

Response to the Keynote Lecture

**An American Christian Response to
Ambassador Sergio Duarte's "Moral Leadership and
Nuclear Weapons"**

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Good morning. It is a great honor to respond to Ambassador Duarte, and I would like to thank him for his inspiring, challenging, eloquent, and powerful words. I also want us to recognize what a privilege it is to have Ambassador Duarte with us: the UN's top man in nuclear affairs, who has labored for four decades on the words and actions necessary to make the world a more peaceful place. Thank you, sir, for speaking with us today.

I'd also like to thank Yale Divinity School for hosting this important conference, the Smith family for supporting it, and the leadership of Harry Attridge and Miroslav Volf in bringing it about, as well as the work of Rose-Anne Moore, John Lindner, and Gus Spohn, among others.

Early in his remarks, Ambassador Duarte stated that "the heaviest responsibilities in the realm of action remain with our member states, whose own citizens are ultimately responsible for ensuring that those actions serve the common good."

That is, the United Nations cannot manufacture a common good if the member nations, and their citizens specifically, do not take responsibility for that mission.

Ambassador Duarte also noted the role that religious communities have played in supporting work for the common good, before articulating in greater depth the nature of the moral leadership that our times require.

I read in Ambassador Duarte's words, therefore, a worthy challenge for citizens of all nations to take up in their own contexts. I would like to treat this response as an *exercise in taking responsibility* along the lines that Ambassador Duarte lays out.

In the main section of my remarks, I will do so as an American who loves my country deeply, by answering this question: how are we Americans furthering or hindering the mission of the common good as it regards disarmament?

Second, and in closing, I want to take responsibility as a Christian minister, by faith a member of a global family and borderless nation: what do Christians have to say and do about disarmament?

I hope in doing so to uncover some truths about the themes of security and vulnerability around which this conference is framed.

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Before I turn to these questions, however, I think it would be helpful to identify two moral principles that permeated Ambassador Duarte's remarks: that is, universality and reciprocity. These principles are immensely useful in the project of evaluating our success or failure in the moral leadership to which Ambassador Duarte called us all.

Universality is the condition of *something* applying to *everyone*. In the nuclear arena, as Ambassador Duarte put it, this manifests in the United Nations' not being "in the business of promoting discriminatory norms. We are not seeking to outlaw certain weapons only in some countries, while certifying their legitimacy elsewhere."

This critical point underscores Ambassador Duarte's absolutely vital observation that nuclear non-proliferation—that is, nuclear threat management—“gains its own collective legitimacy from its intimate connection with disarmament.”

He is here referring to Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which is the playground simple bargain that has kept the world from the disaster of unchecked proliferation: in 1970, the non-nuclear powers agreed not to acquire nuclear weapons in exchange for the promise from the nuclear powers that they would someday eliminate their own arsenals.

The non-proliferation regime has come to feel like a permanent condition; I suspect most people tacitly accept the enduring validity of two classes of nations. But this is really an unsustainable paradox: a (nearly) universally applicable discriminatory norm, in which some nations are classed as nuclear powers and others are not.

Such universal discrimination cannot endure forever. The discriminatory stop-gap measure that is the nonproliferation regime—“a world in which nuclear weapons remain in fewer hands”—will someday give way to universality, and perhaps terrifyingly so: either in the form of unchecked proliferation (universally possible), leading to universally-felt catastrophe, or as universal nuclear disarmament, leading to, as Ambassador Duarte noted, universal goods for all peoples.

If universality is a condition, then reciprocity is the mechanism for attaining it—most simply expressed in the Golden Rule of doing (or not doing) unto others as you would have them do (or not do) unto you. Reciprocity is the enacted ethics to which Ambassador Duarte referred, the hard work of give-and-take that makes universality possible. It is there in Article VI of the NPT: a give and take between the nuclear and non-nuclear powers toward a commonly desired goal—that is, security through disarmament.

In sum, the principles of universality and reciprocity are the guarantors of the *common* good, because such principles guarantee that the well-being and security of one party—whether an individual, community, or nation—does not come at the flagrant expense of another. And the principle of universality is itself universal, as true around the family hearth as it is around the nuclear negotiating table.

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Having isolated these twin principles, let me take personal account for them as I previously mentioned.

First, speaking as an American, there is no way to get around the fact that our security policy has, since the end of the Cold War, been an escalating exercise in removing the United States completely from the bounds of universality and reciprocity.

Universality is the condition of co-existence between multiple parties who are subject to the same norms. But our security policy now strives toward the opposite pole, unipolarity, wherein one party exerts dominance over all others, imposing norms over all, which do not apply to itself.

