

# A VIEW OF THE WORLD

Abraham Martin Murray

**NECESSARY HYPOCRISIES.** When La Rochefoucauld observed that hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue, he might have had in mind the seventeenth century's developing notion of international law. Three centuries later his skepticism, if not cynicism, is still in order.

Last June a four-year effort to update the 1949 Geneva conventions on the rules of war was completed at a conference of 109 nations in Geneva. George Aldrich, head of the U.S. delegation, said he expected easy American ratification of the protocols now approved. Little wonder. One protocol lays down rules for the conduct of civil wars. The American delegation did not like that one very much, but Mr. Aldrich says there is little reason for worry, since few countries will admit they face a full-scale rebellion, and therefore the rules would not go into force. Similarly, another protocol, which the Americans also disliked, recognizes "peoples [who] are fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercises of their right of self-determination." Aldrich says the protocol is harmless, however. We can be "quite confident it will never be applied [since] no state is ever going to admit it is a racist regime or exercising alien or colonial domination."

Most threatening is a general rule that prohibits air attacks against cities and indiscriminate killing of civilian population. There, it would seem, goes the whole doctrine of nuclear deterrence. Not to worry, says Mr. Aldrich. The U.S. is on record with the understanding that the new rules "are not intended to have any effect on and do not regulate or prohibit the use of nuclear weapons." Good, we were nervous there for a moment.

Perhaps this latest conference and the protocols emerging from it are necessary for maintaining the hypocrisy that is a kind of vague homage to the virtue of international order. Or perhaps the double-talk and patent lack of substance has so demeaned the process that it undercuts the usefulness of hypocrisy itself. In any case, Mr. Aldrich is likely right in thinking there should be little difficulty in getting ratification from the Senate.

**THE PRICE OF PRINCIPLE.** At the start of 1976 a new state law went into effect prohibiting New York companies from cooperating with "the Arab boycott" by refusing to do business with companies

blacklisted by Arab governments for trading with Israel. Although it is expected that a federal law will soon preempt state law and put everybody on the same footing, New York has already paid a price. Clifford O'Hara of the Port Authority says that since 1976 New York's port has lost 300,000 tons of its usual six million tons of export cargo a year. Nor is New York likely to make up its loss anytime soon. "Once a shipper and a buyer set up a way of doing business somewhere else, it's hard to change the pattern," says Mr. O'Hara.

Opponents of the New York law think it was a pretty stupid thing to do to a city already suffering from myriad declines and fiscal crises. They add that the pro-Israel lobby much exaggerated the dangers of the Arab boycott to Israel's security. After all, it is said, the boycott turned out to be relatively ineffective. Yes, and perhaps one reason for that is that some people in New York drew the line early and hard.

**THE CHURCH SPEAKS.** The 252-member Governing Board of the National Council of Churches recently met in Cincinnati, and they had a busy two-and-a-half days of it. For examples: They approved a statement urging limits on the use of grand juries; declared the Council would hold no national meetings in states that had not approved ERA; supported, with reservations, Carter's energy proposals; called for a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty; resolved support for the U.N. and a new international economic order; urged normalizing relations with Cuba; passed a resolution decrying abuses in the bail bond system; advocated federally funded day-care facilities for all children of working parents; urged the president to apply human rights sanctions to U.S. allies as well as adversaries; and so forth.

The news release from the NCC notes with apparent satisfaction that some resolutions "were adopted without debate on their substance with few, if any, dissenting votes." In an address to the Board, NCC President William Thompson proposed convening a large gathering of lay members to seek solutions to "some of the most perplexing problems confronting us as a people today: energy policy, welfare reform, defense," and other national problems not resolved by the Governing Board. He also expressed concern that in recent years no new church bodies have joined the NCC.

### CONFLICT AMONG THE WELL-INTENTIONED.

A host of organizations has joined in a friend-of-the-court brief supporting "affirmative action" or "quotas" in minority admissions to higher education. The goal is to have the Supreme Court overturn a California ruling that the University of California's affirmative action policies violated Constitutional guarantees of equal protection. The organizations include the National Council of Churches, Americans for Democratic Action, American Public Health Association, UAW, National Council of Negro Women, NOW, and fourteen others.

