Since then, in the 1984 Ferguson lectures at Manchester University, Kaufman has developed his own ideas more fully.<sup>28</sup>

Immediately one sees how profoundly he is moved by the uniqueness of the nuclear age and the serious possibility that humanity may disappear from the earth. But, he argues, Western religion offers only two ways of interpreting our crisis, both of them equally irresponsible. Either it is said that nuclear holocaust must be God's will (and to hinder it would

be to trifle with the divine plan—so the Hal Lindseys, for instance), or that God somehow will forever prevent holocaust from happening. Both alternatives unfortunately obscure the "stark fact of total human responsibility for the earthly future of humanity"<sup>29</sup> by means of traditional but now alienating notions of God's sovereignty and personhood.

In fact, says Kaufman, theism as such has become dubious. It arose from ancient myths ("dualistic and asymmetrical" in their archaic worldview) of a creator/father/king deity, which are no longer binding today.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, such notions blind us to the organic nature and long evolutionary past of humanity and to our corresponding duty to cultivate ecological harmony with the biosphere. Kaufman's solution is, in effect, a form of demythologizing (to use a term he would not claim). That is, "God" must be reconceived as that symbol which both relativizes and humanizes our lives as responsible beings. Likewise Christology must be stripped of its monarchical imagery and exclusivist claims to mediate salvation. Jesus instead is the prototype of service and self-sacrifice for the sake of "wider loyalty to on-going life."<sup>31</sup>

These recent proposals by Kaufman should be understood against the backdrop of his earlier theological work. From the outset he has been keenly aware of the problems posed to faith by relativity, the absolute relatedness and mutuality of all finite things, whether in nature or in history.<sup>32</sup> So his career has been characterized by a quest for a theological method adequate to find meaning in a pluralistic world—a world that seems bound only by the achievements of science and critical analysis. Procedurally his Archimedean point remains the responsible human self.

But long before this self was agitated into nuclear urgency by reading *The Fate of the Earth*, Kaufman was committed to a form of Kantian epistemology. That is, the mind can never know external reality as such, but is ceaselessly active in constructing its own pictures of reality in responding to perceived experience. Knowledge is an unending creativity of the mind struggling to impose meaning on its data, and truth must be judged pragmatically, in effect, as whatever renders contemporary experience as intelligible and of value. The theologian's task, accordingly, is neither to "hand on" Chris-

tian tradition nor merely "apply" it to recent problems, because that would be to devalue and subsume actual experience to some abstraction. Instead, we are reminded, "theology is human work, . . . primarily a work of the imagination."<sup>33</sup> As such, it is charged with interpreting the particularities of life here and now in light of symbolic reference points—in our case the mental constructs "God" and "Christ."

In his later writings Kaufman has progressively heightened the role of the subjective self and its conceptual activity, and correspondingly diminished the scope of the objective (divine) Self to be known. Back in 1968 he had stressed "the ultimate authority of God's revelatory act over every phase of theological work"<sup>34</sup> and balanced the experiential grounds of theology with sufficient confidence in God's accessibility to permit some 170 pages to be written (in language reminiscent of Karl Barth) about the triune Lord. Thereafter the title of his 1972 book, *God the Problem*,<sup>35</sup> suggested his growing misgivings about God-language and its warrants. But there he does argue that it is still linguistically defensible to retain the personal category of God as "agent." Properly interpreted, this symbol is not mythological after all, but "analogical," as a comprehensive imaginative construct which can point us to that which is most real: the sense of final limits yet source of value in life.

By his next book<sup>36</sup> Kaufman rejected more sharply any talk of divine self-disclosure, since "revelation" as a term is said to beg the question of what is meant by "God" and is itself a mental construct to be evaluated critically and pragmatically. Not revelation but imagination becomes the operative term in his thought—hence the title of his 1981 book, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*, in which he also asserts that theology has outgrown the need for "mythopoeic" imagery. And now in his *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, even references to God as "agent" are absent, as is other personalistic language of the more restrained or "analogical" variety.<sup>37</sup> In his passion to avoid both authoritarian dualisms or human complacency, Kaufman would have us demythologize virtually all personal categories for God. What presently remains is "an ultimate

point of reference for human existence" which is to unite two indispensable functions: a relativizing of all finite being and a humanizing of mortal life.<sup>38</sup>

In sum Kaufman is increasingly an heir of Enlightenment rationalism. His methodological pilgrimage was already far advanced, but now it apparently has been accelerated by reflecting on Jonathan Schell and the nuclear peril. For our purposes here, his work is of interest for two reasons: both because of what he does and because of what he fails to do. Let us look at each, in turn.

What he does is significant. Kaufman is one of the few non-fundamentalist theologians to face the possibility of nuclear holocaust as not simply a moral issue but as a theological one. From now on, this will be harder for the theological scholars, religious professionalism, and the church at large to ignore. For that we should be grateful to him.

To be sure, the *manner* in which he chooses to cast the challenge should be questioned-and is worth a short digression to do so. For Kaufman portrays the essential problem as a primal, even authoritarian power struggle. That is, humans have for a long time-but especially since 1945 been snatching more and more ability for domination, so God accordingly must have less of it. In effect, because global Doomsday is at last in human hands, God's sovereignty is discredited. The world conflagration of ancient myths has become a serious possibility at any moment, but now it is so because of human technology and thus exclusively as a human responsibility. It is unthinkable that God would either cause or condone such final horror, so the role of God is shifted to that of fellow victim rather than divine perpetrator. From now on, we are told, for us to retain notions of God's omnipotence, providence, or majesty is not only outmoded, but an act *of* bad faith. What Kaufman means is that traditional theism offers to superpatriots and right-wing religious crusaders a tempting cover for their all too human spite and folly. This warning is well taken, and it discloses the integrity and moral energy of his argument.