This is hegemony, or unlimited dominance. And we can say that it is the true goal of present American security policy because in every conceivable way this policy seeks to shrug off any possible restraint.

- It is unrestrained in *scope of enmity*. By declaring that we will militarily engage even individuals and non-state actors—as opposed to a policing action—as well as any nations that are seen to harbor these enemies, each of the six billion people on the planet is potentially our national enemy. This is a recipe for eternal war.
- It is unrestrained in *geography*: because we are at war with networks of individuals, who may after all be anywhere, there is no square inch on the planet that does not potentially constitute a vital national security interest of the United States. Left unchallenged, this policy will certainly lead to the militarization of space.
- It is unrestrained by *reciprocity*: the Bush Doctrine, as it is known, calls for preventive war against potential threats, a commitment that is refined to absurdist permissiveness by Cheney’s One Percent Doctrine—“if there’s a one percent chance” of a dire terrorist threat, “we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.”
- It is unrestrained *tactically*: the U.S. military’s policy of “full spectrum dominance” entails complete control over every arena of warfighting. At present, the pending “prompt global strike” program, pairing ballistic missiles with conventional warheads, would enable a U.S. President to hit any target on earth within sixty minutes.
- It is unrestrained *legally*: we have systematically sought to free ourselves from every multilateral agreement of international law which might restrain the future exercise of American will.
- It is unrestrained *economically*: the exercise of this kind of policy requires staggering amounts of resources, as the Iraq war demonstrates.
- It is unrestrained *morally*: fearing no authority other than the nation’s interests as immediately determined, this policy leads naturally to doing what we would find unacceptable if done to us—from the torture of individual bodies to threatening the death of millions in a nuclear strike.
- It is unrestrained in *hubris*: “the shining city on the hill”—the moral example that has been part of America’s self-understanding since its Puritan foundations—has of late opened its gates and gone down the hill to war, with President Bush pledging to “rid the world of evil” in the prosecution of our war on terror.

In sum, this is a foreign policy where America’s freedom from *any* limiting authority is attained by seeking to become that authority, itself—a comprehensive rejection of moral leadership. We have thus inverted the principle of universality: instead of seeking our national good in the common good, we define the common good by our national good.

Now, as Ambassador Duarte powerfully articulated, the practice of nuclear weapons elimination demands at every level the principle of universality. Disarmament entails:

- *transforming the discriminatory nonproliferation regime into a universal condition of disarmament;*
- moral leadership which “[inspires] the mighty” to see their own self-interest in the context of *a good common to all;*
- *a mechanism founded on reciprocity* wherein nations—peers in sovereignty and dignity, if not power—exercise the give and take of multilateral negotiation and accountability.

Therefore it is with sorrow—as a citizen who loves his country—that I must conclude that the hegemonic impulse of present American foreign policy, being constitutionally opposed to the principle of universality, is categorically inhibitive of nuclear disarmament.

This would be bad enough, because the failure to act toward disarmament will eventually lead to proliferation. But the situation is far worse: American foreign policy is not simply a passive but an entirely active stimulus for global nuclear proliferation. If we do not alter our security policy we will not be able to advance the disarmament that is in our interest. A nation that imagines it might someday oppose the United States needs only to look at North Korea on the one hand and Iraq on the other to see the indisputable advantage of acquiring a nuclear weapon. Those trained in business might rightly name this an *incentive*—and it will inevitably lead to a human catastrophe beyond imagining.

Before concluding this section, I must point out that all of this is the result of a *national security* policy, which seeks the safety of America’s borders, interests, and citizens. We should evaluate it by the articulated standard of one of its principle authors, Paul Wolfowitz, who said that a failed policy cannot be defended by protesting the purity of intention in its development. And a United States security policy that seeks safety outside the principles of universality and reciprocity—no matter how well-intentioned—is a policy failure, for it moves relentlessly toward nuclear disaster of the highest order. Our policy inverts that which is true of disarmament: it’s the *wrong* thing to do and it *doesn’t* work.

Every patriot son and daughter of America should be on his or her feet, demanding our nation’s about-face.

Let me observe two vital matters before turning to my second question. First, though I lack the time to explicate this, there is a critical difference between being a powerful nation—which is complicated, but within the scope of universality, and seeking hegemony, which is not. The problem is not so much our power but our ambitions to become inviolable.

Second, I do not intend to demonize America or paint it as a singular villain by criticizing its policy, however harshly. As I said, I love my country and indeed I do think that it is the greatest nation on the planet. My criticism of American policy is an exercise in taking responsibility for our own affairs. Other countries desperately need to do the same in their own contexts, as the news this morning from North Korea certainly indicates, and as we can see in Russia’s counterproductive aggression. We must all take responsibility for our own lands.

