

---

Religion News Service | (<http://religionnews.com/2016/05/27/religious-americans-should-take-up-obamas-call-for-a-moral-awakening/>)

---

COMMENTARY

## Religious Americans should take up Obama's call for a moral awakening

By **Jacob Lupfer** | May 27, 2016



U.S. President Barack Obama, right, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe walk in front of a cenotaph after they laid wreaths at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan on May 27, 2016. Photo courtesy REUTERS/Carlos Barria \*EDs: This photo may only be used with RNS-LUPFER-OPED published on May 27, 2016.

(RNS) In addition to President Obama's expected [remarks](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/world/asia/text-of-president-obamas-speech-in-hiroshima-japan.html) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/world/asia/text-of-president-obamas-speech-in-hiroshima-japan.html>) about how we must not forget what happened in Hiroshima, Japan, the president used his bully pulpit to make a vital ethical argument: "The scientific revolution that led to the splitting of an atom requires a moral revolution as well."

The debate over nuclear weapons starkly divides people who share a commitment to the world's religious faiths.

Many on the left subscribe to a kind of de facto pacifism based on a naive view of human nature and international relations. To them, it is wrong to possess (let alone deploy) nuclear weapons, but almost any use of force is highly questionable.

ADVERTISEMENT

On the right, many believers unquestioningly endorse every use of American military power. They often see the atomic bomb attacks in 1945 as objective moral goods. America took decisive action and prevented greater subsequent loss of life.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Christians expressed growing concern over scientism, the idea that scientific advances devoid of rigorous moral reflection would lead modern societies to untold death, destruction, and devaluing of life.

C.S. Lewis, in particular, warned against faith in scientific progress for mankind's salvation. For a multitude of reasons, most traditional Christians echo Lewis' concern today.

ADVERTISEMENT

"I agree technology per se is neutral," Lewis wrote to fellow writer Arthur C. Clarke in 1943. "But a race devoted to the increase of its own power by technology with complete indifference to ethics does seem to me a cancer in the universe."

Evangelicals revere Lewis and appreciate his insistence that philosophical questions are as important as scientific ones, even in an atomic age (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxFmkg5dcyk>). But Lewis' words should challenge them to reconsider their relative silence about the nuclear status quo.

For Obama, an incisive ethical thinker who admires the famous Christian realist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a wide gulf separates his aspirations and actions.

The United States is poised to spend more than \$350 billion (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/27/heres-the-real-benchmark-of-obamas-visit-to-hiroshima-nuclear-nonproliferation/>) over the next decade modernizing an arsenal of weapons that will hopefully never be used but could end human life on Earth.

ADVERTISEMENT

In the spirit of Lewis' critique of scientism, Obama reminds us that nuclear weapons are not strategies. They are machines of death made from the most dangerous materials in the world. An intentional or accidental detonation could result in millions of casualties and unleash a humanitarian catastrophe beyond the capacity of any state or NGO to address.

Even if total abolition is unattainable (or unwise), it is urgent that we seriously debate nuclear weapons' risks, consequences, and strategic importance. Obama, like all of us, finds a gulf between words and deeds. Even so, he rightly reminds us that we need more ethical reflection, not less.

But the first visit of an American president to Hiroshima occasions a broader and ongoing debate about the ethics and strategic value of nuclear weapons. A well-formed Christian conscience cannot be untroubled by what happened in August 1945, or by the danger and unfathomable devastation these weapons pose.

Obama ended his speech by pointing toward “a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not as the dawn of atomic warfare but as the start of our own moral awakening.”

May it be so for every nation and for every human heart.

*(Jacob Lupfer is a contributing editor at RNS and a doctoral candidate in political science at Georgetown University)*

---

**Get RNS in your inbox**  **SIGN UP**

---