

# The Role of Religion in the Prevention of Nuclear Extinction

— The Possibility of the Total Annihilation of  
Humankind and the Implication for Religion —

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On the evening of August 6, 1977, the 32nd anniversary of the mass deaths and destruction of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, I visited the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima by the hypocenter, and stood in silent prayer for the repose of the dead before the cenotaph erected to their memory. Tens of thousands of people were paying their tribute in peace park, and all around the cenotaph lay hundreds of floral wreaths, as the incense from a thousand burning tapers rose over every thing like a mist. Many of those kneeling in prayer must have lost loved family members in the atomic bombing but had not been able even to collect and enshrine their ashes. Their hands clasped, eyes filled tears, many elderly people just stayed there, unable to tear themselves away.

I made my way to the *Heiwa Ohashi* (Great Bridge of Peace) beside Peace Park, and from over the bridge I stayed watching for a long time, as thousands of symbolic candlelit lanterns floated silently on the river. The tide was at high, and the lanterns drifting about slowly, back and forth, almost as if each bore the soul of one of the thousands of victims who lay in this river thirtytwo years ago. What did it mean, I thought, watching the lanterns, that

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so many people came to mourn and pay tribute to the dead, whether religious believer or not, and regardless of differences between religious persuasions? What, I thought, is the meaning and *raison d'être* of religion itself in this particular age of crisis, the crisis of the possible nuclear extinction of all humankind? What is the meaning of nuclear weapons in terms of religion? What are the implications of religion to the movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons?

Since that August 6 evening in 1977, I have pondered these questions with particular earnestness, and my thoughts have led me to the conclusion that, in this age of crisis, of the possible total annihilation of humankind, the meaning of religion in terms of thought is indeed significant, and religion and religious believers have a role to play that is greater than any role ever played, for reasons I shall give.

First: I have argued elsewhere<sup>1)</sup> that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki created a HELL so horrifying as to be beyond what any religion has ever conceived, an actuality that now confronts religion with its terrible significance. The atomic bombing not only turned these two cities into a literal HELL, the genocide of all living things, but in doing so it destroyed temples, churches and shrines, depriving the dead even of their final sacred resting places, desecrating tombs and graveyards. There were many devout Buddhist believers in Hiroshima, and Nagasaki was a city of many devout Catholic Christians; those who waged nuclear war against both cities slaughtered most of these people of all religions, bonzes, ministers, pastors, fathers, nuns and *Shinto* ritualists who would otherwise have been able to hold religious services for the dead.

Ten years earlier, I had the opportunity of visiting the northern part of Vietnam to investigate war crimes committed by the U.S. Armed Forces. There, in 1967, I saw that the U.S. Forces had not only killed the living but had also profaned them and their ancestors by bombing out temples, pagodas,

churches, and the sacred places where the dead lay. We were deeply impressed by the people of Vietnam in their severe denunciation of the U.S. Forces for having committed these crimes even against the dead. For what they claimed was defense of "Christian civilization," the U.S. Forces set out not only to exterminate the living but bombed Buddhist temples and Christian churches indiscriminately, blasting graves open and desecrating the dead. This is an extreme of criminality and inhumanity.

In this respect, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an actual prototype of nuclear war, must be sharply condemned as a crime against religion and the dead, as in Vietnam. We can say that nuclear weapons and those who plan and use such weapons are enemies of the teachings of all religions and of their adherents.

**Second:** While I stood and watched the great crowd of people paying tribute to the dead on the evening of August 6, I pondered the meaning of this wholly human and universal action. Whether one does or does not believe in gods and buddhas, mourning for and paying tribute to the dead is totally befitting to the spirit of humanity. Anyone who would mock or make light of such an act would rightly be regarded as possessing a nature wholly without refinement of feeling.