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Ambassador Duarte was very gracious to praise, as a diplomat, the contribution that religious leaders have made to the cause of nuclear disarmament. I am not a diplomat, however, nor especially diplomatic, and I hope that I might have the prerogative of saying as one religious leader to others that our contribution has not been nearly enough, not by half.

In fact, given the middling contribution we have made thus far, we ought to be grateful that Ambassador Duarte did not take us to task for our failure. Here is what I heard: that one notable achievement occurred in 2000, when a group of religious leaders “agreed to join” with the United Nations in calling on the nations to abolish nuclear weapons.

“Agreed to join?” These are the words of a people who imagine the issue to be an attractive option, a goal preferable to the alternative—but not an a theological imperative of life and death. Would we merely “agree to join” in a call to abolish slavery, establish civil rights, end sex trafficking, etc.? Or would we grab our leaders by the lapels and stare them in the eyes and say with all our strength: these things are abhorrent to God?

I am confident that the temperate viewpoint will not lack for advocates. Therefore, in closing, I have a far different message, more immoderate by leaps and bounds, and it is this: the foreign policy I have just described seeks to elevate America above that which God has ordained any nation to be, and this places us squarely in the face of his wrath and coming judgment.

I know that it is horribly unfashionable, embarrassing, and even impolite to talk about the wrath and judgment of God. But I do not know how to read the Bible, to believe in Jesus, without believing that thing he saves us from is nothing less than the righteous judgment of God Most High, King of the Universe, whose wrath against this blood-soaked world is the proof that what we do to each other *matters* to God. I believe in this God because if we are not called to account for our violence then I don’t get the point at all.

Please note that I am not claiming some special power to read the tea leaves of history for God’s intention, as some Christians do in the wake of natural disasters. I agree with Niebuhr that the purposes of history far outstrip our mortal scope of discernment. My judgment is instead based on the conviction that the very God who judges the nations also ordained human government and created it for human good, and that the perennially abused authority of the state to use violent force was given as a necessary measure in a fallen world, so that the social order might be maintained and wrongdoing might be punished.

But this ordination of state power is given to *each* nation that *all* peoples might be protected and secured against the chaos of human sinfulness. God’s purpose for each nation is the same—he wants America to benefit Americans to the same degree that he wants Canada to benefit Canadians. This is why Christians must oppose aggressive war, because it is a misuse of state power to seek one’s own security at the egregious cost of another nation and its people.

In sum, the principle of universality is written into God’s purpose for all nations: we were made to be a community, subject to the same divine rule. In Micah 4, for example, we

see the consummation of this divine purpose, wherein the peace of beating swords into ploughshares is an immediate outgrowth of the divine judgment directly settling disputes *among strong nations*.

With this understanding of the nation-state's purpose, hegemony ceases to be any idle error. It is instead the greatest offense a nation can commit, the ultimate perversion of its power through the subordination of every other nation's interests to its own. A nation that is an authority unto itself can do this. But a nation that recognizes itself to be under God, fearing him, will quail at the prospect.

I am not suggesting that we face some imminent exercise of supernatural wrath. I am suggesting, however, that the thoroughly earthly disaster we court by pursuing a hegemonic foreign policy ought not to be regarded as some accident of history, some coincidence of cause and effect, but rather the judgment of God Most High. God didn't need Archangel Michael to judge ancient Israel—he did just fine by giving the Babylonian king a poke in the right direction. The Lord of the nations wrote the laws of causality into the fabric of the universe.

If this is the case, then the hegemonic direction of America's foreign policy constitutes a fundamentally *godless* course of action. Those who fear God know that immoral security in temporal affairs is simply vulnerability deferred. And Christians who fail to note what is happening in plain sight—or worse, who recognize this blasphemy but fail to name it as such—are without excuse.

To this, I say *Enough*. This is a test of our belief. This is a test whether we truly fear God. If the God we worship is less than we believe him to be, then would-be tyrants can walk with their heads held high. But if God is real—and he is—then we cannot bear lightly a nation's flagrant blasphemy in his sight.

Perhaps we are afraid of being called anti-American or unpatriotic if we call upon America to limit its ambitions. But if we acknowledge that we are under the authority of God, nothing could be *more* pro-American or *more* patriotic than to see our nation turn from its arrogance in the sight of God to a humility that merits divine favor.

Calling America to restrain its power is only anti-American if there is no God. Leave it to the critics who fear neither human beings nor God to take their pick. For our part, brothers and sister Christians, let us speak the truth in fearless fury.

Thank you.