

There are many reasons for welcoming the 'Statement Concerning Moral Questions' made by the bishops of England and Wales.<sup>1</sup> It presents in readable English a series of humane views on various moral issues raised by the society in which we live. These views differ from those of the average liberal humanist mainly in displaying a somewhat greater regard for human life. The traditional teaching on abortion and euthanasia is put succinctly and without fuss and towards the end of the document ('The child is not the property of the parents either before or after birth'). Sexual morality also comes late; as the authors say, 'An obsession with sex is more characteristic of society at large today than of the Church'. They have been careful to avoid absolutely excluding the use of contraceptives but in the concluding paragraphs they make clear the duty of Catholics to take very seriously papal pronouncements on moral matters.

There is a notably cool passage dealing with drugs; admirable first for its title and the principle it invokes: 'Truth and Escapism', and secondly for invariably linking drugs and drink under the same moral rubric. 'The real adventure is to live life as it is, not as it looks through a haze of drugs or alcohol.' It is, of course, important to distinguish amongst 'drugs' and it would be claimed for some that they provide not a haze but an intensified experience of life as it is; nevertheless the bishops were probably wise not to enter into this difficult and uncertain field.

There are some mistakes like the sentence 'Black Power is as ugly as White Power'. By 'White Power' the bishops presumably mean the kind of racist repression practised by white people in South Africa and the United States. They should have been told that Black Power is in no sense parallel to this. The term refers to the political organization of these oppressed people to form an influential pressure group. Black Power is no more or less 'ugly' than Trade Union Power or Conservative Party Power.

The statement deals with a fairly haphazard group of moral problems thrown up by our society. In its own words, 'It has touched on matters which happen to be uppermost in the minds of Christians at the moment'. There is a proper modesty about this claim but it reveals an important weakness in the whole discussion. There is no suggestion about how the various evils discussed might hang together, no attempt at a coherent analysis of our society. This is the first of the three major criticisms that have to be made of the document. It is superficial in that it deals with the symptoms of an inhumane society without asking about the society itself. Reference is made to the 'rat-race', to 'the determination to achieve power and wealth no matter who is trampled down in the process', but nothing

<sup>1</sup>Available from the Catholic Truth Society, 1s. (5p.). Also printed in full in *The Tablet*, 2 January.

is done to show how this, the mainspring and source of energy in our capitalist society, determines in practice the structure of our world. The fact that 'the larger the scale of financial affairs, the less regard is had for honesty' is brought out almost as a quaint moral quirk instead of as the natural consequence of our class-structured country. Strikes and lockouts are seen as 'a confession of failure'—but merely the failure of negotiators, not the failure of a whole inhuman economic system. The bishops recognize that 'those in authority may be guilty of . . . violence in the legislation they enforce' but again seem to see this as a personal moral failing rather than as belonging to the way in which a society based on individual greed *has* to be organized.

The second major criticism is that the statement, while offering much good advice to individuals, says nothing about the rôle of the Church as such. There is something rather charming about the offhand way they say they have been moved to make these comments at the request of lay people, but there is no suggestion that the Church as a whole, represented by her bishops, sometimes has an urgent duty to witness to her moral position and make it effective.

This leads us to the third and most important criticism, and this is that the authors of this document may well have disqualified themselves from making a lot of their often admirable statements—at least without blushing. Morals is not an abstract subject, it is a practical matter to do with particular times and places; detached from these, moral pronouncements can have a remarkably hollow ring. For example: discussing immigration they say: 'Where an explicit grant or promise of citizenship has been made it should be honoured, as for example in the case of the "Kenya Asians".' That statement would have sounded a lot better if it had been made when that disgusting betrayal could have been prevented. For example: 'The principle of the Welfare State is fundamentally Christian.' There is no record of the English bishops saying this when this was an issue between political parties, nor of their coming to the help of Dr Noel Browne in Ireland when the bishops there told him the principle was unchristian. (And do not imagine that our bishops are reluctant to comment on affairs in foreign countries; they feel free in this statement to criticize some African governments.) For example: they say that the Christian can 'never condone a situation where human rights are flouted', but they said nothing at all about the South African racist sports tours and have not even joined with the other Christian bodies in condemning the provision of weapons to men who flout human rights. For example: they condemn the H-Bomb but made no protest at all about the establishment of Polaris bases; they say that 'the use of conventional weapons may be equally wrong' but have never spoken about our government's acquiescence in the slaughter of Vietnam.

Taken as a whole, though, it is a good statement; all we have to do now is to earn the right to make it.

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