

## The churches and the peace marches

ONE OF THE few publications to attempt an analysis of the recent enormous peace marches in Australian cities is *The Bulletin* of June 8. Greg Sheridan had the considerable task of sorting through the many groups and organisations involved in the peace movement. Unfortunately, Mr Sheridan's analysis of church involvement does not do justice to the rationale of various Christian groups.

Mr Sheridan claims that the major achievement of the peace movements is the "recruitment of important figures in church bureaucracies. The specifics of much of the peace movement — opposition to the American alliance, opposition to the American bases, and opposition to uranium mining — have no place at all in the Liberal or National Country Parties, so that if they are to find political expression it will have to be within the ALP" (*The Bulletin*, p.45).

### The cogency of the churches' case

These "specifics", however, do not necessarily follow from Church involvement in the peace movement at all. More significantly, Mr Sheridan has entirely failed to understand that the concern of many Christians flows from the entirely respectable and highly sophisticated tradition of Christian thinking on war and peace.

A casual reader might infer from *The Bulletin* article that church people were being duped by 'radical' groups or were being mindlessly uncritical like the "Red parsons" of the 1930s. *Outlook* readers know how false such an inference would be. *Outlook* has recently drawn on traditional teaching on war in major set-piece articles by Rev. Harvey Perkins ("Nearer the Precipice", May 1981), Fr John Hill ("Is a Just War any longer possible?", August 1981) and US Bishop Roger Mahony, ("Why Christians must take steps to end the arms race", March 1982).

Mr Sheridan failed to understand why church groups have become so alarmed about the threat of war. *Outlook* has

traced the increasing tension between the Church and the US administration because of its armaments policies and its policies in South America, particularly in El Salvador. As we pointed out in articles in January and February of this year, events in El Salvador appeared to be pushing the US Catholic bishops to a major confrontation with the Reagan Administration. It is not exactly easy to dismiss the US bishops as just another radical group of uninformed 'trendies'. Perhaps Mr Sheridan might like to consider the other alternative, that the policies of the Reagan Administration are not above criticism.

By and large Mr Sheridan's generalisations about the "peace movement" are too sweeping and do not take any account of the major differences between groups. Certainly *Outlook* and most church

leaders would have nothing to do with "the crude anti-Americanism" or painting "their opponents as vicious warmongers". Indeed, I suspect only a small minority of those marching would have shared those views.

My impression of the marchers was that there were very many who had never been in a demonstration before, whole family groups with a settled middle-class background who had mobilised behind the church leaders. I also doubt Sheridan's argument that these were overwhelmingly Labor Party voters. I suspect that many were traditional Liberal Party voters who share the churches' concern about the dangers of nuclear war.

One can only welcome *The Bulletin's* attempt to analyse "the peace movement", a political phenomenon which has received far too little attention in the press. Unfortunately Mr Sheridan's article, at least as it appeared, failed to demonstrate an understanding of why the churches are involved. ■

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