

C.I.I.R. and The Middle East

A reply to Louis Allen

Before examining Mr Allen's particular criticisms of the CIIR Comment 19 on the *Middle East*, it is necessary first to dispel some of his misconceptions about the Catholic Institute. Through its regular newsbrief Comment CIIR gives the background to particular situations, usually international in character and examines them in the light of Catholic social teaching and values. In this way CIIR attempts to bring to the attention of the Catholic community in this country international issues of justice and peace which are quite properly their concern. Where the role of the Catholic Church is integral to the discussion, this is examined—for example, recent Comments on Portuguese Africa, Brazil and Chile. It is true that in Comment we do not quote extensively from official Church sources; rather we make references to these as necessary. As a Catholic body, we give a Catholic view, but it is only a Catholic view. Perhaps Mr Allen would care to specify where he feels the Comment is uncatholic or unchristian?

Quoting from an article in the *Tablet* of 15th June 1974, Mr Allen criticises our 'selective approach to complex problems'. The article went on to say:

'But the CIIR never deals in trivialities or at a superficial level, and one must expect and respect some biased passion where big issues are at stake. Indeed we would like to see CIIR's crusading zeal extended to all that vast area of the globe under the domination of Soviet Russia where all values that it stands for are more blatantly and brutally disregarded than anywhere else'.

It seems that CIIR is being criticised not for what it does say but rather for what it has not. Whilst some may consider it a valid criticism of the CIIR that in recent years it has not produced anything on the persecution of Christians in communist countries, such criticism in no way invalidates what it has already said on Northern Ireland, Portugal or the Middle East. (As the *Sword of the Spirit*, CIIR spent many years drawing attention to the plight of Christians in Communist countries. There are now other bodies which are engaged in this work, e.g. Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism). It would be difficult to see how the CIIR, with its limited funds and personnel, could take on the whole world and at the same time avoid what the *Tablet* praises us for *not* being—trivial and superficial. Recognising these limitations, CIIR has concentrated on issues of particular relevance to the Third World, e.g. recent Comments on World Population, Oil and Developing

Countries, Arms and the Third World, and on issues in which Britain has a special responsibility, e.g. Rhodesia and the Middle East.

CIIR's Comments are not anonymous—they are signed by the Catholic Institute for International Relations. They are not signed by an individual because they are never the work of one person. Comment drafts are circulated to a number of people, the Comment is then redrafted, recirculated, even again redrafted until the final version is approved by the CIIR Executive Committee. This Committee is the representative of CIIR's 1800 members and is elected by them at the Annual General Meeting. This cumbersome procedure ensures that Comment is never the product of one person's prejudices and CIIR accepts responsibility for the views expressed in this publication.

Having, we hope, established our credentials, we can turn to the Comment on the Middle East. As with Mr Allen's general comments about CIIR, the main bulk of his criticism is not what has been said in the Comment but what has not, less about what is actually stated and more on what Mr Allen feels is implied. The Comment is not a piece of subtle propaganda full of innuendo and deliberate oversights. It is an honest attempt to examine the situation of the Palestinians—a situation which in this country is not fully understood. The Comment is not intended to be a definitive statement on the Middle East but simply to provide basic background information, analysis and suggestions for further reading. In a document the size of Comment we have necessarily concentrated on those events which we consider to be the historically decisive ones, and have omitted a great deal of detail which we do not feel integral to the main issue.

Similarly, in this reply to Mr Allen's letter, we shall avoid arguments over minor detail and numbers and hope instead to focus on the fundamental points raised in his letter.

We mention the Zionist movement against Britain during World War Two not to cast aspersions on the military records of certain individuals nor to deviously suggest that the Arabs won the war. The fact that the Arabs did not wholeheartedly throw in their lot with the allies is both well-known and quite understandable in view of the broken promises to them after the First World War. We mention Zionist acts of sabotage against Britain to illustrate an attitude and a set of priorities. Persecution of the Jews has always formed the emotional basis for Zionism and the Nazi persecution of the Jews in Europe lent urgency to its demands. It would seem that Zionists had everything to gain by throwing their lot in with the allies in the face of a common enemy. As the war progressed, however, the Zionist movement turned increasingly against Britain in the pursuit of their ultimate goal—the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Mr Allen is mistaken if he thinks our attitude to terrorism is ambiguous. It is not. We deplore all terrorist activities and acts of violence committed against innocent civilians—by anyone, anywhere. There are many incidents and atrocities on both sides which find no place in our Comment. Deir Yasin is mentioned precisely because it is not

simply one of many such incidents but because it is historically so important. The events at Deir Yasin are significant less because 250 civilians, men, women and children, were massacred, but because this atrocity was one of the elements which led to the panic flight of Arabs from Israel. Menachim Beigin, leader of the attack on Deir Yasin, said in his book *The Revolt: Story of the Irgun*:—

‘The massacre was not only justified, but there would not have been a state of Israel without the victory at Deir Yasin’.

