

Background Paper to Motion 8, proposed by 12 Full Members and the Peace Fellowship, on the grave dangers of nuclear weapons

Why this GA motion is justified and necessary

In an urgent 2018 warning to political leaders, scientists and concerned citizens worldwide the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has announced that its symbolic Doomsday Clock is now set at ‘two minutes to midnight’.

These internationally respected nuclear scientists are particularly alarmed at President Trump’s irresponsible threat of ‘fire and fury like the world has never seen’ and to ‘totally destroy’ North Korea; the provocative launching by North Korea of intercontinental ballistic missiles; the perils of uncontrolled nuclear proliferation; serious proven continued violations of international law by the nuclear powers and others secretly developing atomic weapons; and the alarming breakdown in trust in international political institutions ensuring global security, as well as the additional grave threats caused by unmitigated climate change.

In addition to these there is well-grounded international concern at the plans of the Trump Administration to loosen constraints on the use of nuclear weapons and develop new low-yield warheads for US Trident missiles: which, military strategists have warned, may make nuclear warfare not only easier to launch but more likely to occur.

‘The world is not only more dangerous now than it was.... it is as threatening as it has been since World War II’, concluded Lawrence Krauss and Robert Rosner of the Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

Equally alarming for UK citizens is the declaration by the Prime Minister, Theresa May, that she would be willing to order a nuclear strike to kill hundreds of thousands of people. During a Parliamentary debate on the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme in July 2016 May was challenged by the Scottish National Party MP George Kerevan, who directly asked her: ‘Are you prepared to authorise a nuclear strike that could kill hundreds of thousands of men, women and children?’ May replied, without hesitation, with one word: ‘Yes’.

In view of these developments is it right that Unitarians should remain silent and inactive?

Why this particular motion now?

In July 2017 122 nation states, including the Vatican, voted for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This provides the best opportunity in decades to advance the global control and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons: an objective to which the UK, as a founder signatory and co-drafter of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, committed itself ‘in good faith’ to help secure 50 years ago.

The grave dangers posed by nuclear weapons

Military and scientific experts have proven beyond doubt there can be no protection against the devastation caused by nuclear weapons. Studies have repeatedly shown how even a limited nuclear exchange would result in dire environmental effects that would cause not only the deaths of millions and massive destruction but also severe economic damage and disruption to agriculture that would put two billion people at a grave risk of starvation. A large-scale nuclear war would of course threaten the very survival of humanity on this planet.

Moral leadership needed by Unitarians

In November 2017 Pope Francis, himself the leader of a global religious community of over one billion believers, showed commendable moral leadership in not only warning about the 'catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects' of nuclear war and the very real risk of accidental detonation but also asserting that 'the threat of their use as well as their very possession is to be firmly condemned'. Quakers have shown equally strong moral leadership in declaring that 'nuclear weapons are morally and ethically unacceptable'.

We UK Unitarians ourselves in our 1982 GA resolution made our own moral and religious convictions clear when we declared that we 'regard the use and threatened use of nuclear weapons as morally and spiritually indefensible'. If we are to be true to our convictions action is surely needed right now?

Appendix

Letter signed by our GA Chief Officer and other faith leaders

Successive UK governments have pledged their support for a world free of nuclear weapons. Today the House of Lords will discuss a United Nations Treaty that bans nuclear weapons. The Treaty is the result of multilateral negotiation and is supported by more than 120 states, more than 50 of which have already signed. Unfortunately the United Kingdom has refused to engage with the process.

Nuclear weapons continue to pose a threat to the survival of humanity. The Bible teaches us that we are stewards of the earth, with a duty to protect all life. Nuclear weapons are the antithesis of this teaching.

At a time when the threat of nuclear war continues to hang over all of us, the Treaty represents a unique opportunity for the nuclear weapon states to walk together towards a total ban.

We hope that the debate in the Lords today will be the first step towards the UK engaging with this process and joining the growing international consensus against nuclear weapons. Being the first nuclear-armed state to sign would show real moral leadership and demonstrate the UK's commitment to work for a world without nuclear weapons.

We urge the government to reconsider its position on the Treaty.

Jill Baker, Vice President of the Methodist Conference

The Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford

Rev Dr Richard Frazer, Convener, Church and Society Council, The Church of Scotland

Derek McAuley, Chief Officer, General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

Revd Loraine Mellor, President of the Methodist Conference

Paul Parker, Recording Clerk - Quakers in Britain

Revd Kevin Watson, Moderator of General Assembly of the United Reformed Church

Alan Yates, Moderator of General Assembly of the United Reformed Church