

Turning Points: Christ and Hiroshima

David Denny

Tessa Bielecki and I recently visited the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Sedona, Arizona. I visited once when I was attending nearby Prescott College in the early seventies. Back then, a gaunt, blackened sculpture of Christ crucified hung above the altar. It reminded some visitors of the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many tourists came to see a beautiful view; they encountered what looked like an incinerated bomb victim crying out. The woman who had commissioned the sculpture eventually destroyed it. Tessa's [reflection](#) on the crucifix and a charred saguaro cactus appeared before we saw *Oppenheimer*, and her words are an excellent preparation for seeing the film, which is based on [American Prometheus](#), by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin.

Holy Days Desecrated

The detonation of the first atomic bomb in New Mexico on July 16, 1945 is a turning point in human history. How strange that Oppenheimer named the test site *Trinity* and the explosion happened on the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, commemorating the patroness of the Carmelite order of friars and sisters dedicated to contemplative transformation. I was stricken years ago when I realized that the Hiroshima bomb was dropped on the Feast of the Transfiguration, a wondrous moment when Jesus' friends realized that this young rabbi was radiant with divinity. It is strange and haunting that some scientists now call our current geologic epoch the "[Anthropocene](#)." In the 1950s, human population soared. Radioactive material and fossil fuel ash blanketed the earth. Humans initiated unprecedented changes in earth's biosphere. Are ash and plutonium the definitive mark of humanity? Is this our legacy?

Christians divide history into the epochs before and after the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. I'm haunted by the question: which pivotal event—the Word become flesh or a global blanket of radioactivity and ash—will determine human destiny? I hope that the two together might drive a paradoxical catalytic conversion for many of us. May these apparent

opposites, the sheer vitality of Christ's love, and the nightmare prospect of nuclear homicide, press us to choose Life.

A Priest Repents

After viewing *Oppenheimer*, I read an [interview](#) with Fr. George Zabelka, a military chaplain assigned to care for the airmen who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 1980, Fr. George described how, even though he knew killing civilians was wrong, it never entered his mind to speak out about it during the war. No one he knew in the military or the church did. Only later, over decades of reflection and repentance, did he conclude that he had been "brainwashed ... by my Church's silence and whole-hearted cooperation ... with the country's war machine." He came to see this corruption as a logical result of 1700 years of Christian cooperation with state violence, and a rejection of Christ's teachings on violence and on love of enemies.

I also revisited Denise Levertov's poem, "On the 32nd Anniversary of the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." She recalls how delighted and relieved she and her friends were that the war ended. "... we don't notice / the quantum leap: eighty-seven thousand / killed ..." by a single bomb. "The rumor was distant traffic."

Tending the Dead and Wounded

It wasn't distant traffic to young Spanish Basque Jesuit priest Pedro Arrupe, whose Hiroshima residence was blown to smithereens when the bomb dropped. He described in his [diary](#) how he and others dealt with a portion of the tens of thousands of corpses and 120,000 wounded. Arrupe later became Superior General of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) from 1965-1983. He encouraged Jesuit educators to form "men and women who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors."

And the bomb was not distant traffic to the mature Levertov, who wrote that a shadow left by a human body on stone in Hiroshima dug into her soul, crying out that

*...something can yet
be salvaged upon the earth:
try, try to survive,*

*try to redeem
the human vision ...*

Ellsberg's Hope

Shortly before his death in June 2023, Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked The Pentagon Papers in 1971 and believed that the threat of nuclear disaster is extremely high, spoke to Lulu Garcia-Navarro of *the New York Times* about his life's work. She asked him if, given his nine decades of life and decades of exposure to the dangers of the nuclear age, he is cynical about the future. "Oh, I'm very hopeful," he insisted. He noted how many "impossible" events had occurred in his lifetime: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the election of Nelson Mandela, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Ellsberg celebrated the people who care about and sacrifice for others. He said the odds are not good, but that he believed we can indeed redeem the human vision.

