

When the President of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales writes an official letter his words deserve careful consideration. Such a letter has been written to the Bishop of Northampton as Chairman of the Commission set up by the Conference to deal with matters of International Justice and Peace.

The first thing to notice is that the Bishops' Conference thought it worth while having such a Commission. They thought, in fact, that international politics, war and military matters did not fall outside their scope. These things they (surely rightly) felt should not be left simply to the arbitrary opinions of Christians. They thought they were matters on which the Church as a whole, through the bishops, should help to form consciences. They did not think that the proper Christian response in these areas was always either so obvious that Christians would inevitably get it right or so obscure and uncertain that preachers of the gospel could throw no light on it. In the course of their work, the members of the Commission dealt with 'the proposed sale of arms by the British Government to South Africa' which, they concluded, 'is a matter of clear moral concern', and so they handed it up to the Bishops' Conference as something upon which the bishops should express a Christian opinion.

The question they put was: 'How is the morality of the sale of arms, whatever their intended use, by one government to another, affected when the people of the recipient countries are in a situation of stark injustice which could explode into violence, and where the effect of the sale of arms could be to reinforce the continued rule of the white minority?' They ask whether, and to what extent, an arms transaction which might otherwise be good or morally indifferent, becomes bad when it serves to reinforce the 'stark injustice' attributable to rule by the white minority. They would presumably have liked to know whether such considerations should rule out the transaction altogether, as intrinsically evil, or whether it might sometimes be permissible for a Christian to reinforce an evil government in order to achieve some other good objective connected, say, with trade and investments.

The question, the Commission thought, was not merely an interesting abstract problem for moral theologians, it was an urgent practical one to do with the salvation of souls. Would co-operation in Mr Heath's proposed transaction in fact mean sharing in responsibility for the human degradation, the killings and torture that go on in South Africa. Catholic traditional morality seems clear and sensible about such matters: there are cases when an over-riding need makes it legitimate to tolerate, and even to act in ways that will support, an unjust man (or government), and in such cases you do not thereby incur responsibility for his crimes. There are other cases, however,

in which this is not so; to aid him for insufficient reasons, or to aid him precisely as a means towards your end, is to bear some responsibility before God for his activities.

It is worth pausing on this matter of responsibility. In the United States, apparently, a fairly large number of people think that Lieutenant Calley is an innocent and praiseworthy man, and a much larger number admit that he is guilty but add that it is unfair to single him out because he is not the only one: we are *all* guilty. Both these notions are, of course, rubbish: there is at least one easily identifiable group of Americans who are definitely *not* guilty of Calley's crimes and these are the brave young men who went into prison or exile rather than serve in the Vietnam war. The judgment on Calley is, amongst other things, a judgment on those who did not protest, who did not take part in peace demonstrations or seek in some way to end the killing. Parallel considerations apply to our responsibility for the crimes of the South African régime. Such, at least, is the teaching of traditional Catholic morality, and if there is one contribution that the Roman Church can make to the often heated debate in our society, it is to bring to bear on it a tradition of rational moral analysis—frequently a very inadequate one, but at least one that is cool and reasonable.

The Commission, then, feared that it might be sinful to co-operate with Mr Heath's plan (or to fail to sabotage it) and they sought the guidance of their bishops about this. If activity (or inactivity) in this matter were sinful and if, through lack of guidance, Catholics did not realize this, then, of course, a large part of the guilt for their behaviour would fall on the Christian leadership.

Let us look, then, at the reply they received from the President of the Conference, Cardinal Heenan.

'The request . . . was made . . . a few days before the bishops published a comprehensive statement of principles underlying ethical issues.' The *Statement Concerning Moral Questions*, that excellent document to which the President refers, in fact 'does not profess to cover the whole field of morality but only some outstanding problems. . . . Nor does it deal exhaustively with these' (p. 4).

'We affirmed', the letter says later, 'that legislation supporting a colour bar—of whatever colour—is bound to lead to injustice.' The *Statement*, I am glad to say, does not affirm that such legislation 'leads to injustice', it says it *is* unjust: 'All have a right to equal treatment before the law, for example in housing, irrespective of colour or race' (p. 7). But what, we should ask, is the function of the curious parenthesis in the Cardinal's sentence? There is no state in the world in which there is legislation supporting a colour bar against white people. One of the nastier side-effects of white supremacy has been a heritage of snobbery and social discrimination amongst people of different shades of brown, but to have made laws supporting a colour bar is the unique glory of white people. The effect of

this otherwise pointless parenthesis is simply to suggest, quite misleadingly, that there are equal 'faults on both sides' and that those who make a fuss about white racism are merely prejudiced in favour of coloured people.

The letter continues: 'It is clear that much of the legislation of the present government of South Africa is likely to offend the Christian conscience.' What is meant by 'likely'? It *does* offend the Christian conscience. Can circumstances be envisaged in which it might not? We know, of course, that it does not always offend the consciences of Christians but that is a quite different matter; that is precisely why one might hope for a loud and unequivocal statement from the bishops.

The really extraordinary passage, however, comes next: 'The bishops thought it would be wrong to condemn the government publicly without first seeking assurances that the proposed sale of arms would in no way work against the interests of the black and coloured citizens of South Africa. Accordingly I was instructed to request an interview with the Prime Minister. On 9th November, 1970, I had a long conversation with Mr Heath. The bishops do not consider themselves competent to judge the military and political aspects of the proposed sale of arms.'

Can this really mean that the bishops were prepared not to condemn the government so long as the government provided them with 'assurances'? It is hard, in that case, to understand why the Cardinal and the Prime Minister wasted each other's time. It was inconceivable that the government should go ahead with its plan for selling arms *without* producing assurances of this kind. As Miss Mandy Rice Davis said on the famous occasion when they told her that the noble lord denied everything, 'Well, he would, wouldn't he?'

We are, surprisingly, not told what Mr Heath said in his long conversation but we may be sure that he repeated the 'assurances' he has given all of us on many occasions. The question is not, of course, what Mr Heath says—or even what he believes—but what is the truth. If you find a strange man climbing out of the window of your house in the middle of the night carrying a heavy bag, it may be quite unjust to jump to the conclusion that he is a burglar, but you would not ordinarily hope to settle the matter by accepting his assurances; you would make other enquiries. Incredibly, the bishops do not seem to have made any other enquiries, or at least none that they think worth mentioning. When every available spokesman for the black people of Africa thinks the transaction an evil and racist move, when most other Christian leaders in this country have condemned it, it really doesn't seem good enough just to have a long conversation with Mr Heath. If the English Martyrs died for anything it was to ensure that the final say in questions of the Christian life was not left to the government of England.

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'The bishops do not consider themselves competent to judge the military and political aspects of the proposed sale of arms.' This is a baffling remark. The sale of arms doesn't have military and political *aspects*, it quite simply *is* a military and political transaction, and this is what the bishops were being asked to look at in the light of the gospel. To confess to not being competent about this is just to confess to not being competent.

'We feel it is for citizens to support or oppose the government according to the moral principles we have outlined.' The air of neutrality here is completely spurious. This document will be welcomed by those who support the sale of arms to South Africa; it will be read with something like despair by those Catholics who believe the transaction to be evil. Amongst these (to declare an interest) we count ourselves.

H.McC.