

Publishing Editor's column

I WAS INTRIGUED recently to read in the *International Jerusalem Post* (in a weekly column entitled "Ethics at work") of research done by Philip Booth of the Institute of Economic Affairs showing that countries which are more religious tend to have more corruption in public bodies. This was particularly noticeable in countries which are strongly Roman Catholic. It is also true, however, of Muslim countries. For example, the British Government recently attracted considerable media criticism for calling off a corruption investigation into the awarding of a huge contract to British Aerospace by the Saudi Arabian government for the supply of military equipment, following threats by the Saudi government to cancel the contract. Saudi Arabia is perhaps the most strongly Islamic country in the world.

Elsewhere in the same issue of the *International Jerusalem Post* there was an article by an observant Jew, a citizen of Israel, lamenting the extent of corruption in modern Israel. It was entitled, "The blight of corrosive corruption", with the subtitle, "Will Israel be a light unto the nations, or just a corrupt little secular state?". He cites the fact that eighty-five per cent of Israel's citizens now think the government is corrupt. Bribery and cronyism is apparently widespread, and the problem begins at the top. The current and previous three prime ministers are or have been subject to investigation over alleged financial improprieties, and the then president was forced to resign over this issue some years ago. These problems are not restricted to secular Jews; prominent rabbis have been involved in corruption scandals, and some years ago the leader of Shas, the most powerful religious party in Israel, was jailed on corruption charges. The current situation contrasts strongly with the situation years ago when the pioneers in establishing the State of Israel were people of integrity.

The author of this article begins by saying that he was studying the prophecy of Isaiah when he was struck by the aptness of the following words to Israel today: "Your leaders have become plunderers, associates of thieves, lovers of bribery, pursuers of pay-offs" (1:23, version unknown). Isaiah is not describing a secular society but a religious one, for it is clear from verses 10-15 of this chapter that both the leaders and the people of the nation were carrying out all the religious observances of the Law: sacrifices, religious feasts

and prayers. It was, however, a matter of outward observance only; within, those practising these rites were full of wickedness. Israel today is a state with a strong religious ethos, with laws based upon the Law of Moses, sabbath observance and feasts part of the pattern of life, and rabbis actively involved in the legal system, yet we have the situation depicted above.

The situation was, of course, the same at the time of Jesus. In Matthew 23 he castigated the scribes and Pharisees for their outward observance of the Law while at the same time being full of wickedness within; for example, enriching themselves at the expense of poor widows, and by legal devices evading carrying out their promises. The situation was no better in Victorian Britain, a society in which most people went to church but practised the kinds of abuses that were castigated, for example, in the novels of Charles Dickens. It was even worse during the time of Nazi domination of Europe, when many Roman Catholics, including priests, supported the massacres of Jews and others. This hypocrisy provides ammunition for those who profess atheism and humanism, and who maintain that religion is in fact an obstacle to the achievement of a just and fair society. The breakdown of morality in secular nations of the West, and the deaths of many millions of people at the hands of the state in communist régimes such as Stalin's Russia and Mao Tse-tung's China, show this not to be so, however.

We know that only the rule of Christ over the earth will bring this situation to an end. However, we need to look to ourselves, for there will be a multitude of saints from all ages and all nations who will work with Christ to provide a righteous rule over the earth, and we will only be among them if our religion is a matter of the heart as well as outward observance. Occasionally we are shocked to discover that one looked up to as a pillar in our community has in fact been practising wickedness while preserving outward observance. Let this not be the case with us: "Who shall ascend in to the hill of the LORD? Or who shall stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation" (Ps. 24:3-5).

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