

The forward march of the peace movement

THE CONTINUING and perhaps increasing strength of the peace movements throughout western societies must be seen as a phenomenon of the early 1980s, especially since the Christian churches have been playing such a significant and sometimes leading role.

This year more so than last year, media attention is being focussed on the role of the churches: the final statement of the US Catholic bishops nears completion, with implications for the rest of the Catholic world, particularly in Europe. The Anglican Church in England also received major media attention when it debated the morality of unilateralism last month. And in many of the Protestant churches groups have taken various positions.

Christians can claim no special competence to judge the morality of the nuclear arsenals, but must undertake the same painstaking research and evaluation as anyone else. It is then not surprising that all the churches reflect a spectrum of views within them. But that church leaderships are willing to take a firm stand, like the US bishops, is surprising. How do we explain the sudden urgency?

Up till recently, the consensus among western societies and in the churches was that the nuclear deterrent was necessary to protect the West against Russian or Chinese aggression or blackmail. Several things shattered this consensus. Firstly, the Vietnam War destroyed the myth of the righteousness of the United States and its role as guardian of the West against Communism. The War both revealed the ambiguities of power and flashed the ugly and immoral nature of war via the television into the homes of western viewers. The age of innocent and righteous crusades was at an end.

Secondly, the aggressive rhetoric of the Reagan Administration, coupled with dissent over the role of the USA in Latin America, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala, has forced a profound rethinking of the use of US power. Was the Cold War to be revived, or could coexistence be resurrected with the Soviet bloc? Reagan's overuse of the myth of

American righteousness has paradoxically called it into question in the minds of many Americans, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church which has strong links with Latin American Catholics.

Thirdly, does an upswing in the nuclear arms race really add anything to western security and deterrence? Many opponents of the new arms race were arguing that both superpowers now have enough 'overkill' to make the further extension of nuclear weaponry absurd and immoral. Particularly did this seem so in a time of recession and budget cuts in the States, which meant a retreat of the welfare state and an expansion of the military budget. The poor were to pay for new nuclear weapons.

Within the churches, too, recent major changes in the nature of their leaderships were making them more willing to enter the debates of social ethics and nuclear arms. In the United States in particular, the new wave of bishops has a well developed social conscience which is reflected in the competence of executive groups dealing on behalf of the Bishops with US public and foreign policy debates. This was a new development in the States, where the Catholic Church had felt alien to the culture and anxious to prove it was as American as apple pie. That has changed.

The final crunch came for Europeans with the belligerent American rhetoric of being able to fight a limited nuclear war in Europe. Suddenly the issues were not academic, and the unthinkable was being put forward as a possibility. The Europeans were not impressed. Many more people became aware of just what a nuclear exchange, even of a limited kind, if that were possible, would mean. The possibilities of a general nuclear war seemed closer.

The peace movements themselves are remarkable for their size, the range of groups within communities that have swung behind them and their endurance. Undoubtedly the peace movements reflect the widespread frustration that politicians and military establishments were not taking seriously enough the need to seek an alternative to current policies on nuclear arms. So strong have these movements now become that European governments cannot afford to ignore them without risking electoral defeat.

Within the churches, the debate has focussed around deterrence as morally justifiable or not, and whether nuclear disarmament should be unilateral or multilateral. Many churchmen in Europe favour disarmament of their countries as a signal to the Soviets and the Americans that the present build-up cannot continue. The draft of the statement by the American bishops said that deterrence could be *morally tolerable* only if all efforts were being made to find a more acceptable policy. The Pope's position at this stage accepts a policy of nuclear deterrence as *morally acceptable* as long as countries are moving towards disarmament.

Two major difficulties confront advocates of disarmament on these grounds. Firstly, what happens if nations are making no satisfactory steps to nuclear disarmament, and for various reasons are not really interested in doing so? Does this mean the Church will come out and condemn the policy of deterrence as *morally unacceptable*?

Secondly, what happens if only one side, that of the Western allies, accepts the moral obligations of disarmament? Would this leave the Soviet bloc at a dangerous advantage?

The problem of the peace movement in the West is that with some exceptions, there is no real equivalent to it in the Soviet bloc. No mass movement of public opinion is allowed to surface there as it does in the West, and hence there are not the same political constraints acting on Communist leaderships as there are in the West. Careful judgements are called for then about whether the abandonment of nuclear arms in some Western countries could spur the Soviets into genuine negotiations, or whether it is likely to be counterproductive.

However, few marks can be allotted to the Reagan Administration for efforts to reach an understanding with the Soviets. Moreover, it is unclear at the moment what the new Soviet regime will do about the nuclear arms race, and whether it is open to negotiation.

What can be realistically achieved by the peace movement is not clear. Of itself, it is unlikely to affect the thinking of the men in the Kremlin, but it may influence the governments of Western countries to make greater efforts to convince the Soviet leaders that some progress towards nuclear disarmament is overdue. Unilateral disarmament by one or other European country *may* help convince the Soviets that the West is serious about disarmament, but that cannot be presumed.

In other words, dramatic moves to nuclear disarmament are unlikely at the moment, though some small steps may be possible. It is vitally important, however, that the pressure for disarmament from public opinion be maintained lest a new nuclear arms race surge ahead. ■