



A Reflection from Bishop Swing

Nakedness and Nukes

March 14, 2022

In the story of the Garden of Eden, God says, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden . . . or you will die.” To which the serpent says, “You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it . . . you will be like God . . .”

So they ate. “Then the eyes of both (Adam and Eve) were opened; and they knew that they were naked.” Genesis, Chapter 3.

Nakedness is that state where one’s innocence permanently disappears. Where one’s vulnerability is totally exposed. Although nakedness is usually revealed in the removal of clothes, it can be heard at this moment in the voices of the custodians of our nuclear weapons. Authorities in military uniforms are asked to comment on the developments in Russia’s war on Ukraine, and they are full of confidence until the subject switches to what will happen if nuclear weapons are used in Ukraine.

Then their voices are naked. They know. Unpredictable events could escalate into horror beyond description. Despite professional control, nuclear weapons can get out of control, and the cost of life on planet Earth would be incalculable.

Nuclear nakedness can be heard in voices right from the beginning. On July 16, 1945, near Alamogordo, New Mexico, Robert Oppenheimer was in charge of the first artificial nuclear explosion. His scientific innocence gave way to the enormity of physical and moral annihilation that he had unleashed.

What was he thinking? Later on, he said that two passages from the Bhagavad Gita were running through his mind after the success of the atomic test. First, “If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the mighty one.” Oppenheimer’s elation!

That was followed by his abject disillusionment. Quoting again, he cited the epic battle of Mahabharata when the Supreme Lord says, “I am death, the mighty destroyer of the world, out to destroy.” In an instant, Oppenheimer realized the naked truth that he, himself, might well have a leading role in destroying the world.



A Reflection from Bishop Swing

Nakedness and Nukes

Please keep in mind that in 1945, following Oppenheimer's breakthrough, there were only two atomic bombs. Knowing human nature, however, he could not hold the consequences of what would predictably follow. Today, there are over 14,000 nuclear warheads in nine nations. Nuclear nakedness leads the imagination to envision the comprehensive apocalypse that will certainly follow at a later date, just as surely as Hiroshima followed the first nuclear explosion in New Mexico. Voices change when the future sticks in the throat.

Ten years later, in 1955, a great banquet was given in Russia to celebrate the first successful test of the hydrogen bomb and the so-called "father of the hydrogen bomb," Andrei Sakharov. On that occasion, Sakharov gave the first toast. With a glass of brandy in his hand, he said something like: "May all of our devices explode as successfully as today's, but always over test sites and never over cities." He later said, "The table fell silent, as if I had said something indecent." Quickly the leading military figure at the banquet got up and told a "half-lewd, half blasphemous story" which belittled Sakharov's sentiments.

He later wrote, "Many years have passed, but I still feel as if I had been lashed by a whip . . . (the military dignitary) wanted to squelch my pacifist sentiment, and to put me and anyone who might share these ideas in our place . . . We, the inventors, scientists, engineers, craftsmen, had created a terrible weapon, the most terrible in human history; but its use would lie entirely out of our control. The people at the top . . . would make the decisions."

"Of course, I knew this already – I wasn't naïve. But understanding something in an abstract way is different from feeling it with your whole being, like the reality of life and death."

Yes, that is what nuclear nakedness is about, i.e. "feeling it with your whole being, like the reality of life and death." Oppenheimer came to this by way of religious scripture. Sakharov came to this by way of an obscene parable at a banquet. Just like the authorities today opining on the Russian war in Ukraine who glimpse nuclear nakedness and want to look away. The full weight of the weapons has shifted "to the reality of life and death."

What was it that the serpent said in the story of the Garden of Eden? Go ahead, eat it, "You will not die." Updating that encouragement, today we can hear, "You can manufacture all of the nuclear weapons that you want, others can do the same, because you will not die. The weapons only exist to keep you safe and to deter anyone who might harm you." What's more,



A Reflection from Bishop Swing

Nakedness and Nukes

27,000 miles in space, there is a little satellite, the size of a school bus, which serves constantly as a nuclear watchtower in the sky to keep us safe.

Perhaps we have a nuclear torpedo designed to create a tsunami wave so high that it could contaminate an enemy's coastline with radioactivity in wide stretches. We have submarines which can release 400 nuclear warheads in 15 minutes and vaporize every big city in Russia. There is a military general flying around in an airplane named "Looking Glass," armed with "go code" to launch all of our nuclear weapons upon command from our President.

What could possibly go wrong? "You will not die."

Besides we are too big to fail. But don't read the ancient story of Noah. Millenia ago, when the world was "small," people told the Noah story around campfires about human folly beings so perverse that the whole world would be swallowed up in death. Before the flood, folks figured that the sheer momentum of their logic and lives would sustain them. They were the realists, and Noah was the naïve dolt who believed that the entire world could be flooded. It turned out, in the story, that Earth was not too big to fail, and Noah got it. Is it possible that ancients understood something that we find difficult to comprehend?

What else did the serpent say in the Garden of Eden story? "You will be like God." Yes, that is the ultimate beguilement.

On the one hand, it takes a wide range of scientists, elements, politicians, industrialists, safe-guard experts and others to produce nuclear weapons. All of them funneling toward the bomb. On the other hand, it takes a wide range of voting constituents in two nations with nuclear weapons, to funnel the decision-making to two people. In Russia, Putin. In the United States, Biden.