One step in that direction may be Pope Francis' 2017 rejection of the doctrine of deterrence. Regarding nuclear arms, he [proclaimed](#) that "If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned." Another hopeful step is the upcoming pilgrimage to Japan led by the bishops of Santa Fe and Seattle. Oppenheimer's Trinity site is in New Mexico, and nuclear submarines are stationed near Seattle. So Bishops Wester and Étienne will travel to Japan August 2-9 on a [Pilgrimage of Peace](#). They will meet with Japanese peacemakers to work toward the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Shadows Cry Out

As I think about the human mark of ash and radioactivity that trigger climate change and initiate the Anthropocene, I think of how the realms of the human, the material, and the divine are intimately related. Pope Francis notes that care for the earth is not optional, because just as Jesus reached out to the human poor, the earth herself has also been exploited and impoverished. Jesus taught that what we do to the least, we do to him. "The least" includes the earth herself.

"The least" includes the bodies incinerated, wounded, and cancer-ridden in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I'm sorry that many of us find "hope" by ignoring the shadows of mass death. I'm sorry that the crucifix that reminded us of

the shadows in the Chapel of the Holy Cross, was obliterated. But at least its shadow cries out in my soul.

We begin to understand that Hope lies in a profound, painful transformation. It liberates us into a peaceful fellowship of human, natural, and divine. Hope awakens our souls and can empower us to end the violence and pollution threatening our human future. That is what I pray for in my life after Christ and after Hiroshima: a Rising from the shadow and ashes. A Transfiguration.

***Author's Note:** Oppenheimer dreaded the possibility of a global arms race. And in 1961, President Eisenhower said, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist."*

The following statistics give a sense of the scale of present defense expenditures.

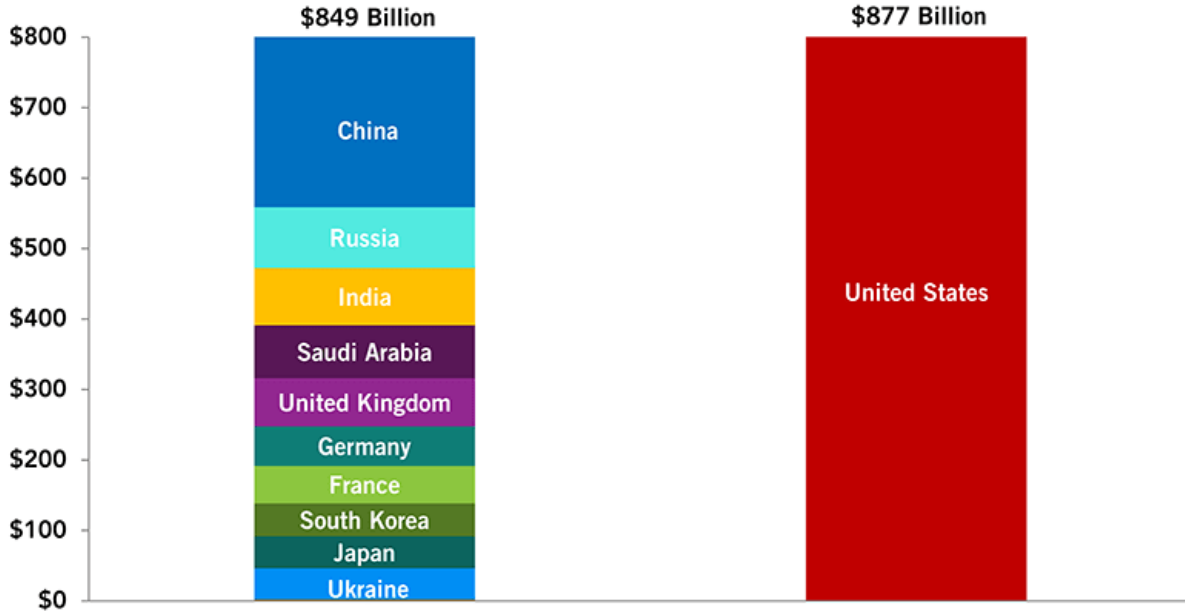
If all goes according to plan, the U.S. will spend \$634 billion on new nuclear weapons and deployment systems by the end of this decade, an average of more than \$60 billion annually, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Thomas C. Fox



The United States spends more on defense than the next 10 countries combined

DEFENSE SPENDING (BILLIONS OF DOLLARS)



SOURCE: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, April 2023.

NOTES: Figures are in U.S. dollars converted from local currencies using market exchange rates. Data for the United States are for fiscal year 2022, which ran from October 1, 2021 through September 30, 2022. Data for the other countries are for calendar year 2022. The source for this chart uses a definition of defense spending that is more broad than budget function 050 and defense discretionary spending.

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