

COMMENTARY

THE CAUSES OF CRIME. The announcement that the Nuffield Trust has commissioned Lord Pakenham to conduct an enquiry into the causes of crime is very welcome. It is to be hoped that a grave problem is now recognized as needing investigation at its centre and not merely at its circumference. In this country there is a long and honourable tradition in penal reform, and the need is as urgent as ever for a sane and constructive policy with regard to offenders against the law. But punishment can avail little unless the crime it presupposes is first acknowledged for what it is; a disease in the structure of society which is capable of description (and that is much) and perhaps of cure.

Those who are in reaction against the secular mood of our time will be sceptical as to the value of such an investigation. For the Christian, it is true, crime is not surprising: sin is not new, and the offences the state takes cognizance of are a faithful enough reflection of a contemporary moral decline. The dismal catalogue of likely causative factors is too familiar: the breakdown of family life, the loss of religion, the effect of conscription, the commercialized exploitation of violence and sex in films and newspapers. But they are familiar as generalities only, and the Home Secretary's frequent reference to 'the decay of religion and of the moral law' as the principal cause of crime is not often particularized. What in fact does the statement mean? One has a suspicion that 'religion' in the vague is thought to be a form of social insurance; its sanctions should secure the public decencies. And so they should, but not in isolation, as though one could turn back a powerful tide of national apostasy by an appeal to the usefulness of religion, invoking the moral law while ignoring its organized denial on a scale far greater than that of the crime the police discover.

The methods of modern sociological enquiry are at least descriptively useful, and one may suppose that Lord Pakenham's investigations will take account of them. But they cannot of course do more than enumerate the discernible factors in a situation which is far more complex than a questionnaire can indicate. Yet if the decline of religious belief (and hence of its practice) is indeed the radical cause of crime, it should be possible to assess the value of the existing methods of religious instruction, for

instance. The challenge put forward by politicians and judges, with their reiterated emphasis on the importance of religion as the cure for crime, should be boldly accepted. If they mean what they say, then let them learn what are the discoverable facts. In advance one can guess that the evidence will be like. It will show that religious sanctions can have little meaning when at so many points the ordinary business of living is thought to be exempt from them. This is not to say that the practice of Christianity is not possible in the slums, nor that the flood of divorce with its legacy of divided homes necessarily creates contempt for the law. There are far too many generous exceptions to justify such pessimistic conclusions. The malady lies at a deeper level than that of material circumstance, though the influence of place and time are powerful indeed. It reflects the whole dilemma of the Christian life in an industrial society, and no enquiry that ignores this basic consideration can hope to be useful.

For those who believe (and those who are at least nominally Christian are present in prisons, Borstals and approved schools in a proportion that is higher than one might expect), crime is not too easily identified with sin. It may of course not be sinful at all, and the moral culpability of even chronic criminals is not always grave. But a real hiatus seems to exist between a consciousness of 'personal' sin and an indifference to social obligation. The great majority of crimes offend against the virtue of justice: the rights of another have been invaded, his property has been stolen. And such offences (and the social setting they suggest) are too readily separated from the 'duties' of religion as seen in terms of personal obligation. Is religious instruction in schools, one wonders, effectively related to the life of a community, and does the Christian community itself have much sense of its responsibilities as a community? Perhaps the divorce between precept and the practice that seems likely to be achieved is already too grave, and the flood of crime is the proof of it.

An investigation, however disinterested its motives, can do little more than to state the problem. This we may hope Lord Pakenham's enquiry will do. There will remain the hard work of commending the faith, not as a first-aid in a desperate situation but as the ultimate solvent of this, as of every other, human misery.