

Woe unto Trident

Alan McDonald

On 12 June 2006, I joined a delegation from Scotland which went to the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. The visit was organised by Scottish CND. The delegation consisted of Members of the Scottish Parliament, together with religious, trades union and others leaders from Scottish civic society. The purpose of the visit was to inspect the establishment at Aldermaston, and see for ourselves what is being done there, in our name. I agreed to be part of the delegation because I thought it was a creative contribution to the debate about nuclear weapons in this country.

There had been a tendency of late, at least until when Gordon Brown made a speech, that the debate about Trident had almost become confined to set piece demonstrations at Faslane. I was encouraged that CND were taking a new initiative, and approaching the issue of Trident from a slightly new direction. After all, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has said that he wants there to be ‘an open public debate’ about the possible replacement for the Trident ballistic missile system. It is hard to have a meaningful debate without being in possession of all the facts. It is also the case that Governments have argued for years that while what happens in Aldermaston is of a sensitive nature, the purpose of the establishment is not a secret and there is nothing to hide. The delegation from Scotland went in expectation, but sadly we were turned away at the front gate of Aldermaston. We sent a letter of protest to the Secretary of State for Defence, and I was at least allowed, along with Robin Harper MSP, to briefly go inside Aldermaston to hand in a copy of the letter.

Local groups which have been monitoring developments at Aldermaston over the years then took us for their ‘alternative’ tour of the base, stopping at various points around the perimeter fence to point out the extent of the establishment, but also the preparations for new developments. As we made our way round the miles of perimeter fence, we were shown the probable site for one of

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Aldermaston.*

the world's most powerful supercomputers, a Cray XT3, costing £20 million. The computer will be able to simulate in great detail the detonation of a nuclear weapon. The computer, to be known as Larch, will be so fast, that, as the Systems Manager at Aldermaston puts it 'The 6 billion inhabitants of earth would each have to make nearly 7,000 calculations per second to keep up with it.' However, for followers of the crucified and risen Christ there is a much more telling calculation — precisely how obscene is it to spend £20 million to simulate a nuclear weapon when so many of the 6 billion inhabitants of earth still exist on less than a dollar a day?

After our visit to Aldermaston, the delegation from Scotland was taken to Westminster for a session of a Commons Select Committee. The Committee had gathered to take evidence from Dr Hans Blix, the former nuclear weapons inspector in Iraq. We met Dr Blix, who was presenting the eagerly awaited report of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission: *Weapons of Terror – Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms* [see *Spokesman* 92]. The Commission makes 60 recommendations, one of which, number 23, seems to have particular relevance for the United Kingdom at this time. 'Any state contemplating replacement or modernisation of its nuclear weapon systems must consider such action in the light of all relevant treaty obligations and its duty to contribute to the nuclear disarmament process. As a minimum, it must refrain from developing nuclear weapons with new military capabilities or for new missions. It must not adopt systems or doctrines that blur the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons or lower the nuclear threshold.'

Back at Aldermaston, we were shown the site of a new laser system which would be critical in the design of any new thermonuclear weapon. And finally, we stood outside the fence and looked at the site for the new A90 building which will manufacture plutonium parts for nuclear weapons.

In July 2005, when he was Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid announced a three year investment of over £1 billion for the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. Included in that figure was the construction of the new supercomputer, and the new highly powered laser system. What is not clear, is whether this massive sum of money would be included in the figure of £25 Billion, for the cost of a replacement for Trident. Most commentators think this is additional spending to the estimated figure of £25 billion, making that figure even more obscene. And talking of obscene – let's just remind ourselves what we're talking about.

On 6 August 1945, the United States Air Force dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Three days later a second atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki. At least 100,000 people died almost immediately in these cities as a result of two bombs. The atomic bomb which was used at Hiroshima was equivalent to 13,000 tons of TNT. The bomb used at Nagasaki was equivalent to 20,000 tons of TNT.