But to applaud Kaufman for raising the theological issue is not to say we should approve of his way of doing it. For in fact his propensity to cast the issue as a contest over auton-

omy rests on a prior assumption. It takes for granted that "agency"-the power to act and to take responsibility for doing so-is a fixed commodity, an indivisible good which humans seize only at the expense of God. We recognize here a favorite theme of critics of religion in the eighteenth century, when technological mastery over the forces of nature was accelerating. It assumes a dichotomy between divine and human agency, a kind of seesaw effect or tug of war, which is featured in the Prometheus legend-and admittedly in some biblical references to divine jealousy (for instance, Gen. 11:1-9). That apparently is the context for Kaufman's thinking, as well as for the whole tradition of Enlightenment criticism on which he relies.

However, I would reply by pointing out that the Promethean struggle to vindicate a contested human autonomy is certainly not the only way to portray agency. In fact to read the New Testament is to find oneself not in a tug of war between divine and mortal freedom to act, but instead to glimpse the mysterious possibilities of their concurrence-extending from the Incarnation through the Spirit-filled community. If God is seen primarily not as the great Monopolist of power, but rather as the liberating source of loving freedom, then the antitheses of Enlightenment rationalism are surmounted. The whole discussion accordingly shifts to a different level. For instance, both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann, each of whom suffered under Nazism and war and have certainly no less cause than Kaufman to be alarmed over human irresponsibility, offer us valuable clues precisely in this direction.<sup>39</sup> In that case, the way to equip the responsible self to avert a technological Doomsday would be less a "demythologizing" of God-language, and more an "ideology critique" of human loyalties and covert self interest.

Nevertheless, as has been said, what Kaufman does accomplish is significant: he recognizes the nuclear threat to be an outright religious issue, and he warns against human complacency and bad faith through any misuse of theistic symbols. This then brings us to the other side of our evaluation: what he fails to do. There is, in fact, no explanation in Kaufman's work for why the Bomb itself is the focus for a new

religiosity. He points to extinction as the fate to be avoided at all costs (including the sacrifice of traditional theism), but he seems unable to account for why the very means to such extinction holds such a fearful fascination and exhilaration for its "worshippers." We may be reminded thereby that the rationalist critique of theism, from the Age of Enlightenment through Protestant liberalism, has often been embarrassed after attempting a clean sweep, only to find that alternate religious loyalties have crept in the back door. So today we should ask why it is that humanity seems to seek and serve so avidly the very weapons that may destroy us. Surely such self-contradictory behavior is a problem for more than the social sciences or ethics, but also for theology-especially when we consider the dimensions of totality and ultimacy which are associated with the Bomb. To push onward toward such analysis, then, we must leave Kaufman and look elsewhere.

### *Death Anxiety and Symbol Formation*

We begin with Robert Jay Lifton, a research psychiatrist at Yale University who is best known for his 1962 studies of survivors of the Hiroshima bomb.<sup>40</sup> This experience has impelled him over the years to expand his findings into a range of articles and books which probe our attitudes towards death, as well as the effects on the psyche of living in a post Hiroshima world. He goes beyond the older Freudian views that one's own death is so unimaginable that the mind tries to repress all thought of it. Instead Lifton stresses the positive role of symbols in helping both the conscious and the unconscious to transcend that personal finality. He sees "the symbolizing process around death and immortality as the individual's experience of participation in some form of collective life-continuity," of which there have been historically five modes."

The biological mode of symbolic immortality is expressed in the confidence of living through one's children and their descendants. The religious mode consists of rituals and formal beliefs about an afterlife. Creative works that live on through artifacts, the arts and sciences, or other service to humanity, forms a third mode. Fourth is nature itself, which is seemingly eternal; Hiroshima survivors often comforted themselves with

the ancient saying, "The state may collapse but the mountains and rivers remain." Finally and most fundamentally, there is the altered state of consciousness which Lifton calls "experiential transcendence," such as induced states of momentary ecstasy through drugs, meditation, or various disciplines.

We depend on these symbolic affirmations of life - continuity for our sense of inner well-being. But especially the first four of the five have been steadily eroded and impoverished in modern times, which in turn unleashes an ominous sequence of reactions in the unconscious.<sup>42</sup> This dislocation of vital symbols opens the way for what Lifton calls "ideological totalisms," which rush in to fill the dreaded vacuum. Such totalisms vainly promise symbolic immortalities by "an all-or-none subjugation of the self to an idea"<sup>43</sup>

such as a fascist or totalitarian state. This fatal remedy is supported both by victimization, since absolute claims to virtue require a contrasting image of incarnate evil as a scapegoat, and by the distinctively modern blend of passion and numbing that permits mass violence to be organized. Readers of Lifton cannot mistake the religious implications of this analysis for an understanding of totalitarianism: it is an idolatrous answer to the death anxieties of vulnerable modern humans, once desymbolization has reached a certain stage. Lifton goes beyond a critique of police state ideologies, however. By 1945 technology had cleared the way for the ultimate extension of this totalitarianism (even in constitutional societies), namely "nuclearism."

Lifton's work has helped us arrive at a name for what has thus far been described as the religious challenge posed by atomic weapons. We have sketched the functional characteristics of wholeness and ultimacy, and that tenacious hold which the Bomb has on its adherents' loyalties-all of which the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter, Jonathan Schell, and Gordon Kaufman seem unable to explain. But now the complex of ambivalent attitudes towards nuclear weapons may be accounted for under the hypothesis that we are actually dealing with a covert religion. Or at least the phenomena described by Lifton suggest something close to an alternate religion, once we look beyond the conventional indicators of the major historic faiths in the West: formal scriptures,

creeds, houses of worship, and clergy. Explicit forms of such identifying features represent one way, but not the only way, in which human spirituality comes to expression-for good or ill.

