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# Americans of faith must reconsider stands on nuclear terrorism (COMMENTARY)

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Setsuko Thurlow was 13 when “progress” came to Hiroshima in a white-hot flash. In the dark silence following the nuclear bomb blast, Thurlow recalls children crying, “Mama, help me. God, help me.”

Her sister lived for four days. Many of her 351 dying schoolmates “looked like skeletons with skin hanging from their bones.” They perished in agony.

Today, Thurlow and other survivors travel the globe, sharing their stories with a new generation for which nuclear weapons are an afterthought — seemingly a hypothetical and abstract threat.

The end of the Cold War had a mixed effect on the nuclear equation. Through dogged diplomacy and effective institutions, disarmament continues, though at a slower pace in recent years. There are now 10,000 operational nuclear warheads in the world, down from a high of 64,000 in 1986.

But the specter of nuclear terrorism and regional conflicts between nuclear

weapons states makes nuclear weapons even more dangerous in our international system. Deterrence theory, which governed strategic thinking during the Cold War, is a much less compelling framework today.

Thankfully, most states have forsworn these armaments. Nuclear weapons are not vital to any state's legitimate security interest. No state or NGO has the capacity to respond to the unfathomable humanitarian crisis that would follow an accidental or intentional use of a nuclear weapon.

Thus a growing global consensus now acknowledges the extreme risk nuclear weapons pose.

Pope John XXIII stated unequivocally in his 1963 encyclical "Pacem in Terris," "Nuclear weapons must be banned."

Though many Christian ethicists conditionally accepted the logic of deterrence during the Cold War, it is time for Americans to reconsider the theological and ethical principles that compel them to oppose (or favor) nuclear weapons.

Hard-nosed realists may scoff at religious idealism, but the faith community has a role to play. At a minimum, it should demand that the United States and other parties honor their commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The global concern about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons invites Americans of faith to engage a vital issue after years of complacency. There is precedent for such activism. Denominational offices in Washington and religious activists and ecumenical coalitions have contributed meaningfully to arms control efforts. Even the Southern Baptist Convention passed resolutions supporting nuclear disarmament in the 1970s and 1980s.

Now is the time for every person of conscience to join and affirm the global ecumenical consensus against nuclear weapons. We must honor the witness

of survivors like Setsuko Thurlow. We must remember the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children — born and unborn — killed or maimed by nuclear attacks and tests.

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The Vatican has been particularly active and increasingly vocal in promoting its belief that a world without nuclear weapons is possible. Late last year, Pope Francis said, “I am convinced that the desire for peace and fraternity planted deep in the human heart will bear fruit in concrete ways to ensure that nuclear weapons are banned once and for all, to the benefit of our common home.”

The present moment calls on Christians to question the morality of weapons devised to indiscriminately vaporize and incinerate innocent human beings who bear the image of God.

The path forward is difficult, but the risk of calamity is too great to ignore. If millions of Americans shed our indifference and engaged nuclear security issues with moral clarity, we could truly change the world. We might even help save it.

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