Imagine a human being being killed and left to lie there and rot, with no one to care or mourn the lost one. Few things could be so contrary to human dignity and such a profanation of human life as this. Mourning for the dead should not be scorned or treated lightly, even though such mourning does not finally solve the problems and sufferings of the living, nor can it replace action for the living. But "death is death," in the words of John Somerville, "and has a dimension which nothing else possesses. It does not solve problems of life; but it can speak to life, and give it meaning".<sup>2)</sup> For the living, mourning the dead means giving meaning to both the life and the death of the dead, thus communicating with the dead. It also means that the living can

thus resurrect the meaning of life in themselves, recalling to them the meaning of life and human dignity and giving new meaning to life. In this respect, mourning the dead has the quality of humaneness, essential to the living.

Such a relation between the dead and the living is especially to be realized between us and those killed by the A-bombs. To mourn the victims of the atomic bombing is an essential act of human dignity, an act which enables us to feel the heartburning that must have been felt by the victims at the desecration of their humanity, feelings from which we resolve never to allow such weapons to be used again. The great number of cenotaphs and other memorials erected in the two A-bombed cities testify to the widely-cherished sentiments of deep mourning for the dead, of tribute paid to them, of resentment at the atomic bombing, and the ardent desire to totally abolish nuclear weapons — a testimony of the living for survival.

Although the act of mourning the dead is not necessarily motivated only by religion, it is nevertheless true that it has a central place in religion, and that many people, including the *hibakusha*, the bomb affected survivors, mourn for the dead in their own religious faith and in accord with their religious ritual. It is in this context that religion has such an important meaning in terms of human dignity, that it may well be expected to play an active role in working for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were used as the world's first demonstration of nuclear war, in embryonic form, in which hundreds of thousands of people were obliterated, their remains left to decay, their ashes scattered. As far as possible, the ashes were collected later, but the mortal remains of many victims still remain, tossed aside unidentified in the soil of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many people quite properly gathered up the remains of the unidentified dead, who apparently had no surviving relatives, and erected monuments to their memory. What would be the outcome of a future nuclear war? What would be the situation if nuclear weapons were used, with destructive power

equivalent to millions of the Hiroshima-type bomb? No doubt remains that all human beings on earth would ultimately be exterminated, their corpses left to rot and their ashes scattered over the globe, with no one to bury or mourn them. In past wars, great numbers of people were killed, but still there were survivors, who fulfilled their obligations as “bereaved families.” In a future nuclear war, a war of annihilation, there would be no “bereaved families.” Temples, churches, shrines, tombs and cemeteries would be totally destroyed, and religious people and even their religion obliterated. The earth itself would become the graveyard of humanity. To put it more correctly, the earth would not be a “graveyard” but a dead planet, its surface covered with the ashes of *homo sapiens*.

Throughout the history of humankind, no religions or religious sects have ever before had to face a “religion-exterminating” or an “anti-religious force” of such total destructive power as the initiator of nuclear war would be. Neither religion nor religious sect has ever before been threatened by such an “atheist,” so formidable and barbarous an enemy of the fundamentals of religion, with no reverence whatever for gods or buddhas of any kind. Compared with the nuclear war blackmailers who have stated they are prepared to run the risk of unleashing nuclear war, knowing that this would become the last step in *the total extermination of religion of a scale greater than ever seen heretofore*, it would be no exaggeration to say that Marxists or socialists who denounce such religion-extermination war and defend freedom of conscience and belief are genuine defenders of true religion.

Religionists can judge this point for themselves. Nuclear weapons and religion can not “co-exist.” In so far as they follow their essential ideals of the fulfilment of life, and mourn for those who die, religionists must be part of the struggle for the total abolition of nuclear weapons. If there should be “religions” or “religionists” who approve nuclear weapons and bless the nuclear war blackmailers, they must be classified as anti-religionists taking anti-

religious action, giving their support to “heresy” and barbarous “atheism” and its protagonists.