To resume a description of Lifton's analysis, here is his definition of this final modern totalism:

*nuclearism*: the passionate embrace of nuclear weapons as a solution to death anxiety and a way of restoring a lost sense of immortality. Nuclearism is a secular religion, a total ideology in which "grace" and even "salvation"-the mastery of death and evil -are achieved through the power of a new technological deity. The deity is seen as capable not only of apocalyptic destruction but also of unlimited creation. And the nuclear believer or "nuclearist" allies himself with that power and feels compelled to expound on the virtues of his deity. He may come to depend on the weapons to keep the world going. <sup>44</sup>

To enter this or any other religion usually entails a conversion experience. In the case of nuclearism this means "an immersion in death anxiety followed by rebirth into the new world view. At the heart of the conversion experience is an overwhelming sense of awe-a version of Freud's 'oceanic feeling' in which one's own insignificance in relationship to the larger universe is so extreme as to feel oneself, in effect, annihilated."<sup>45</sup>

That awe shines through the strikingly religious language used by early witnesses to atomic explosions. For example Lifton notes that a "language reminiscent of a 'conversion in the desert'" and "images of rebirth" are found in the words of a science writer, William Laurence, in describing the Almagordo test: "On that moment hung eternity. Time stood still. Space contracted to a pinpoint. It was as though the earth had opened and the skies had split. One felt as though he had been privileged to witness the Birth of the World.... The big boom came about a hundred seconds after the great flash - the first cry of a newborn world. . . ." <sup>46</sup> The same writer compared it also to witnessing the Second Coming of Christ.

Elsewhere Lifton has extended a description of the numinous awe inspired by the Bomb to include the rest of us who have never been eyewitnesses. For us, our fear is amorphous, corresponding to the invisibility of the dreaded radiation; we have a sense of mystery because the precise effects cannot be known; we feel a presence of nemesis and of being related to the infinite by tapping an ultimate force of the universe; and we sense our creatureliness and absolute vulnerability.<sup>47</sup>

It is ironic that such religiosity is devoted to the Bomb. For that weapon is the culminating achievement of those very historical processes that have eroded the traditional modes for symbolizing the sense of immortality and larger connectedness. Under the nuclear threat it is impossible to be confident of posterity, for instance, or of cultural and social achievements that will endure, or even of the capacity of nature to survive.<sup>48</sup> Nor can we rely on conventional religious beliefs in an afterlife, if we accept the report of survivors of Hiroshima, for whom traditional religious symbols and doctrine suddenly were emptied of meaning at the very time they were most needed.

The only mode remaining, experiential transcendence or ecstatic "high states" of consciousness, therefore, must bear the additional weight in meeting our needs for psychic nurture. This helps explain, by the way, the restless demands of our generation for new thrills, heightened sensory awareness, or exotic personal experiences; these are in a complex sense religious quests for transcending the anxiety of extinction. "So 'flexible' is the human mind that it can, in this way, contemplate annihilation as a joyous event, more joyous than living with the sense of being meaninglessly doomed."<sup>49</sup> The danger grows that the weapons themselves may be subconsciously perceived as "the most Dionysian stimulants of all."<sup>50</sup> That would tempt humans to indulge themselves in the ultimate orgy-as is reflected in the apocalyptic ending of the classic film, *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, where the bomber pilot straddles the nuclear weapon and rides it down to its target with a wild Texas yodel.

And so, as Lifton remarks, "The weapon itself comes to usurp all of the pathways to symbolic immortality."<sup>51</sup> The

heritage of images for death and immortality that formerly sustained us has become contaminated with forebodings of holocaust. Lately many people have turned in frustration to conservative religions that promise security from nihilism. But this resurgence of traditionalism will be ineffectual, Lifton believes, for "as death imagery comes to take the shape of total annihilation or extinction, religious symbolism becomes both more sought after and more inadequate."

When basic symbols lose their nurturing power and plausibility in a culture, one desperate response is-so to speak-to turn up the volume. It is no wonder that all over the world in the 1970s and 1980s there has been an upsurge of fundamentalist religion and politics. "Fundamentalism is a form of totalism with a very specific response to the loss of larger human connections. It is a doctrinal restatement of those connections in which literal, immutable words (rather than the original flow of vital images) are rendered sacred and made the center of a quest for collective revitalization." 3 However Lifton does not dwell long upon the dangers of, say, Protestant literalists who understand little of the profound nature of symbolization, and who thereby only make the problem worse. His real concern lies elsewhere, and so with disconcerting nonchalance he takes up this religious term primarily to bend it to his earlier point of reference: "Nuclearism, then, is the ultimate fundamentalism of our time. The 'fundamentals' sacrilized [sic] are perverse products of technicism and scientism-the worship of technique and science in ways that preclude their human use."54

Finally, this summary of Lifton should take note of some of the psychic traits associated with nuclearism, the new totalism. Lifton sees two major categories of these consequences: "Dislocation creates a special kind of uneasy duality around symbolization: a general sense of numbing, devitalization, and absence of larger meaning on the one hand; and on the other, a form of image-release, an explosion of symbolizing forays in the struggle to overcome collective deadness and reassert larger connection."55

To take the latter one first, the "image-release" and flood of "symbolizing forays" characterize what Lifton labels as the Protean self of the modern age. Like the figure in ancient

mythology who changed shape at will, so the self nowadays seems embarked on an endless series of experiments in seeking identity. Belief systems, careers, marriage partners, or lifestyles often are switched with bewildering ease. Fads come and go, discordant ideas may be held simultaneously, or ever new personal experiences sought in unending quests for rebirth. Because one's outer, public world is no longer coordinated with one's inner, symbolic world, a sense of absurdity prevails-and the best defense mechanism becomes a tone of mockery affected towards every experience.<sup>56</sup> It seems that only old, stable societies are able to breed durable personal identities in their members. But we moderns find ourselves overwhelmed by the nuclear threat, the cultural dislocation of our symbols, and the flood of unrelated fragments of imagery from our mass communications. No wonder a person's role or identity may change as abruptly as turning the channel switch on one's TV set!

