

RELIGION AND...

Who Says What Is Political

In a letter dated July 31, 1981, General Arthur Brown of the Salvation Army withdrew his troops from "full membership" in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and elected to maintain a vaguely defined "fraternal status." "Our gravamen," wrote General Brown, "has to do with the issuance by the World Council of Churches of statements, the developing of policies and the carrying out of actions which we regard as political, and which, as such, endanger the nonpolitical nature of the Army....Refusal to identify with political factions, as distinct from deep social concern for the needy people of all lands regardless of creed, colour or political persuasion, has been the Army's life and endeavour from its very beginnings....The Salvation Army's foundation belief is that the only real hope for the transformation of society lies in personal salvation through faith in the redemptive grace of Christ." The Army's membership (its constituent bodies are united in one WCC representation) had been "in suspension pending dialogue" at its own request since 1978.

In receiving "with deep regret" the Army's resignation of formal membership, WCC General Secretary Philip Potter and Moderator Edward W. Cott felt "compelled to disagree with the contrast" General Brown drew between "the so-called political nature of the action of the World Council of Churches" and the Army's "claim to have a non-political stance." "[T]he World Council of Churches has always acted from the deep conviction that the imperatives of the Christian Gospel affect all realms of life. Indeed, one of the constitutional functions of the Council is to promote 'one human family in justice and peace.'" Even those programs for which the Army expressed its support "are inextricably bound up with all the policies of the Council in all areas of its work, including the Programme to Combat Racism...."

A news release from the WCC communications office in New York observed that the impetus for the Army's decision to suspend membership in '78 was the announcement of a grant by the WCC's Program to Combat Racism (PCR) to the Patriotic Front of Zimbabwe, the link up of guerrilla groups seeking to overthrow the white government of Rhodesia. This and other PCR grants draw not on general budget funds but on a Special Fund, to which some of the WCC's 301 member churches, the governments of Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands, and individuals, groups, and local congregations in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand have allotted monies over the years. The press release also noted that even with its membership in suspension, the Salvationists had asked for and received from the WCC Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service a grant of \$100,000 for rehabilitation work in Zimbabwe.

The Army's U.S. National Information Service's news release was brief. It reprinted a statement issued by international headquarters in London that mentioned a new relationship with the WCC owing to "changes

in world and national situations and a divergence of view concerning certain World Council emphases" and reiterated its desire to "continue to...play its part in the work of the W.C.C."

At London headquarters the Army's public relations secretary for the United Kingdom responded readily to questions from *Worldview*. Yes, the sticking point had been the WCC's 1978 contribution to a political organization, the Patriotic Front. "Why didn't they give it to the Red Cross; why give it to people who were killing people?" The Salvation Army "prefers to work to meet the physical and spiritual needs of people."

According to a subsequent WCC New York office press release, Colonel David Mayo, the Army's territorial commander in Zimbabwe, himself saw "'no conflict' between liberation movements which 'fight for human rights' and 'the gospel of love, charity and the liberation of the total man.'" Other Salvationists in the country reportedly disagreed with the Army's stand too.

NBC's *First Estate* allotted ten minutes to the matter one Sunday morning late in September. After these Special Fund grants have been made, how can the WCC ensure they're not used for military purposes? Keith Bridston, executive director of the U.S. Conference for the WCC, responded that "there's no guarantee," but that the WCC feels the selected group's other needs—for example, in the area of medicine or administration—"are more pressing for them than military things." He indicated that there are two levels of grants, one for those engaged in political actions and another for those merely at the stage of awareness raising. Grants, such as the ones to the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO), which is fighting to end South Africa rule in Namibia—almost \$700,000 over the years—are made on the basis of application. Of course applicants must state what their purposes are, and the WCC makes the judgment whether their "real intention" is to solve problems by nonviolent means. In such matters, said Bridston, who is to say what is political, what not? How do you define racism?

PCR Special Fund grants for 1981—\$587,000 to be distributed among forty-six groups—were announced on September 21. A total of \$4,775,000 has been distributed since 1970. The year's largest grant is to SWAPO (\$125,000) and a similar sum will be divided among three South African organizations (according to one of the Fund's six formal criteria, "the situation in Southern Africa is recognized as a priority due to the overt and intensive nature of white racism..."). An A.P. dispatch recorded the grant-giving in the secular press and alluded to the "controversy" surrounding PCR "support for guerrilla movements in southern Africa."

Yet this brief flurry of publicity only touched upon the question that Messrs. Potter and Cott answered for the WCC in corresponding with General Brown and Mr. Bridston dismissed rhetorically to his TV audience—Who can say what is political, what not? But the question remains. How do religious groups use their time and treasure to best advantage in the service of their goals? It will not help the cause of "one human family in justice and peace" to evade the question now.

—S. W.