

OPINION

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GENERAL DECLINE IN MORAL VALUES

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A NUMBER of recent happenings have conspired to make me feel that there has been a noticeable decline in morality in the world at large. What seems to matter least of all now are the means and that cannot be right. To take some examples. In the last few weeks as many as three American journalists have been found out for breach of professional ethics. One of them reported anti-British troops stories from Northern Ireland which he could not substantiate when challenged and so he got the sack; a lady journalist who won a prize for her reporting was subsequently forced to return it when it became obvious that her story had been made up. As a result the prize, which she forfeited, was given to another lady journalist who in her turn had to admit that the source for her story was not the one she had quoted, so that she too has had to give up the prize. Three American journalists in barely one week found out!

Then, too, there is the British journalist who went to Australia and sold the purported taped telephone conversations of Prince Charles and his fiancée and of Prince Charles and the Queen to a German publication for some £ 15,000. Whether these conversations are not authentic, as has been alleged in an afterthought by the Royal Family whose solicitors began by issuing an injunction on their publication on the grounds of breach of privacy, is beside the point. What is to the point and what raises a moral issue is whether it is right for a journalist to make use of tapes which someone in the telecommunications system of Australia gave him. After all, even royalty are entitled to privacy in love; what a son tells his mother off the record is also his own affair. "The Economist" has suggested that Her Majesty ought to have presented Prince Charles with the kind of scrambler used by top business executives; such a scrambler costs a mere £ 5,000 but, according to "The Economist", this is a price the Queen can well afford on a present to her son. Indeed, Her Majesty can afford £ 5,000 but this does not answer the question of morality. Why can Prince Charles not talk to his fiancée like any ordinary citizen? If he needs a scrambler it is because much of journalism has lost the morality which used to make one proud of belonging to that profession.

In all the years I worked in India, and subsequently in the West, I have never paid an informant for information, nor indeed have I paid 'expen-

ses'. At most I have, as in the case of anybody one meets socially, offered my informants a cup of tea, if that. It is profoundly immoral to my mind for a journalist to pay for information. In 1979 it will be remembered that in the notorious proceedings of the Jeremy Thorpe case, one of the key witnesses was offered a large sum of money by a publication *if the defendant was convicted*. But even more scandalous, in the case of one minor witness who had no story to sell—all the other witnesses had already sold their stories right, left and centre—he was persuaded by a newspaper, who found that all worthwhile stories had come under exclusive rights, to accept payment so that he would ask for reporting restrictions to be lifted. This way that newspaper, too, could fill its pages with the kind of titbits upon which the hunger for sensationalism feeds.

And now, in the disgusting Yorkshire Ripper case, a sizeable section of the press has once again come out the worse for wear. It seems that all possible witnesses, from mere acquaintances of the Ripper to people in any way likely to add pepper to the story, have been either given or promised money for their exclusive contribution. Indeed, the News of the World offered the unfortunate wife of the Ripper £ 110,000 for her "exclusive" but that offer has been withdrawn because of the hue and cry started, quite rightly, by the mother of one of the victims who said that this kind of cheque-book journalism was a way of compensating the family of the guilty by making sure that whatever happens to criminals their near and dear would be all right.

However, the moral decline on which I am dwelling goes much further than cheque-book journalism, as can be seen by the world reaction to the latest happenings in Northern Ireland. Two Roman Catholic IRA prisoners have committed suicide—a crime against the will of God, according to the Pope—and have been treated like heroic martyrs by many. First of all in Belfast the bodies of these men, who expressly disobeyed the advice of the Pope's personal envoy, were allowed to lie in state in a Roman Catholic church, although according to Roman Catholic dogma their bodies can never rest in consecrated ground. Yet both are enjoying massive funerals. Before the death of the first "martyr" an American ex-Attorney General had the cheek to come to Belfast to support the hunger strike of those people who are, after all, nothing but convicted criminals. When he was refused the right to visit the IRA hunger-strikers he was widely seen on television as protesting his indignation. So much for an ex-Attorney General who ought to have known better. "L'Express, the leading French weekly, went into ecstatic rapture over the heroism of this 'unfortunate young man' Bobby Sands who has destroyed his body for a cause. "L'Express" pointed out, presumably to draw crocodile tears from its readers, that after the fifteenth day of a hunger strike one begins to devour one's own body, with the result that the liver shrinks as does the brain and that in the process one suffers not only great pain but irreversible damage. If this were true Mahatma Gandhi, who must have starved himself on many occasions for more than fifteen days, would have

become a semi-cretin before he was murdered. The fuss made over the hunger strike of the IRA prisoners is totally misguided. This is because so many people today, unlike Mahatma Gandhi, forget that the end never justifies the means and indeed they do not even bother to consider what the end involves. I have no doubt myself that if Mahatma Gandhi had been alive, instead of interceding on behalf of the IRA strikers, as it is reported that Mrs. Gandhi has done, he would have gone on a counter hunger strike to try to persuade them to give up their efforts to promote a bloody civil war. Indeed all that the IRA hunger strikers are asking for in their protest is for the legitimisation of murder and that is something which should never be granted.

What I find very puzzling indeed is that on a moral issue as clear cut as this there should be room for double standards and confused thinking of the kind shown by the reaction of the media and a number of governments who prefer to focus their attention upon the self-inflicted plight of a few fanatical individuals while totally overlooking the fact that this fanaticism has, over the past few years destroyed many homes, maimed and killed a large number of innocent people, not to mention the unfortunate widows and orphans whose only sin was that their fathers did not agree with fanatics. It is high time the good old moral values upon which people of my generation were brought up were restored to their place because, if this does not happen, the world is running an ever-increasing risk of turning Clockwork Orange.

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