The other main category of effects of the Bomb on us all, "psychic numbing," moves in the reverse direction. Alongside the excitation of multiple images and successive self-identities-what Lifton calls "an explosion of symbolizing forays"-there is also an implosion. That is, we find a widespread muting and repression of affect, a sense of inner emptiness and devitalization.

Lifton first noted this general "psychic shut-down" in his early research: "We thus encounter in both Hiroshima and concentration camp survivors, what can be called a pervasive tendency toward sluggish despair-a more or less permanent form of psychic numbing which includes diminished vitality, chronic depression and constricted life space, and which covers over the rage and mistrust that are just beneath the surface."<sup>57</sup> But psychic numbing is not limited to victims of catastrophe. In one degree or another similar reactions to death anxiety have been reported also in empirical studies of people who earlier had taken part in 1950s nuclear air-raid drills, or in recent questionnaires given to school children.<sup>58</sup> Assailed by images of grotesque annihilation, the mind's protective mechanisms act quickly to block painful feelings or impressions. For those present at, for instance, Hiroshima, it means the mind is telling itself something like "If I feel noth-

ing, I cannot be threatened by the death all around me.... I am not responsible. . . ." And for those not present back then, it means the mind sees to it that the trauma becomes repressed, even "unimaginable."<sup>9</sup>

This numbing is a breakdown in the normal human symbolization process which in itself is a miniature "death in life," a symbolic death of the self, or "knowledge without feeling." In turn this only perpetuates the general malaise within a beleaguered society. "We can also speak of a profound symbolic gap characteristic of our age, a gap between the capacity for technological violence on the one hand, and our much more limited capacity for moral imagination on the other."<sup>60</sup> It is ironic that in repressing pictures of mass death, the mind instead-and in devious ways-"contracts" on the installment plan for an inward imitation of death.

A variant form of numbing, as a defense mechanism, is "denial." An unacceptable image is repressed by the mind until it actually disappears from the field of our perception. Nicholas Humphrey has given an early example of this striking self-deception.<sup>61</sup> Two hundred years ago, when Captain Cook's great sailing ship reached Australia and anchored in Botany Bay, it passed within a quarter of a mile of some Aborigines fishing offshore. But they showed no reaction whatever. Apparently they could not "see" a huge shape that was utterly without parallel in their experience. But they finally did take alarm when Cook put down some rowing boats, which presumably resembled dangers known from past experience.

In modern times we have more subtle forms of denial. Great assistance is given by inappropriate language that distorts perception, often with endearing or evasive labels. Lifton describes some examples of what has come to be known as "Nukespeak": the domesticating or "anesthetizing" quality of the language of nuclear weapons.<sup>62</sup> The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, for instance, were named "Little Boy" and "Fat Man," respectively. A "nuclear exchange" sounds like a party with mutual gift-giving, and so jargon obscures the grisly realities of carnage. There are, furthermore, many examples beyond those listed by Lifton. In the recent trial of the Plowshares Eight, Christian activists

who were accused of damaging missile nosecones, the General Electric officials testifying insisted on calling the nosecone "the product," and warheads "the physics package."<sup>63</sup> "Doublespeak Awards" are given annually by the National Association of English Teachers to public officials using language that is "grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-contradictory"; a 1983 award went to the officer who described the Titan 11 missile and its nine-megaton warhead as a "potentially disruptive re-entry system."<sup>64</sup> Currently a renowned example of euphemism is the MX, our largest and most accurate offensive missile, which President Reagan has renamed "Peacekeeper"-possibly unaware that the cognate word "peacemaker" has a history as a humorous name for a gun or warship.<sup>65</sup>

Such affectations of language are not just happenstance. They have the effect of blocking images or of diverting intense emotion that would normally accompany any symbolization of mass destruction. The unthinkable is denied, the potential anguish benumbed, and all with a joyless intensity resembling religious fervor.

This avoidance by "linguistic detoxification," *"a way of talking about nuclear weapons without really talking about them"*,<sup>66</sup> is a prerequisite for the many illusions we cherish about the Bomb. Lifton lists, for instance, the illusion of limit and control (the supposition that thermonuclear warfare could be managed rationally and without escalating into global havoc), the illusions of effective foreknowledge, preparation, and protection, the illusion of stoic behavior while under nuclear attack, the illusion of recovery afterwards, and a more encompassing illusion of "systems rationality" that projects an aura of insane logic over the whole structure of nuclear strategy.<sup>67</sup> Self-deceptions of this kind depend upon "Nukespeak" and a habitual numbing against unspeakable images of holocaust. Moreover the entire process of denial is structurally reinforced and encouraged by the postwar growth of "chronic secrecy," as part of our government's mythic quest for national security.<sup>68</sup>

All these are consequences of nuclearism on the human psyche, which have been delineated by Lifton in his writings for two decades. Now, however, there is a much wider recog-

dition of these effects. Attestation has been added by medical and psychiatric research by John E. Mack, Michael J. Carey, and Jerome D. Frank.<sup>69</sup> A still broader audience has been reached by Jonathan Schell's descriptions of living a double life (that is, by trying to ignore the peril we secretly know could at any time obliterate everything) and its pervasive effects on marriage, human relations, politics, and art.<sup>70</sup> In a nuclear age, explains another prominent writer, composing fiction is difficult now "that the story of any individual . . . may not be able to sustain an implication for the collective fate."<sup>71</sup> And in his Albert Einstein Peace Prize speech, former ambassador George F. Kerman characterizes our obsession with overkill:

