

# Dealings at Davos: Diminished Collaboration Meets Heightened Nuclear Dangers

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*Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World*

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Just at a point in human history when global solidarity and cooperation are needed more than ever to respond to global challenges, commitment to multilateralism seems to be increasingly threatened and in retreat.

Seventy years ago, at a 1948 assembly of church leaders in Amsterdam, the World Council of Churches came into being. It realized a long-held dream of generations of ecumenical pioneers, for a council of churches to work for the visible unity of the church, following the biblical call “that they all may be one” (John 17:21).

Though driven by faith rather than by politics or economics, this history of dialogue and common initiatives for cooperation and deep human and spiritual relations, has become a significant example of how multilateral relations can be established as a contribution to the unity of humanity. We share with multilateral institutions like the United Nations (inaugurated that same year) a common notion of a unity of humanity. Indeed, the unity of the churches of different historical and theological traditions and contemporary contexts has become a unity in solidarity, justice and peace among human beings across the borders. These experiences and values are also relevant for how politics and economics can support fairness and unity in a fragmented world today.

Where is that eagerness to collaborate for the good of humankind today? It is endangered.

## Breakdowns in the Social Contract

This reality is recognized, though reframed in a positive twist, in the theme for this year’s annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland: *Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World*.

The World Economic Forum is challenging participants to find ways “to reaffirm international cooperation on crucial shared interests, such as international security, the environment and the global economy” in the context of rising geostrategic competition between states. They also seek “to overcome divisions within countries” caused by “breakdowns in the social contract as a result of failure to protect societies from the transformational impacts of a succession of shocks, from globalization to the proliferation of social media” and the advent of revolutionary new technologies.

These are valid and noble aims. Let’s see if Davos participants will be able to apply themselves seriously to these questions amid the circuit of high-end parties.

Of course, churches are also affected by and implicated in the divisions and fragmentation of our world and our time. We have to acknowledge that religion has been and can be a source of division. It can even against its very purpose be used as a legitimization of violence, war and terror. Violence in the name of religion is violence against religion. In the biblical tradition, not only the evil and violent acts, but also such brokenness of relations with the other is called sin. Thus it is a brokenness in our relations to God. It is describing what we are and do individually and collectively. Sin is a reality that disrupts and diminishes human relationships and destroys the life given to us for fellowship and unity as human beings in God's creation. Our faith compels us to be honest, but not fatalistic. To the contrary, by being honest there is a potential for change. We can admit something was wrong without giving up, or pretending that we are perfect. We are still human. And as humans we have the potential for change. To restore our lives and build new relationships, a kind of conversion toward the other is needed – a new, more inclusive understanding of identity that includes the material, moral and spiritual dimensions of life in community and in creation.

## Nuclear Sin

I can think of no greater antithesis to this vision of shared life and responsibility, no greater obscenity against it, than the continued existence of and political and social support for nuclear weapons. There is absolutely no moral justification whatsoever for using them. The time has come to say together that for the sake of the one humanity there is no moral ground on which we can keep them and threaten one another with them. The risk they are used by a mistake or by irresponsible people is indeed also a very real one. Still, this most destructive and indiscriminate type of weapon of mass destruction ever devised by men (and I use the gender-specific term deliberately) continues to be the keystone of our global “security” regime.

It is time to say together that this is wrong. It is time to call it a sin, both using and having nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are designed to destroy entire cities, with every man, woman, child and every living creature in them. Moreover, they destroy the natural environment itself, their deadly radioactive legacy lingering and poisoning the very earth for millennia. They are the “dumbest,” most evil weapons. They destroy what is built up for the common good through politics, through the economy, through civil society. Everything.

Yet they were the only category of weapons of mass destruction that had not been banned by international treaty. Until now. The adoption last year of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons at the United Nations gives the nations of the world a salutary and long overdue opportunity to create a new normative, ethical and moral standard against nuclear weapons – against any development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, use or threat of use of such weapons – and for environmental remediation and assistance to the victims of nuclear weapons use and testing.

Unfortunately, churches and Christians have also been among those providing tacit or explicit support for the maintenance of nuclear arsenals. We have ourselves taken shelter under the dark umbrella of “nuclear deterrence.” But nuclear deterrence depends upon the willingness to actually use these weapons. I reject as incompatible with the most basic understandings of Christian responsibility in the world any willingness to contemplate the use of *even a single* nuclear weapon, under *any* circumstances.