The statistics about Trident are chilling. There are four Trident nuclear submarines based at Faslane, just up the road from Glasgow. Each submarine can carry 16 missiles. Each missile can be armed with up to 12 nuclear warheads with a range of 6,000 miles. One Trident submarine can carry the equivalent of 750

Hiroshima atom bombs. The potential for the indiscriminate destruction of countless men, women and children is almost beyond belief. The threat to the future of creation is beyond imagining.

For me, how we respond to the issue of nuclear weapons is close to the heart of what it means to be a Christian today. It is very important for me as a minister of the Church of Scotland to acknowledge that, since 1981, the General Assembly has, through many deliverances, adopted a very clear position on this issue. The Assembly has said, along with every other mainstream church, that nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction are morally and theologically wrong.

Luke, chapter 6, verses 17 to 26 is one of the most important sermons Jesus ever preached, and includes the Beatitudes, sometimes called the heart of the Gospel. And the message that Jesus preaches turns the world upside down. The message says: 'Blessed ... are you poor, the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed ... are you who are hungry now, you will be filled. Blessed ... are you who weep now, you will laugh ...' The listeners to this Sermon in Luke would have been astonished because this was not their experience of poverty, hunger, and tears. And neither is it our experience today. The Beatitudes are as sharp and relevant as they were 2000 years ago. This message of Jesus challenges all our assumptions about what life is for. But Luke goes on to add some verses that we don't find in Matthew's version of the Beatitudes. In some translations these are known as the 'Woes', for they literally say 'Woe to you'. In the Good News translation of the Bible the text says 'How Terrible': 'How terrible for you who are rich now, you have had your easy life ... How terrible for you who are full now, you will go hungry ... How terrible for you who laugh now, you will mourn and weep ...' And once again those listening must have been astonished, for this was not their experience of riches, and security, and laughter. And neither is it our experience today. This message of Jesus challenges all our expectations and assumptions about life. These words of Jesus are hard, but not threatening words. These are words of concern and compassion. Jesus is telling us that if our heart's desire is only 'me, my and mine', then ultimately it will not bring happiness or fulfilment.

This is a serious challenge to the way of the world, which tells us, 'to get, to have, to consume, to look after number one, to keep to ourselves, to defend what we have'. But the message at the heart of the gospel is that if we only think about me, then ultimately it will affect not only me, but also our sisters and brothers in this global village, and the intricate web of creation which we inhabit together. It is no coincidence that, in the verses that follow the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks about loving our enemies. The Beatitudes represent the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nuclear weapons represent the reverse of the Gospel — the indiscriminate threat to incinerate men, women, and children, and threaten the future of creation.

Our Christian faith teaches us that we are not powerless in the struggle to preach the gospel about the love of God. We can make a difference in the world. Each one of us must decide the most faithful way of living our daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

When this meeting was first planned, we wondered if anyone would be interested

in whether there was life after Trident. Then the Chancellor of the Exchequer made a speech at the Mansion House. And yesterday, in Scotland, in the church where his father was a Church of Scotland minister, Gordon Brown said he was sure his late father would have agreed with him about nuclear weapons. Well who knows, but we do know that the Church of Scotland has opposed nuclear weapons for the past 25 years. The Chancellor is due great credit for his part in the Make Poverty History campaign. However, what is the point of making poverty history if you then effectively target the poor, and everybody else in the world, with nuclear weapons? And there is a crucial question in this debate which perhaps can best be answered for us only by the Chancellor of the Exchequer: How much aid for the developing world could you buy with £25 billion? How many lives could be saved?

But even if a Trident replacement cost nothing, even if the system came free from the land of George W Bush, we should still have nothing to do with it. Because it's wrong, morally, and theologically wrong. There has been some discussion lately, in this Post-Cold-War, new War-on-Terrorism World, about exactly who we would target with our new, improved nuclear weapons? And that is indeed a good question that brings out the insanity of nuclear weapons today. But for Christians, as people who believe in the resurrection, the answer to that question about who we point these missiles at is, the target would be Jesus Christ, the Son of God, along with millions of his brothers and sisters. For people of faith this is no way to love our neighbour. For people who believe in the Creator God, 'Son of Trident' is not the way to care for this beautiful world or to hand it on to our children and our children's children. Let us not replace Trident. Just don't do it!