

Ethics: What is the Anglican Church's view on nuclear deterrence?

Andrew Richardson is the Honorary Chaplain of St Paul's Cathedral which means that, along with the Chaplain, he is responsible for the pastoral care of the Cathedral's congregation and staff.



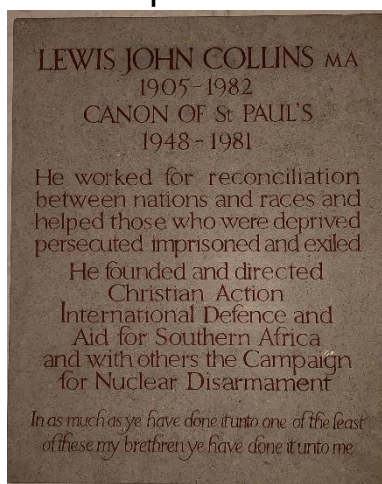
Tucked away in a small Chapel, down in the Crypt of St Paul's is a wonderful memorial to commemorate someone called John Collins. He was an Anglican priest who worked at the Cathedral between 1948 and 1981. He died in 1982, during the height of *The Cold War* between the United States and the Soviet Union. The memorial tells us that John Collins *'worked for reconciliation between nations and races and helped those who were deprived, persecuted, imprisoned and exiled.'* At the end of a list of organisations he championed, it says simply that *'he founded and directed with others the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament'* - perhaps, better known to most of us as 'CND'. Actually, he set up this organisation in the house opposite my own home. I often think about him whenever I look out of my window. I mention John Collins because for me, his tireless action, flowing from his Christian faith, and the words of this memorial plaque, frame my response to this question as an Anglican Christian and priest.

My faith compels me to strive for a world where trust, dignity and friendship matter; where cultures and people are able to flourish but not at the expense of each other; where the earth is respected and life is able to thrive, free from pollution and free from the threat of destruction. I wholeheartedly believe that weapons of mass destruction, with their almost unimaginable power to wipe out life across the world several times over, are a blasphemy and an affront to God, and the whole of Creation. The idea of amassing weapons as 'deterrence' speaks of a fundamental failure in societal relationships. If as much effort (and money) were put to the causes of justice and peace and to all that upholds life and our common well-being, could we begin to imagine a world where things are a little different and even a little better?

All this said, Anglicans have the same range of views on the question of nuclear deterrence as will be found among other Christians and across wider society too. There are many good and faithful Anglicans who would take a different view to my own. As there is no, one, single, authority to speak on behalf of *all*

Anglicans, it is very hard to answer this question in a definitive and clear-cut way. In the UK for instance, we have the Church of England, the Church in Wales, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Ireland. They are all Anglican, in close relationship with each other, but there is no common authority to direct and govern their decisions. To find official Anglican responses to the question of nuclear deterrence would mean examining what each Church in the Communion has said officially through debate and resolutions at their own governing meetings (Synods). This might take a while – but there is nothing to stop you finding out for yourselves later on!

Most recently in 2018, the General Synod of the Church of England passed a motion which welcomed the UN treaty of the previous year on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, recognising such weapons as dangerous and unnecessary. This tells me that the question of deterrence must never mask what these weapons, if used, will do. Some might argue that the concept has worked but it only needs to fail once – and over the decades, this has *almost* happened *more* than once! 1983 for instance contained one of the most dangerous moments in the Cold War. A pan-European military exercise was misinterpreted by Soviet authorities as a sign of an impending western pre-emptive nuclear strike. Soviet nuclear silos and monitoring posts were put on high alert. The nuclear button was almost pressed! It leaves me cold when I think how close we came to accidental annihilation. The risks are huge. I firmly believe we must do all we can to remove these dreadful weapons from our world. This begins by keeping before us what we risk by maintaining them. It requires building trust through international co-operation and commitment to independent monitoring and supervision of disarmament. The *idea* of deterrence is a cynical excuse to neglect relationships and marks a failure in politics. People of faith, Anglicans included, must continue to be among the voices who champion a more positive, generous and celebratory vision of life on this planet.



Memorial to Canon John Collins, Crypt of St Paul's Cathedral