The visions for a shared, nuclear free world is as urgent as ever before, but also undermined as ever before. According to information from SIPRI<sup>[1]</sup> and other sources, at the start of 2017

nine states—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea — together possessed approximately 14,935 nuclear weapons. While global nuclear weapons inventories have been declining since they peaked at nearly 70,000 nuclear warheads in the mid-1980s, it is evident – including from the reaction of nuclear weapon states to the negotiation and adoption of the Ban Treaty last year – that none of these states has any intention of giving up its nuclear arsenals in the foreseeable future. Indeed all of them are either developing or deploying new weapon systems or have announced their intention to do so.

India and Pakistan are expanding their military fissile material production capabilities on a scale that may lead to significant increases in the size of their nuclear weapons inventories over the next decade.

## Opportunity Costs in Lives

Also from an economic perspective of how we shall make real changes to overcome the fragmentation and unfair and risky divisions of the world today, there is a strong argument against nuclear weapons. The World Economic Forum should be a significant arena to raise this argument in a convincing way. We need to hear also the voices of the financial elite and the experts of economy.

Both Russia and the USA – which together account for nearly 93 percent of nuclear weapons in the world – have extensive and expensive modernization programmes underway for their nuclear delivery systems, warheads and production facilities.

According to a recent US Congressional Budget Office report, the cost of the US nuclear arsenal over the next 30 years – for maintaining and modernizing its nuclear forces, buying replacement systems and upgrading its nuclear weapon production infrastructure – will be over \$1.2 trillion (even before any new weapons ordered by the Trump administration). The costs would peak in the 2020s and the 2030s, coinciding with the critical period for the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Meanwhile, as hundreds of millions of people across the globe continue to go hungry, the nuclear-armed nations will together continue to spend close to US\$300 million a day on their nuclear forces. The diversion of such vast public resources away from health care, education, climate change mitigation and adaptation, disaster relief, development assistance and other vital services is beyond scandalous.

Globally, annual expenditure on nuclear weapons is estimated at US\$105 billion, the equivalent of \$12 million an hour. Compare this with the 2002 World Bank estimate that an annual investment of just US\$40–60 billion, or roughly half the amount spent on nuclear weapons, would have been enough to realize the Millennium Development Goals (which preceded the current Sustainable Development Goals). Nuclear weapons spending in 2010 was more than twice the official development assistance provided to Africa and equal to the gross domestic product of Bangladesh, a nation of some 160 million people. The Office for Disarmament Affairs – the principal UN body responsible for advancing a nuclear-weapon-free world – has an annual budget of \$10 million, less than the amount spent on nuclear weapons *every hour*.

And most recently, according to reported details of a forthcoming review of the US nuclear posture, the Trump administration plans to loosen constraints on the use of nuclear arms and to develop smaller “more useable” nuclear weapons. This review reportedly expands the circumstances in which the US might use its nuclear arsenal, to include a response to a non-nuclear attack that caused mass casualties or was aimed at critical infrastructure or nuclear command and control sites. Self-evidently, these developments make nuclear conflict more rather than less likely.

It could hardly be more obvious that we are living in an acutely dangerous time in human history, with the risks of catastrophic conflict certainly higher than at any point since the coldest days of the Cold War. And nuclear weapons – and the twisted logic of nuclear deterrence – are not the cure for this danger, but its cause.

## Where is realistic hope?

It is deeply human to hope. There is hope if we human beings with our leaders admit what is wrong. The power to overcome sin is part of our faith. This is certainly true for all those who believe in the God of life and listen to God’s call and claim on their lives, despite the violence and despair that surrounds them. It is audible in the categorical condemnation by Pope Francis not only of the use but also the possession of nuclear weapons. It is also visible in the people and movements that rise up to challenge the deathly hand of the nuclear-armed status quo, such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, in which the WCC is proud to participate.

It is therefore very timely that this year’s annual meeting of the World Economic Forum will include the issue of nuclear disarmament on its agenda. It is a sign of hope. The nuclear-armed minority are unable to free themselves from their thralldom to nuclear weapons. It has and will require the example and leadership of the non-nuclear majority to set a new course away from the precipice.

In our own time, rather than focussing on who are enemies are, I believe that we should counteract the forces that make people enemies by pitting them against each other. The economy is one of the strongest tools we have to create a better world for all, for the common good of all and the better relations between our nations. We can use our resources better than for threatening one another with total destruction. The task to care for our common security is a great responsibility also for those who have the greatest financial power. We need to recognize how the polarizing and dividing powers that lead us toward conflict and war today are working against the will of God in this world, and we must liberate ourselves from them. It is time for the strong economic agents to say “no” and to put pressure on the states to disarm. The participants in Davos can give a strong sign of hope if this happens. Humankind – each one of us as well as our children and grandchildren - deserves to be liberated from the threat of nuclear weapons.

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<sup>[1]</sup> [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/fs\\_1707\\_wnf.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/fs_1707_wnf.pdf)