Nuclear Weapons VIOLATE the “Just War” Criteria

Even before St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) developed a theory of when a war could be permissible or “just,” other thinkers and ethicists had discussed that. Approximately 1,600 years ago St. Augustine developed criteria for when a war could be “just.” Other theologians and ethicists have continued to work on that problem. Nowadays most Christians and most of the general public assume that when their nations go to war it’s for good reasons. People glibly assume the “Just War” theory without understanding it or applying it to our current reality.

Nuclear weapons blatantly violate the “Just War” theory that has dominated our society and Christendom for many centuries. The criteria or principles vary from author to author over the centuries, but these are typical:

1. A just war can only be waged as a last resort. All non-violent options must be exhausted before the use of force can be justified.
2. A war is just only if it is waged by a legitimate authority. Even just causes cannot be served by actions taken by individuals or groups who do not constitute an authority sanctioned by whatever the society and outsiders to the society deem legitimate.
3. A just war can only be fought to redress a wrong suffered. For example, self-defense against an armed attack is always considered to be a just cause (although the justice of the cause is not sufficient--see point #4). Further, a just war can only be fought with "right" intentions: the only permissible objective of a just war is to redress the injury.
4. A war can only be just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success. Deaths and injury incurred in a hopeless cause are not morally justifiable.
5. The ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish peace. More specifically, the peace established after the war must be preferable to the peace that would have prevailed if the war had not been fought.
6. The violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered. States are prohibited from using force not necessary to attain the limited objective of addressing the injury suffered.
7. The weapons used in war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. Civilians are never permissible targets of war, and every effort must be taken to avoid killing civilians. The deaths of civilians are justified only if they are unavoidable victims of a deliberate attack on a military target.

Read through the list again and notice how nuclear weapons violate these criteria. The “Just War” theory says a war is “just” **only if it meets ALL** of these criteria. We can see now launching nuclear weapons would **VIOLATE all or nearly all** of the criteria.

When we talk with people who assume the “Just War” theory, we can expose nuclear weapons as violating the “Just War” criteria.