

# Comment

## *Getting the record straight*

It is becoming increasingly hard to be honest. That, arguably, is the most disturbing message for non-South Africans in the 'Kairos Document', just signed by 150 South African theologians of various denominations, and available from CIIR or BCC, price 50p.

This document is, among other things, a massive onslaught on the misuse of language in the Christian Church—especially the blithe misuse of the heavily-loaded terms 'reconciliation', 'justice', 'non-violence'. For quite a lot of the time when these are being used in the churches they are being used as disembodied concepts, employed in ways often irreconcilable with their sources in scripture or in Christian experience and without adequate consideration of the particular contexts in which they are being applied today. In today's South Africa what this means is that quite often the churches are helping to perpetuate instead of abolish the suffering of the oppressed, and making it more rather than less difficult to expose apartheid as the dangerous heresy it is—something which Christians have got to stamp out (so the churches have first got to help the mass of the people to bring about a change of regime; only *after* that can there be 'reconciliation').

Clearly the Kairos Document is written by South Africans for South Africans about South Africa—the South Africa of 1985. But it is clerical sympathy for the Contras in Nicaragua—the CIA-backed guerrillas so good at skinning their victims alive—quite as much as dithery clerical neutralism in South Africa that is starting to make 'reconciliation' a dirty word. All over the place, in other words, there is evidence of this growing misuse of language, this growing tendency to hide unpleasant truths behind clichés and slogans.

At the core of Christianity is the claim that the climax of God's self-communication with his creation was the 'making flesh' of the Word: that the fullness of truth was revealed through the life of a real human being. Christianity is a down-to-earth affair. When what we like to think are Christian ideas are disembodied—in other words, become the ammunition of rhetoric, generalisations with very tenuous links with the real world—they are in danger of no longer being Christian ideas. They can instead quickly turn into part of the devil's currency. So what we are talking about is something for Christians as

Christians to be troubled about.

Some Americans are uneasy about the growth in the U.S. of 'government by television'. In fact, the role of the media in our culture is giving the Sophists a field-day everywhere, and what person or group with a point to make and with access to an audience is not tempted to join them? Potentially we are all propagandists and ad-men. The pressures favouring misleading language and distortion are bigger than they have ever been. Glasgow University Media Group's much-discussed new study, *War and Peace News* (Open University Press, £5.95 paper), shows how, without factual inaccuracy, British TV nevertheless misled the British public at some crucial moments during the Falklands War, how 'cold war rhetoric' has turned quite good news into bad, and how application of the famous BBC principle of 'balance' actually distorted the story of the women's peace protest at Greenham Common. We are not talking about something that is specifically a Church problem.

Although there will be no thorough-going change until there are deeper changes in our society, people fairly widely agree that there would be some improvement if the promoters and circulators of ideas and opinions were better informed. One project in the Church world which could help towards this end is for a Rome-based data base. At its plenary meeting last March the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications recommended a feasibility study, but so far the Secretariat of State has not moved on the Commission's request for funds. Providentially? The arrival of Opus Dei in the Vatican Press Office and the currently proposed 'streamlining' in the Vatican, which could make that place more monolithic than ever, pushes the chances of a more 'open' communications policy at the top of the Catholic Church even further into the future. It would be better if the various enthusiastic outsiders took the project over.

Even so, we in the Church are fooling ourselves if we think that any—yes, any—assaults on distortion in the Church are going to have much effect while Church people persist in seeing no essential connection between worldly affairs and their journey to God.

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