We have gone on piling weapon upon weapon, missile upon missile, new levels of destructiveness upon old ones. We have done this helplessly, almost involuntarily, like the victims of some sort of hypnotism, like men in a dream, like lemmings heading for the sea, like the children of Hamelin marching blindly along behind their Pied Piper. And the result is that today we have achieved, we and the Russians together, in the creation of these devices and their means of delivery, levels of redundancy of such grotesque dimensions as to defy rational understanding.<sup>72</sup>

So it defies rational understanding? But of course! Not because it is instinctual behavior, as supposedly is the case with lemmings heading to the sea, but because it is religious behavior. This is the point that is so often overlooked by anti-nuclear critics who shake their heads over the mindless futility of the arms race. Whether they realize it or not, they seriously overestimate the role of rationality in human nature. Here Lifton's depth psychology marks a great improvement. But more is needed. What is required finally is a religious diagnosis. For religion has always known that human beings will sacrifice reason and even life itself, if need be, for the sake of repressing chaos and securing cosmic meaning for their restless lives. Even suicide can be a last

ditch grasping at self-vindication and defiance! Instead of puzzling over these lemming-like actions, we may gain more understanding as well as improve our chances of averting disaster if we address nuclearism at last as an appealing and effective new religion." And so we now move on to consider what religious studies as a discipline may have to contribute.

### *Chaos and Nuclear Mythology*

Lifton's analysis is carried further by a gifted young scholar in the study of history of religions. Ira Chernus of the University of Colorado at Boulder has been an inspiration to many, including myself, in his pioneering work of applying cross cultural studies and symbolisms to the hold which nuclearism has on our inmost heart. Like Lifton he sees religion as rooted in a profound hunger to experience spiritual power and transcendence through images that uphold the larger continuities of life.<sup>74</sup> He agrees that psychic numbing is both cause and effect of the mind's inability to produce culture-specific images that link death to these continuities. But he goes further than Lifton: our numbing towards the nuclear threat cannot account for the lurid fascination such themes nevertheless have for the public imagination. Popular culture returns again and again to such pictures, and yet somehow the public never attains a concrete understanding of what nuclear war would actually be like. Why not? The answer lies in the

In thinking about nuclear war, we have largely set aside our rational, analytical faculties and our capacity to think in realistic detail. The reality they depict has an elusive, blurred-at-the-edges quality, an open-endedness, a questionable mooring in everyday reality, and an emphasis on a few central, intensely concrete sensory images linked by unpredictable distortions of ordinary logic. For the student of religion, these characteristics remind one of nothing so much as that puzzlingly unreal reality found so often in myth. And the student of religion is well prepared to predict that constellations of images relating to fundamental issues of life and death

will be likely to assume mythic forms.<sup>75</sup>

Analysis of mythic forms takes on a most practical function. "So psychic numbing is only half the story. It tells us why we fail to face the nuclear issue. The mythic approach tells us what happens when we do face the issue: We are fascinated, deeply moved, and somehow fulfilled in ways which we only dimly perceive or understand. Numbing and mythologizing thus reinforce each other, and the upshot of this secret alliance is political paralysis."<sup>76</sup>

Those knowledgeable in religion can fathom how this numbing emasculates traditional symbols of faith just when they are most needed while also impelling us to generate new mutations of mythic content. "The crisis of psychic numbing is, at its most fundamental level, a religious crisis."<sup>77</sup> Chernus describes several examples of cherished mythic images of nuclear war. One is the myth of the "heroic survivors" or the "big bang," so popular in science fiction plots: civilization is destroyed, but a band of people ("blond and beautiful and creative") survive the purgative fires and build a new society that is better than the past. We are beguiled with the promise of a fresh start after the traumas of rebirth. A second is the myth of "no survivors" or the "big whoosh." Here, instead of narratives, we are charmed by simple images of mushroom clouds and "the end" of everything, in a universally quick and painless death. Somehow the notions suggests a comforting regression to primal chaos and unity, a fantasy of "return to the womb." This gives expression to what Lifton calls the experience of transcendence, the Dionysian ecstasy of letting go one's self-consciousness and merging with cosmic nothingness.<sup>78</sup>

Together these two myths present a pair of attractive options as ways of maintaining sanity in the nuclear age: either I will survive and become a member of the heroic remnant, or I will be painlessly vaporized along with everyone else in an ecstatic "big whoosh." Both alternatives rest upon a third theme, the myth of "Destiny or Fate": the belief that one is powerless as the End approaches, and so under no obligation to make decisions. These mythic perceptions operate in reciprocity with numbing, shielding us from the concrete realities

and the vast scale and chaos of what a holocaust would be. "When we face the immense, our minds revert to the modes of childhood and dream thinking-symbolism, fantasy, archetype, myth"<sup>79</sup>-and in direct proportion to the enormity of thermonuclear war. In effect these several myths "all share the common characteristic of making that war in some way acceptable or even attractive."<sup>80</sup>

However, Chernus points out, these and other nuclear myths betray us in two ways. First they are discredited when measured by the best knowledge available of what the likely results of nuclear war would be. The "big whoosh" view is refuted by statistical projections from the Office of Technology Assessment, which conclude that, although many tens of millions of Americans would die in the first thirty days after the initial blasts, even more would die thereafter.<sup>81</sup> Death for a majority would be neither instantaneous nor a rapturous release into what Freud called "oceanic feeling," but instead a slow process of agony. The "big bang" myth of new beginnings is hardly more credible. "The factors that make rapid recovery from a small-scale disaster possible . . . will almost certainly be absent following a nuclear attack.... Even the simplest requirements of survival will become major tasks." "Even if the ecological collapse predicted by recent studies on nuclear winter were somehow avoided, it is doubtful that the beleaguered bands of dazed survivors could ever produce enough surplus beyond their immediate physical needs to rebuild an economy. The same vicious circles that presently plague the Third World would become universal, and the greater the number of survivors, the more desperate and even violent may become the competition for scarce resources.