Since they have the fate of the entire world in their hands, then we have elected gods. What could possibly go wrong with two gods? To test that premise, ask if Putin, by himself, in Ukraine has brought the entire world to a moment of nuclear nakedness? What he does now and in the near future, decides the fate of all existing nations and people unborn. We are at a critical time when the two things that ultimately matter are the decisions made by two gods, Putin and Biden. This is nuclear nakedness.



A Reflection from Bishop Swing

Nakedness and Nukes

In the USA, our final plan is this: when the President decides to release our full array of bombs, the President will fly away in a plane called “Doomsday.” Forget about the Big Bang of creation, about evolution, about the variety of life forms, about the nobility of well lived lives, about the sense of the sacred, about beauty imbued in all directions. As long as our one elected god flies off – without two of the species – then we have exhausted the highest aspiration in our moral arsenal. Let the world turn into rubble. At least we kept our enemies from gaining a greater foothold, and at least our President will continue living. Nuclear nakedness is the moment when our nuclear arsenals outdistance our moral arsenal!

And Putin? He has the world guessing. What is he after in Ukraine? How far will his war extend? How many people in how many countries is he prepared to murder? As the other god, he acts and the world reacts. We naturally wonder if he is moored to any loyalties?

He had a wife, Lyudmila Aleksandrovna Ocheretnaya, but they divorced years ago. He has two daughters, Mariya Putina and Katerina Tikhonova. And he mentioned in passing that he has a granddaughter. There is one report that today his family is now sequestered in a luxury bunker in Siberia, a bunker built to withstand a nuclear strike. True? If that is so, perhaps Putin would be content to initiate a nuclear war that would destroy most of the world as long as his own family was guaranteed to survive. Thus, moored to a familial anchor.

Then there is the matter of the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by Patriarch Kirill. Does Putin’s Christian faith, grounded in the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church, inspire him to murder Ukrainians? Patriarch Kirill finds no contradiction or outrage in Putin’s behavior. In a sermon at Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, recently Kirill claimed that the invasion was about stemming the spread of “gay parades” in Ukraine. These parades, according to Kirill, were inspired by the West. So what is happening in Ukraine is a holy war between religious traditionalists and liberalism. Thus Putin is acting as the champion of the Orthodox faith.

Later on, Patriarch Kirill claimed that the war is being fought because the West was insistent on expanding NATO in Eastern Europe. And by the way, 300 Russian Orthodox priests in Moscow have recently issued a joint statement against the war in Ukraine. So there is not uniformity in the religious picture in Russia.

At this crossroads moment, when Putin is playing a godlike role, when women, men and children are being slaughtered for nothing that they did, Putin looks to his church to get a



A Reflection from Bishop Swing

Nakedness and Nukes

gospel informed response. Does that response echo anything from the teachings of Jesus? The forgiveness of Jesus? The compassion of Jesus? Or is the response merely floating around in a pool of religious/political bargaining? When a god asks about God, one would expect outrage rather than accommodation. Putin finds himself moored to the highest religious authority in his land and is comforted in his merciless killing.

Thus, Putin has riches, family, church, political power, global reach. What else could he need? Answer: Ukraine. And with this ambition, the world's nuclear nakedness has been exposed.

I think that this planet has had three defining moments of nuclear nakedness, and now we are living this fourth one. They have been:

1. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The planet Earth has existed 4.543 billion years without an atomic or nuclear bomb. Earth did pretty well. At least it carried a future. Since 1945, Earth has been plagued with nuclear weapons, potentially developed enough to make the human species extinct.
2. The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. With Russian nuclear missiles just miles from the United States border and the Cold War between these nations at a fever pitch, the world came a few breaths away from full scale nuclear war.
3. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1986. The number of nuclear warheads escalated to around 70,000, and common sense led Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev to reduce the number considerably before something catastrophic happened. That was the last time that the leaders of nuclear armed nations trusted each other. "Trust but verify" was their motto.
4. Today! The leaders of the nine countries with nuclear weapons have never met together for one minute. They are all positioned for attack mode on each other, but together, they have not a shred of common concern for what really matters, i.e. the fate of this planet which we all depend on. At the end of the Adam and Eve story it says, "Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked."

In Ukraine, we have been forced to look in the mirror and glimpse what we really look like. We see ourselves in a scene where innocent people are annihilated and all people fall under the shadow of the ultimate weapons. So what do we do now?

In handling nuclear weapons, let's not find another fig leaf of high moral intention that covers our rapacious appetite for ever greater weapons, ever more money, ever more false security. Instead let's take the only road that leads to sustaining life on this planet.



A Reflection from Bishop Swing

Nakedness and Nukes

Clearly there are two roads available to us. Metaphorically we either head in the direction of Armageddon or we head toward the Garden of Eden. What is fiercely important now is our direction. If we keep proliferating toward Armageddon, undoubtedly we will ignite it. If we keep disarming in efforts to approach the Garden of Eden, undoubtedly we will never arrive. But . . . in our journey toward the Garden, we will assure that the human species has a future on Earth.

+ The Rt. Rev. William E. Swing