Leading the fight against the California ruling is the NAACP. Prominent in opposing "quotas" are the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, each of which have filed briefs in the case. Supporters of affirmative action have frequently insisted that numerical goals are not the same thing as quotas. But Mr. Gloster Current of the NAACP says, "Goal or quota, it's really the same thing. Blacks and Hispanic Americans have been discriminated against. We've got to correct the imbalance, possibly at the expense of those who have profited from the system."

"It's the easiest thing in the world to impose a quota, says Larry Lavinsky of the Anti-Defamation League. "But it's harder...to find more socially palliative ways. The basic difference between us is a question of whether you view the individual as an individual rather than as part of a group." AJC, ADL, and others who want the Court to uphold the California ruling emphasize that the alternative to quotas is not doing nothing. They call, rather, for intensive remediation programs that can prepare the disadvantaged, regardless of race, to meet prevailing standards for admission to college, law schools, medical schools, and other channels of opportunity.

In university admissions, as in housing and other areas of public policy, the heart of the debate is whether government action should *proscribe* racial and ethnic discrimination or whether it should go beyond that and *prescribe* the allocation of social goods according to racial and ethnic categories. The California Court was on the right track in arguing that a free and democratic society requires more effective proscription of illegal discrimination while firmly refusing to prescribe the places people must occupy by virtue of membership in some social category. If the Supreme Court does sustain California, we hope policymakers do not lose sight of positive proposals for remedial measures that can make the phrase "equality of opportunity" more real for millions of Americans.

**SHIFTING MOOD OF THE CLERGY?** According to much of the media, the 1960's was the decade of clerical social activists marching for civil rights, jailed in challenging against the Vietnam war, defiantly protesting on behalf of the urban and rural poor. Now a new poll commissioned by the National Council of Churches shows that three-quarters of the 2,181 ministers polled believe social betterment

will be achieved through conversion and individual action rather than through organized church efforts for change. More than half think NCC programs are irrelevant, and two-thirds never heard of the current and highly politicized "liberation theology," which has captured the attention of so many Christian intellectuals.

The poll—conducted among "mainstream" Protestants such as Presbyterians, Methodists, and Reformed—may indicate a major shift in clergy mood. But maybe not. It was never very clear just how many ministers and local churches were involved in the "activist" sixties. It is reliably estimated, for instance, that during all the years of the Vietnam protest probably no more than 10 per cent of the churches addressed the question in any significant way, beyond passing reference in sermon or Sunday morning prayer. Apart from how large or small the shift may be, the poll does raise troubling questions. The findings, and the way they are being interpreted, reinforce the enduring antithesis between Christians who believe the Church's mission is to collectively attack systemic injustices and other Christians who are portrayed as promoting a totally privatized religious piety.

As much as we may wish to be rid of these sterile caricatures, they are regularly given new life by the several parties. On the one hand are those who presume to speak for the Church in perpetual motion position-taking of an utterly predictable sort (see above). They come very close to being the McGovern wing of the Democratic party at prayer. On the other, there are the peddlers of personal problem-solving and institutional success; they eschew the remotest taint of political controversy and come very close to suggesting that, if you get right with Jesus, the world's problems will disappear.

If the churches are to play a more vital role in public policy, and they should, a third alternative needs to be pressed; one in which individuals and groups are equipped to exercise God-given responsibilities of citizenship. Such an approach must recognize and celebrate the radical pluralism of political perspectives that exists in the churches. Neither Anita Bryant's Baptists and their views on homosexual rights nor the NCC and its position on Cuba should claim to represent *the* Christian perspective. By seeing pluralism as an asset rather than a handicap, the churches can exercise an indirect influence through clarifying the moral dimensions of public issues and nurturing a diversity of engagements in the political process. In this way the churches can move beyond the present choice between publicly impotent piety or captivity to narrow partisanship. The alternative is a pluralistic empowerment of "the people of God" in search of the commonweal that both employs and surpasses specific political programs.

*Abraham Martin Murray is the collective name of those who contribute to "A View of the World." The opinions expressed sometimes coincide with those of the editors.*