The second way nuclear myths betray us is that they fail even as myth. They lack the effective power which genuine symbols have that transmits depth of feeling, ennobling courage, and the rich texture of life. Although they retain remnants of older mythic narrative, such as purgation and rebirth or heroic warriors, they are but lifeless substitutes for the nurturing symbolism we desire so much. "Pseudomyths" though they be, we cling desperately to them because they seem to be the best available.<sup>83</sup> So the vicious circle of numb-

ing and false myth goes on and on.

Thus Chernus offers a significant exposition of the specifically religious and yet self-deceptive role of myth for our crisis. Moreover-and in marked contrast to anti-nuclear critics such as Schell, Kaufman, and Lifton-Chernus does see a notable role as well for the church. Although making no claim to be a theologian, he points out that, "while the churches have a unique problem in the nuclear age, they also have a unique opportunity to illuminate our situation and respond creatively to it."<sup>84</sup>

Most anti-nuclear activity has come from a liberal ideological perspective. But there is a major failing which liberals share, whether they are within the church or outside the church. That failing is an overconfidence in human reason and its capacity to move people to realize and act upon their genuine self-interest. This prompts a liberal bent toward intellectualizing, if not moralizing as well-in effect a doom and gloom scolding about how incompatible the Bomb is to our survival or our morality. Then liberals puzzle over why their message has so little effect! The answer is, as we have seen, that nuclearism is itself an enticing covert religion. It arises because most people in their heart of hearts would prefer-and indeed demand-a sense of personal identity and cosmic purpose, over and above mere survival or morality. Even self-destruction, in the last analysis, is preferable to meaninglessness.<sup>85</sup> The role of the church, therefore, ought to be in redirecting anti-nuclear efforts towards deeper symbolic and even soteriological levels of communication.

Chernus goes on to apply the same critique of rationalism to both sides of the conventional debate over whether war has become incompatible with human survival. On the one hand there are the "defense intellectuals" in Washington who, since the Kennedy administration, seek both to identify rational purposes for nuclear weapons and to design rational ways of using such weapons for those purposes-a vicious circle between ends and means. "Abstract, technical, mathematical reason is the god at whose throne they worship though the Bomb seems to be seated at this god's right hand."

On the other hand, there are the anti-nuclear critics of

the defense intellectuals who claim that there can be no rational ends or means for weapons of mass destruction. They say that escalation would be inevitable, and so warfare by the Superpowers has become obsolete. Thereby, however, the critics admit that they share the same unspoken premise with their opponents: nuclear war is normally a rational activity! Still a further form of rationalism emerged when the Reagan administration sought to allay public fears about its steep buildup in nuclear forces. The result has been "the myth of rational balance,"<sup>87</sup> in other words, a professed support for arms control as well as deterrence, as a dual pressure on the Soviets to come to terms. We are asked simply to trust our experts, under whose benevolent and rational control the world can be kept in balanced tension indefinitely. In such a fashion, it is claimed, "the weapons will save us from themselves."<sup>88</sup>

All of these assertions about the rational function or dysfunction of war, says Chernus, only serve to ignore the realities of what is actually its religious function. He illustrates this from the works of three authors who have impressed him. James Aho,<sup>89</sup> first of all, says that in every religion, war has had the role of acting out some mythic scenario for the purpose of preserving a sense of "nomos" or cosmic order. This in turn holds back what humanity has always dreaded the most: "anomie," chaos, a final loss of orientation and sense of reality. In some cultures (especially Asian) war is an end in itself, a ritual combat that reenacts the structure of the cosmos. Thereby war is play, in the sense of drama and a game. In other cultures (especially Semitic or Protestant) war is a means to an end, a purification of the world from personified evil or anomie. Thereby war is work, in the sense of goal-oriented behavior with no limits on the means utilized to exterminate that evil. Thus, as Chernus likewise agrees, all wars, both ancient and modern, fulfill deep hungers for imposing anew a sense of orderliness on the stubborn irrationalities of life.

Another author cited by Chernus is J. Glenn Gray, who reports from his own battlefield experiences a mingling of awe in beholding spectacle, joy in comradely solidarity, ecstatic loss of self, and delight in destruction.<sup>90</sup> "War com-

presses the greatest opposites into the smallest place and the shortest time," Gray concludes.<sup>91</sup> This paradox Chernus proceeds to refer above all to the vast mingling of *nomos* and *anomie*, of structure side by side with destruction.

A third writer, Roger Caillois, in studying the role of festivals in traditional cultures, found the only analogue in modern times to be warfare. In both festival and war, says Caillois, "all excesses are permitted, for society expects to be regenerated as a result of excesses, waste, orgies, and violence. It hopes for new vigor to come out of explosion and exhaustion. . . ." <sup>92</sup> To return in ritual to primordial chaos is to touch a reservoir of potency that is thought to rejuvenate the world. Like celebration itself, warfare has always held an uncanny fascination. "The heart of war's secret attraction," Chernus concludes, "may lie in its ability to reflect all of our contradictory attitudes toward *nomos*, chaos, and their complex relationship,"<sup>93</sup> so that we can find a channel for the intensity of our ambivalences through a structured experience.

