

## **Views from the Pews – Another Weapon Entirely**

As promised, we now move quickly away from St Peter's sword, to the opposite end of the spectrum, to another weapon entirely. 1939 saw not only the outbreak of WW2, but also another development with global implications. Theoretical physicists working in the specialized field of atomic physics had just had their theories confirmed by practical experiments. This small community – largely students of Einstein or Rutherford – had reached the uncomfortable conclusion that a nuclear chain reaction could be harnessed to produce an explosion of previously unimaginable power. It was quickly recognized that this knowledge would have military applications. The community held one or more of the following views:

War was henceforth impossible. The end of humanity was nigh. This knowledge could not be 'unlearned', and was already available to previous colleagues within Nazi Germany. That what we now call Intellectual Property in this field should be vested in an international body. That the knowledge should be shared immediately with the leaders of the western democracies, lest it be used first by their enemies.

None of these scientists lived in a moral vacuum. In fact, it was Einstein and a senior colleague who wrote to FDR expressing the last of the above positions. How the world coped with this knowledge – given the moral dilemmas posed by humanity's new-found ability to self-destruct – makes for fascinating if grim reflection.

2025 will mark 80 years since the last military use of this technology. That it has not been used since, especially given the gross oversupply of nuclear weapons, is a source of wonder but there are probably good reasons for that, possibly hiding in plain sight. It is quite possible that, despite ourselves, we have figured out ways of managing the problem. We could start by revisiting the Cuban Missile Crisis, but also studying the western exercise Able Archer of the Reagan/Thatcher years, which nearly brought about a Soviet nuclear response to what was only an exercise. What constraints exist, and how do they operate? What is the role of moral judgement?

CND – supported by many Christians – has done a wonderful job highlighting the risks we face but – as those physicists well knew, humanity cannot 'unlearn' this knowledge. We are left with the difficult task of managing the risk as best we can. This sounds naïve to many but we seem to have got something right in the last 79 years.

*Richard Swarbrick*