

NJPN Comment

At the limits of morality: deterrent

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6th August marked the 75th anniversary of the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima. I usually mark this day while sitting on a French beach with my family. Umbrella to umbrella, we pin ourselves to the vast, relentless beach of dangerous rip currents and burning sun.

Nearby, facing each other across a broad river, are a pair of 17th century, star-shaped forts. The UK has a similar one at Southsea, in Portsmouth. A huge amount of human effort must have gone into building them. They were built in order to deter enemy ships from sailing up the river to Bordeaux but 'not a single shot was fired in anger'. There was a fashion all over the world for these forts; their pointed geometric shapes were thought to be good for deflecting canon balls.

Now we have a nuclear deterrent, designed to deter an unspecified enemy from using its own nuclear deterrent, that it is also never going to use.

When 650,000 people in the world have died of coronavirus, and many in developing countries face starvation, it is plain how costly and wasteful is the maintenance, research and development of a nuclear deterrent. Against the threat of a pandemic, a nuclear warhead is useless. Worse, as Pope Francis said in 2017, we are at the limits of morality and legality in possessing nuclear weapons.

Last week, Boris Johnson compared a second lockdown to a nuclear deterrent, 'a tool I won't abandon but don't want to use'. It's hard to understand why he would use this comparison. Hidden in the language of 'deterrent' is the language of the ultimate threat.

It's not possible to threaten a virus, so Johnson must be threatening the public who, he assumes, consider a lockdown to be a fate worse than death.

The author Bel Hooks, in *All About Love*, writes that western society's idolisation of money, power and weapons is the worship of death. It runs through our patriarchal governments, institutions, religions, keeping us from love and life. She writes that 'our cultural obsession with death consumes energy that could be given to the art of living.'

Lockdown is a way of keeping everyone safe. Unused to the language of life, loving and caring, the prime minister regressed to idolising death, the very trait we need to give up if we are to live and die well in a modern-day pandemic.

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