With Mr Allen we deplore the more recent atrocities at Lod Airport, Munich and Maalot. At the same time we deplore the Israeli retaliations, in which innocent women and children were also killed, which swiftly followed and which are often disproportionate to the original terrorist action. Whilst it may make no difference to the people killed on either side, there is a difference between acts of terrorism by political movements and acts of reprisal officially sanctioned by a Government which has renounced the use of force as a condition of UN membership.

On the question of refugees, Mr Allen says ‘nor is it clear who is responsible for their expulsion’. At best this is an ingenuous statement. Mr Allen quite rightly recognises that the Arabs leaving of their own accord is now discredited Israeli propaganda. Whether the Arabs fled in panic or whether they were forcibly ejected—and both are undoubtedly true—is to a large extent irrelevant. Regardless of *how* they went, *why* they went is quite clear—they left in the face of a powerful enemy and terrified by reports of massacres such as Deir Yasin. It is quite clear therefore where the responsibility for this lies. But the real point surely is that, however the Palestinians left, their homes and their lands have been confiscated and they have not been allowed to return. Why should their leaving mean forfeiture of their homes and of their citizenship?

Mr Allen goes on to say in his letter: ‘I have no wish whatever to justify the creation of large numbers of homeless refugees. But if the Arab states, or some of them, are so rich that they can hold the entire industrial West to ransom, as they have done recently, then some at any rate of their enthusiasm for the Palestine Arabs’ cause could be translated into concrete acts of charity. Money cannot bring back a lost homeland. But it would alleviate the living conditions of those who have been made into refugees’. There are several points here. Mr Allen is doing disservice to the Arab countries by minimising the efforts of the host countries to accommodate large numbers of refugees out of all proportion to their economic abilities. Indeed the Palestinians have been extensively employed by Arab states and have been given schooling and university scholarships—they are in fact the most highly educated of all the Arabs. There are numerous tributes on record by the UN and UNWRA of this contribution. Mr Allen also appears to have misunderstood the oil crisis and the workings of OPEC (cf. Comment 21 Oil and Developing Countries), but does he seriously think that if the Israelis refuse responsibility for the Palestinians that the richer oil producing countries, Kuwait or Abu Dhabi say, will accept it? Further-

more, it must be remembered that the quadrupling of the oil prices happened at the end of 1973 whereas the Palestinian refugee situation has existed since 1948. Israel surely cannot by pleading poverty abdicate responsibility for a situation which she has helped to create.

But the real crux of the problem is the million and a half Palestinian refugees who have been dispossessed of their homes and of their land. Mr Allen acknowledges this yet shrinks from the consequences of this acknowledgement and talks instead of money and charity. As a charitable organisation, we do not wish to minimise the contribution that charity can make towards the alleviation of suffering. However, the issue here is one of justice, not charity. The idea is not to make the refugee camps more comfortable but to formulate a just political settlement which will remove them altogether. The refugee centres are indeed places of unparalleled misery but money will not exorcise the feelings of bitterness and injustice of the Palestinians nor will it restore to them their rights.

The recognition of basic human rights is the central problem—the recognition of the Palestinians as a national entity with legitimate aspirations to self-determination. Jews cannot demand the right to a homeland and self-determination for themselves whilst at the same time refusing this right to others. How can Israel lay claim to democracy whilst operating discriminatory laws such as the Law of Return and the Nationality Law which allows someone of Jewish origin born, say in the United States or Russia, unrestricted entry and automatic citizenship whilst at the same time denying the right of those born in Palestine but not of Jewish mothers to live without harassment in their own homes?

It is within this context that Zionism must be put—not as a sterile exercise to apportion blame or find a ‘culprit’ but to look for possible solutions from the seeming impasse. It is important to distinguish Zionism from Judaism. They are not the same, nor are all Jews Zionists. Indeed the most fervent anti-Zionists are themselves Jews who see in Zionism the betrayal of the values of Judaism. Zionism is a movement of settler-colonisation which sprang up in the 19th Century as a result of anti-semitism in Europe. The aim was to build up a secular Jewish political entity in Palestine, its methods were frankly those of colonisers and this state has since extended its borders in a series of wars. The position of Jews in Arab countries has undoubtedly deteriorated in recent years but there must be a tragic correlation between the position of Jewish communities in Arab countries and Israel’s external expansionist policies and internal discriminatory legislation. Israel is now a great deal larger in geographical area than she was under the UN partition plan of 1947 and the armistice lines of 1949 which Israel freely accepted. Israel must choose between territory and peace. Justice is not divisible. In the final analysis Israel can only safeguard her own rights by recognising the rights of others. The answer to the Palestinian problem can only be a political settlement. To achieve this, radical change in Zionist thinking must take place. Minor territorial

concessions and bi-lateral agreements with Arab states are no longer enough. If Israel wants to live in peace with her neighbours, she must negotiate phased withdrawal from the occupied territories. At the same time, a just solution must be worked out with the Palestinians themselves. To do this Israel must, in accordance with the UN decision, recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation as the legitimate spokesman for the Palestinians and negotiate with them on an equal basis. Ultimately peace can only be achieved when Israel sees itself as a truly Middle-Eastern state. Real security can never depend on foreign military and financial assistance.