Third: In expressing these opinions on the meaning and role of religion in the struggle to abolish nuclear weapons, it is not my intention or desire to preach to religionists. On the contrary, what I have said is said to persuade even myself, a materialist, that it is necessary to make a positive evaluation of the meaning of religion in our time, and to seek common ground with religionists for the total abolition of nuclear weapons, a task that is the common cause of all humankind. A positive evaluation of religion such as this may differ from traditional Marxist views. But the fact is that not a few religions and religious sects, in the application of their very ideals, have taken an active part and made great contributions to the movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons.<sup>3)</sup>

Speaking of the ideals of Buddhism, for instance, we have the words of the Buddha: “Do not kill, do not allow others to kill, and do not acquiesce in killing!” Buddhist ideals of “benevolence,” “suffering for others,” and “sparing no efforts to follow the teachings of Buddha even at the risk of one’s life,” Japan Buddha Sangha’s ideals of the “non-killing commandment” (first precept of Pancha Sila) and “attaining Buddhahood in universal surroundings, attaining Buddhahood in all materials, and building an invisible *stupa* (tope) within one’s mind”; and there is the Buddhist *Nichiren* sect’s ideal of the “establishment of righteousness and the security of the country” — all these, interpreted as they are, can be directly linked with the ideal of the total abolition of nuclear weapons. The ideals of *Maruyama-kyo*, one of the remarkable *Shintoist* sects of Japan, “peace reigning over the world” and “helping people universally” are literally ideals of peace and brotherhood. It is hardly necessary to explain here that the essential Christian ideals are conspicuously ideals of peace and brotherhood, an ideal of solidarity among people.<sup>4)</sup> It will suffice for me to quote only two passages from the Bible: “Blessed are

the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matthew, Ch. 5, V. 9.) “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.” (I Corinthians, Ch. 3, Vs. 16–17) The second quotation can be taken as an appropriate condemnation, in the name of God, of those high officials of the U.S. government who threaten the use of nuclear weapons. The Catholic Church is widely known to have adopted as their precepts “service to the world” and “peace on earth,” as advocated by the Pope.

On the basis of these ideals, many Japanese religionists, especially since the end of World War II, have consistently taken part in the movement for peace, the movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons and for the relief of the *hibakusha*. The Japanese movement against nuclear weapons cannot be properly spoken of without making mention of the active role played in it by religionists. The movement of Japanese religionists for the abolition of nuclear weapons, confirmed by these sublime ideals and thoughts, is worthy of note on the following points:

(1) Extraordinarily active and practical in character. Religionists were the first to initiate the peace marches, or walks for peace, with priests and nuns of the Japan Buddha Sangha beating their drums and leading the way, touching the heartstrings of the people with great encouragement.

(2) Popular and non-sectarian in character. Whereas religious sects are characterized in one sense by sectarianism, the various sects represented in the movement have held dialogues and cooperated for peace, for the abolition of nuclear weapons and for the relief of *hibakusha*. It is instructive to note that what ensued has been a minimum of division or antagonism, in spite of the constitutional characteristics of “inter-sect conflicts” in religious circles. The popular response to these sects and their increased influence through the dialogue and cooperation they have practiced points the way which the overall

movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons must take in Japan.

(3) Consistent and persistent in abiding by their initial purpose, viz., maintaining the principles of the abolition of nuclear weapons and the relief of *hibakusha*, demanding disarmament, not arms control.

(4) Defense of solidarity and unity of the religionist movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons, working under the auspices of the Japanese Religionists Council for Peace; which, in turn, has made a contribution to the unity of the Japanese movement against nuclear weapons.

I pay my respect to them, in confirming that leaders of the religionist peace movement in Japan have become outstanding leaders of the overall Japanese movement against nuclear weapons,<sup>5)</sup> in fact they have become indispensable to it, and are held in high honor among the people. In this same connection, it must be pointed out that such leading personalities as Arthur Booth, Sean McBride and Philip Noel-Baker, key personnel of the International Symposium on the Damage and After-Effects of the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki held in Japan in July–August 1977, are all Christians, and that among the other leading personalities were many people of religious faith.