Therefore the analyses of these several writers, says Chernus, demonstrates why a rationalistic approach to either justifying or condemning nuclear weapons must miss the point. On the one hand, proponents of deterrence claim it protects us from the irrational power of the U.S.S.R.-but at a deeper level it, in fact, is irrationality itself which is feared. Unknowingly they wish to act out anew the timeless struggle to impose order upon primal chaos. It is in the last analysis a mythic struggle, and it is waged with a dauntless faith in technical reason and a literalistic, one-dimensional thinking that is only reinforced by what the mass media considers to be "news." On the other hand, this deadening rationalism is used also by mainstream liberalism in its opposition to the Bomb. That is a great mistake, insists Chernus, for even to enter the debate on the rationality of war or of nuclear weapons only "reinforces the potentially lethal paradigm we have been describing, regardless of the conclusions it attains."<sup>94</sup> It is instead at the level of religion and of symbol formation where the real issue must be decided.

This then is the advice offered by Chernus to the church and the disarmament movement. Human beings have an irrepressible need for life-sustaining symbols, and unfortunate

ly at present it is nuclearism more than its critics which (albeit fraudulently) offers the more enticing mythology. It is tempting to try to "demythologize" nuclear war by publicizing the facts of what it would really be like. But this is ineffective unless accompanied by the difficult task of "re-mythologizing"-that is, selecting mythic themes from contemporary culture which give positive redirection to our quest for a *nomos*. Admittedly, the few examples Chernus gives are sketchy and somber, such as themes of the sufferings of the dead, of the existentialist antihero making forced choices, or myths of renewal such as a mundane heaven on a nuclear-free earth.<sup>95</sup>

In addition to calling for an indigenous new mythology to fill the vacuum, Chernus has more recently turned to the concept of "play" as a resource. If life ought not be a means to some end, but an end in itself, as occasion for joy and intrinsic satisfaction, then we can glimpse the freedom to extricate ourselves from technical reason and servitude to the Bomb. Life is a game in the best sense, "the human drama," but now nuclear weapons have made it possible for the entire theater to be destroyed! But that would hardly be in the best interest of the players, and so they ought to be awakened to that dire possibility. Therefore, instead of arguing that war is obsolete altogether, our cry should be "The show must go on!"<sup>96</sup> Chernus' appeal here comes down to a mixture of pragmatic and aesthetic motives: in some fashion deeper than that provided by rationality humans must be persuaded to be prudent enough to keep future warfare limited, because life itself is the ultimate value.

### *God, Reason, and Moral Response:*

This brings us to the present moment. In this survey of how the implications of the nuclear threat have unfolded until we are brought up against the realization that a new religion is in our midst. Let us pause to review how this has become evident.

From 1945 until recently most responses to it by people of faith have been limited to an ethical level, comparable to other moral dilemmas of our time such as world hunger. A pioneering step was taken by Dale Aukerman, in offering a

provocative theological treatment of the Bomb. He vividly sketches the idolatrous lure of limitless power, contrasting to it the self-limiting God of Jesus the crucified. Yet some may discount Aukerman's message because of his principled pacifism, the intensity of his style, and the unreconstructed biblical language to which he restricts himself.

For a wider audience it may have been Jonathan Schell who first posed at least one aspect of the theological issue, namely the finality and even nihilism of what extinction would mean. One of those aroused by this grim specter, Gordon Kaufman, responded by reopening the ancient theodicy question: how can a God who is both good and almighty permit undeserved suffering in the world? He is convinced the nuclear age imposes on us a definitive if unconventional answer: God must no longer be viewed as in charge of the world. It is instead up to us—in our merely relative goodness and might—to prevent the ultimate in undeserved suffering. Kaufman urges the theological work of "imagination," but by that he means less a re-envisioning of either God or the Bomb as shapers of our perceived world, and more a Kantian boundary to the activity of the believing mind. Readers should appreciate Kaufman's warning against triumphalist tendencies in conventional theism and its abuses by the bombmakers. But in the austerity of his mission to demythologize our language about God, he overlooks the already virulent mythologizing surrounding the Bomb.

This, however, is precisely what must be understood, if we are to account for the seductive fascination yet repressed horror of our images of nuclear apocalypse. Here it is Robert Jay Lifton who traces the quirks and quivers of the post-Hiroshima mentality until the source is disclosed to be a "secular religion," nuclearism. To be sure, it is the psychological and behavioral consequences that interest Lifton, as a psychiatrist. But his trained observations over the years corroborate the hypothesis that religion, functionally defined, continues to thrive in our supposedly secular era. The human drive for life-sustaining images of death and immortality, even when diverted into life-threatening folly, is irrepresible.

It remained for Ira Chernus to develop the religious

dimensions of nuclearism. He does so by delineating the uncanny yet compelling nature of myth, the corresponding limitations of rational argumentation, and the special task of the churches to reinvigorate traditional symbols of salvation and blend them with new ones of an open future.

Thus the religious character of our crisis has at last been displayed, and it will likely become still more apparent in the months or years ahead. As a guidepost for our understanding thus far, let us conclude this chapter by making some comparisons.

Of the authors discussed, the three who deal explicitly with the theological challenge are Aukerman, Kaufman, and Chernus. Coming from quite different backgrounds, they all nevertheless recognize that the stark predicament of humanity in the nuclear age has unprecedented religious implications. Aukerman is true to the radical "peace church" tradition. His reflections on biblical themes conclude with a confidence that God not only will bring a final consummation, but is already at work through obedient believers forming shalom communities.

However, Kaufman and Chernus not only go beyond Aukerman's biblical conceptuality, but also reject any longing for a supernatural rescue mission. A *deus ex machina*, they claim, would only undercut the full responsibility which humans must now assume for finding a path to survival. They are alike in mistrusting classic theism, preferring instead an organic evolutionary perspective on the human species. This would include the relativity of cultures and of all values—except of course for the overriding value of survival. Their methodology differs from Aukerman's, for they disclaim any reliance on revelation or any personal initiative by God. For them, theology remains a human work, with emphasis on the imagination—although Chernus by implication does allow that imagination far more scope and receptivity.