In this same context, it is clear that many people of religion are playing an active part in the realm of thought on human survival, with outstanding power in practical action. What contribution have philosophers and social scientists, including Marxists and materialists, made by their thought and action toward the abolition of nuclear weapons? They seem to be lagging far behind the religionists. Speaking of myself, I have to confess that both in thought and practice I have learned many things from Alice Herz<sup>6)</sup> and the religionists I have referred to. Contemporary philosophers have much to learn from the religionists movements for the abolition of nuclear weapons in respect of thought and action.

**Fourth:** Taking these points as my premise, I want to show that quite a



number, though not all, of religionists working for the abolition of nuclear weapons act from firmly-grounded thinking. At a religionist symposium held on the evening of August 5, 1977 in Hiroshima,<sup>7)</sup> one speaker said: "it will not be enough to denounce only the U.S. imperialists because they dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Every human being has sinned, and atom bombs should be considered as a problem of universal human nature." His statement must have been derived from the religious doctrine of the original sin of all human beings.

Interpretations of the concept of "sin" would lead to disputations. I believe that all human beings have "sinned" in that all human beings are imperfect and have much to reflect on and to be ashamed of in their lives. But "sin" in this sense, and the crime of those who are ready to initiate nuclear war to exterminate all human life are in two totally different categories, the one even contradicting the other. The two things cannot be put on the same level, as "sin." To do this would destroy the case against confrontation with the greatest crime ever contemplated, willingness to annihilate all "sinning" human beings. Such an attitude would completely fail in mobilizing the power of the people to prevent nuclear war, to abolish nuclear weapons and to ensure the survival of humankind.

As individuals, human beings are indeed alienated in actual society and are covered with "all the muck of the ages." In this sense they can be said to have "sinned." As Marx and Engels pointed out, however, "all the muck of the ages" or "sin" can be cleaned off only by a practical movement in the struggle against alienation, by revolution.<sup>8)</sup> Human beings cannot rid themselves of "all the muck of the ages" if they do not confront those who alienate them. For those causing alienation, if they have not been overthrown by the struggle, will only add to "the muck of the ages" that covers the people and make the people even greater "sinners." If those causing alienation and those alienated are held to be "equally guilty" and no distinction made bet-

ween the assailants and the victims, alienation will never be overcome, nor can its human victims be saved from their "sin" in the sense described above.

You see, I admit that human beings as actual individuals are "sinners" in the sense I have stated, and in this respect my position is similar to that of religionists. Many religionists, however, would not agree with me as to whether human beings by nature are sinners or not, and how human beings can or can not be freed from their "sin." But I do not want to enter into a controversy with religionists on these points. Whatever position we take, we should be able to find common ground in recognizing that there are forces at work in this world which are ready to exterminate all human life, and even religion itself, and in confirming that, to denounce these forces and stay their hands are the matters to be settled first. Whether humankind, by nature, has "sinned" or not, can be discussed with ample time after it has been confirmed that the annihilation of human life and religion can assuredly be avoided.

**Fifth:** I wish to reconfirm that the religionists taking part in the movement for the human survival are playing an active role in this movement, although most, though not all, would differ with me on our understanding of the nature of human "sin." It is a matter of regret that religionists active in the anti-nuclear weapons movement are only a few in the overall religious circles in Japan. There are about one hundred thousand clerical religionists in Japan, but only some two thousand are taking part in the peace movement. Overall, religious circles of Japan are not necessarily in agreement with those relatively few religionists, and are often even antagonistic to them. Some Buddhist temples and Christian churches even dismissed priests and pastors because they had taken part in the movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons. It is a serious matter that an overwhelming majority of the old-established and the newly risen religious communities generally have turned their backs on the task of abolition of nuclear weapons and relief of the *hibakusha*; and that many of them have even cooperated in the name of

religion with the nuclear war blackmailers and those cooperating with them, including the Japanese Government, the Government of the Republic of Korea and the organized anti-Communist movement.