This latter point is the clue for the contrariety between Kaufman and Chernus. The differences between these two (we will return to Aukerman momentarily) are significant for any attempts to understand nuclearism. On his own grounds Kaufman seems unable to account for the baffling resiliency of the arms race—a compulsive and Dionysian extravagance

which is potentially suicidal. However, Chernus, like Aukerman, recognizes the uncanny enticement of the Bomb in meeting the human thirst for a sense of spiritual power, including both cosmic renewal and personal experiences of transcendence. It is out of its fullness, not its immaturity, that the mind demands such a rich medley of metaphor. While Kaufman looks outward, so to speak, in a critical "demythologizing" of theism as asymmetrical and alienating to human value, Chernus looks inward to the human self and its daily diet of symbols, seeking by remythologizing to improve that nourishment.

Kaufman's preferred theological method and heritage stem from the Enlightenment and its critical rationalism. So when he turns to consider nuclear holocaust he assumes that after careful thought people must surely renounce such supreme irrationality. But this procedure itself, Chernus might reply, resembles that confidence in technical reason and literal truth which actually sustains our mythic fascination with nuclear weapons. Perhaps a comparison of the two writers in the last analysis must turn, not on their ideas about God (for both are procedurally quite reticent to allow much to be said here), but instead on their concepts of human nature. Is the human self relatively univocal, a rational selfconsciousness that is only secondarily restricted by passion, ambivalence, folly, or self-indulgence? Or is the human self a bundle of complexities which depends on symbolization to construct bridges within itself as well as to the outside world, as it grapples with the tensions of finitude and selftranscendence? Here I believe it is clearly Chernus who is both more faithful to the Judeo-Christian vision, and more capable of advancing our understanding of the nuclear dilemma.

There remains, however, one area to be addressed, before we can begin to ask just how Christians ought to respond to this new secular religion. It has to do with the relationship of God and the human being. Here Aukerman may return to help us. Both Kaufman and Chernus presume that insofar as deity exists at all, God is-to say the least-passive. Kaufman has very particular epistemological grounds for asserting this, and he is right to call for a reformulation of

God-concepts. Our endangered generation does need to outgrow the crude notions of divine warrior or autocrat who exercises a coercive sovereignty. This is not the place, however, to enter the complex and far-ranging debate on recasting the language of theism. Suffice it to say that modern theology has heard a number of options for doing so, many of which do not entail Kaufman's outright abandonment of personal metaphoric language. Rather than the monarch/servant model, for instance, the biblical image of the vine and the branches (John 15) suggests models of connectedness and interpersonal relations.<sup>97</sup>

In any case, by assuming God's inactivity (and probably God's impersonality as well), both Kaufman and Chernus throw the entire weight of responsibility for solving the nuclear crisis on human shoulders. Quite apart from any unintended snub toward heavenly courts, this certainly results in a doctrine of humanity heavy with the freightage of a popularized Pelagianism. The ideas of Pelagius, the fifth century reformer criticized by Augustine, have sometimes been called "musty" religion: we must do what the urgency of the hour tells us we ought to, and so therefore we can. But-can we? It seems to me that the Pauline-Augustinian critique of the law, a religion of rules, or any salvation by human will power, has never been satisfactorily answered by musty activists, but only ignored. For the law or the cosmic "ought" condemns us to impotence and futility at the very time we try most desperately to fulfill it. We all know, for example, the experience of "freezing up" when we feel both singled out and overwhelmed with some enormous duty. Yet, on the other hand, we must grant that an extreme Augustinianism has overplayed this theme and thus legitimated human passivity before the status quo. So Kaufman's allergic reaction is understandable.

To put it rather too simply, the error in the traditional Pelagian-Augustinian quarrels through centuries of church history has been the inability to conceive the possibility that both the divine **will** and a human will might act concurrently-yet without curtailing the full and free responsibility of each. There is, however, precedence for this in the divine yet human will(s) of Jesus Christ, and in the New Testament

experience of the Holy Spirit. It was not in benumbment, but at the height of his powers (even for lively polemic!) that Paul could insist, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20a). Then there is a modern example in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who from his prison cell in the closing months of

World War II wrote movingly of "prayer and righteous action" in their integral unity.<sup>98</sup> In these prison letters there are famous words about living responsibly in a secular "world come of age," even "as if" there were no God, but those letters also contain a striking number of references to Providence! Bonhoeffer felt no sense of contradiction here, for the Lord of history summons human beings into partnership with the divine will to shape the course of events.<sup>99</sup>

In the crisis of the 1980s, as well as those faced by Bonhoeffer and by first century Christians, there should be no antithesis between Providence and human accountability. People of faith are called upon to act with conscious responsibility, but also to trust that God continues to work in the world—perhaps concurrently, and certainly in ways we only dimly comprehend. On this decisive point we return to Aukerman, for here his directly biblical perspective is also a surprisingly timely one. To the extent that more analytical methods are unable to move beyond a stalemate of two selves, the divine and the human, as self-contained entities, it is wiser to be content with the language of dialogue and personhood. Aukerman's meditations avoid that peculiar modern dichotomy, combining instead a confidence in God's faithfulness and providential care with a vision which can unlock human creativity and responsibility.

The confidence that we are not alone in the struggle to avert a humanly crafted Doomsday can give us the courage to turn to the hideous threat and face it squarely and calmly as one which in fact arises from a new religion, nuclearism. The moral challenge is grounded in a still deeper religious challenge. So we may return to the words of Luther and find that they take on a strangely modern ring: "Now, I say, whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God. . . ." But also the words of Richard Barnet may be read in a new light:

"There was no way out of the race to destruction except somehow to transcend it."

We have long worshipped alien gods, and at this late date there are no short cuts to a "way out." But perhaps in the Providence of God, theology may yet assist us to transcend our numbed behavior and turn to face the menace looming before us.