From what I have said, these religions and religious sects cannot escape the criticism of being actually “counter-religion.” What is needed now is not to “change” religion, but rather to revive the fundamental ideals of religion, which include respect for life, benevolence, love, equality of humankind, and peace. Those who threaten to initiate nuclear war, or to state it more succinctly, to undertake the annihilation of humankind, are self-proud beings who claim the right of the “Last Judgment,” taking the role of God, and as such, challenge all religions. How extensively can religions, religious sects and religionists take up this challenge? How far are philosophers, social scientists and Marxists willing to go in taking action in solidarity with these religionists? Their answer will surely affect the fate of humankind.

#### Notes:

- 1) See Shingo Shibata, “Implication of the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” from which I quote:

“In the evening of August 5, 1977, I was given the opportunity of addressing a ‘symposium of those concerned with religion on problems of *hibakusha*’, held in Hiroshima by the Japan Liaison Congress of Religionist NGOs. My statement at this meeting can be summed up as follows:

“Though teachings of various religions have heretofore depicted HELL in the other world, no pictures of hell are as horrible as the realities into which the *hibakusha* were plunged, and in which they have found themselves ever since in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The two cities are often spoken of as *having been like HELL*. More precisely, however, they should be spoken of as having been literally *HELL itself*. The hell described by some religions may become *a reality of this world*, with a magnitude of disastrousness and atrociousness that go far beyond the imaginary hell of the other world. But who brought about this hell of reality? Religions speak of their hells as having been brought about by demons and devils. Has any demon or devil ever been depicted doing anything as dreadful as bringing hell to this world, such as was brought about in Hiroshima and Nagasaki? The atomic bombing is often referred to as a deed done by human beings who could be *compared* to demons or devils. But those who were responsible for the directive to drop atom bombs were *in fact demons and devils* more horrible than the imaginary

ones of the other world. From now on, both religious believers and non-religious materialists, including the author, are called upon to make known the realities of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the masses and to later generations as an actual hell of this world in order that the final hell of this world may not be allowed to occur. If any religion remains indifferent to the hell of this world, how could it be expected to perform its mission of saving people?

These points aroused a sympathetic response from the religionists present at the meeting.”

- 2) John Somerville's Preface to *Phoenix: Letters and Documents of Alice Herz*, ed. by Shingo Shibata, Amsterdam, 1976, p. vii.
- 3) For the ideals and practice of Japanese religionist peace movement, see, for instance, two valuable books: Japanese Religionists Council for Peace, ed., *Testimonies of Religionists Living in Our Times*, in Japanese, Tokyo, 1968, and by the same editor, *Democracy and Religion*, in Japanese, Tokyo, 1970.
- 4) See Shingo Shibata, "The Life and Thought of Alice Herz," in *Phoenix, op. cit.*; Shingo Shibata, "Das Leben und Denken von Alice Herz - Für gemeinsames Handeln von Marxisten und Christen," in Shibata, ed., *Alice Herz als Denkerin und Friedenskämpferin*, Amsterdam, 1977.
- 5) Such personalities include, among others, Most Ven. Ryokei Ohnishi, Most Ven. Nichidatsu Fujii, Ven. Shojun Mibu, Ven. Kyotoku Nakano, Ven Gyotsu Sato, Ven. Kosho Ohmi, (Buddhists), Mr. Tano Jodai, Mme. Hatsue Nonomiya. Rev. Teruji Hirayama (Christians), and Mr. Chiyomatsu Sasaki (*Shintoist*).
- 6) For Alice Herz, see two books cited in notes (2) and (4).
- 7) See note (1).
- 8) See Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, Collected Works*, Vol. 5, Moscow, 1976, p. 53. Note that Marx and Engels properly use the words "all the muck of the ages" but not man's "sin." Human beings can rid themselves of "all the muck of the ages," clean themselves and free themselves. Marxists say that human beings can succeed in doing so, not by prayer or meditation, but by a practical movement or revolution.