

True test of kingship

One African monarch has more reason than most to welcome a possible shift in the Vatican's position on condoms. Isabel de Bertodano meets King Letsie III of Lesotho, who has taken unusual steps to help alleviate his country's Aids crisis

It's not often that much attention is paid to Lesotho. But last year a frisson of international admiration greeted the news that the tiny southern African nation was to be the first country in the world to offer each of its inhabitants a free HIV test. When it was then announced that the Catholic king of Lesotho had volunteered to take the test, he found himself in the unfamiliar situation of featuring in newspapers across the globe.

Mohato Seeiso, otherwise known as King Letsie III, agreed to a rare interview with *The Tablet* in the Royal Palace in Lesotho's capital, Maseru. He confirms that he is prepared to take the test. "I think it's important for people in the public eye to practise what they preach," he explains. "We are telling people to go to the tests and know their status, and we also want to demonstrate that we can do the same."

It is a progressive, pragmatic view of the situation, particularly for an African leader. Already besieged by poverty, Lesotho is struggling to get a grip on its Aids rate, the third highest in the world.

"In Lesotho I'm confident in saying that there isn't a single family not affected by Aids," says King Letsie. "Some families are burying family members on a weekly basis and it's leaving orphans in every village. We were slow to catch on, like most countries, to the fact that Aids is a reality and it is deadly. But we realised in the past few years that this is something which has a potential to eliminate the entire population if we don't stand up and do something about it."

Lesotho has a population of 1.8 million and according to the World Health Organization the average life expectancy for a male baby born today is 29 years. The country is a landlocked island, floating in the sea of the relative prosperity of South Africa. Its currency, the loti, is tied to the South African rand to make the economy more stable, but even so a quarter of the population does not have enough to eat.

"Poverty and issues of development are of grave concern to me," says the King. "It is frustrating when you see poverty endemic in many places you go and you wish that there were something that could be done about it."

King Letsie III has no constitutional power, but he says that he is happy with this and does not crave more influence in the affairs of his country.

"I'm very glad that I'm not a politician. My nature would prevent me being a politician – I don't like the combative aspect of politics," he explains. "I give advice when my advice is sought, or even if it's not sought wherever I see that advice is needed."

While the King is a practising Catholic who has married a Catholic and is bringing up his two young daughters as Catholics, he says: "Believing doesn't mean you believe in everything."

We discuss the Church's attitude to the use of condoms in the fight against Aids, which remains controversial to the secular world and has become one of the most contentious ethical topics in the Church itself. The official position reiterated by Pope Benedict has been that abstinence is the effective response to Aids.

But only a few days ago, Cardinal Martini, the former archbishop of Milan, said that in couples where one partner has HIV/Aids, which could be passed to the partner, the use of condoms would be a lesser evil (see Robert Mickens, page 6).

King Letsie, after seeing the ravages of Aids in his own country, is unequivocal in his support for the ABC (abstinence, be faithful, condoms) policy promoted by his government. "I don't want to be seen as subverting the message of the Pope but I see the realities of HIV around me in Lesotho," he says. "There are people who cannot be faithful and who are not abstaining, so we are encouraging them to please use a condom."

The Royal Palace looks something like a smaller version of the National Theatre in London. We sit in a drawing room on pale sofas and sip tea from bone china stamped with the royal crest. The King is a tall, stocky man and it is easy to believe the stories that he was good at sports during his schooldays at Ampleforth. He had an extraordinary childhood, spending the holidays in Lesotho as a royal prince and the term time in England as a public school boy. He speaks fondly, almost wistfully, of his years at school.

"It was fun. Looking back I think honestly those were the best times of my life." Moments later he repeats himself. "I had so much fun," he says, before adding with



an enigmatic laugh, "Perhaps too much fun."

He also attended Ampleforth's prep school, Gilling Castle, from the age of nine. I suggest that he may have lost something by being educated abroad for so long, but he disagrees, arguing that the gains outweighed any losses and that in England he was exposed to a different way of life, which has been useful to him.

"I was fortunate enough to have the best of both worlds," he says. "When I came home in the holidays my parents made sure that I knew what life in Lesotho was like for a boy of my age. I was free to play with my mates in the village and I spent most of my time there herding cattle and sheep or going to the fields. I would be harvesting wheat one day and the next day I would hop on the plane and go back to school. It was an upbringing which I feel I was fortunate to have."

A product of his education is the 42-year-old King's ability to express himself with confidence. He combines this with an agreeably self-deprecating manner, and a rather regal habit of occasionally using the first person plural to refer to himself. However, his attitude is relaxed and informal, despite his reputation for media shyness. A contemporary of the Crown Prince at Ampleforth, Richard Cumming-Bruce, remembers him well, saying that he was universally liked.

"He was sports mad and played a lot of cricket," says Mr Cumming-Bruce. "I remember

him as a thoroughly nice bloke who wasn't remotely pleased with himself. He was as stiff a royal as you could imagine."

After Ampleforth, the Crown Prince did a law degree in Lesotho before going back to England to do a two-year postgraduate law degree at Bristol and then a development studies diploma at Cambridge. However, he claims never to have wanted to live abroad permanently or pursue any career other than monarch.

"I knew that it was just training oneself to acquire skills," he says. "I always knew I would come back here, and I always wanted to come back. Even now I'd hate to live in England. I'm so happy where I am. I'm grateful that I was born in this part of the world, even with all its problems. I'm proud to be a Basuto and I'm proud to be in the position that I am, difficult as it may be."

Lesotho was originally known as Basutoland, its people formed from disparate tribes in the early nineteenth century by King Litsie's ancestor, King Moshoeshoe. Under pressure from the encroaching Boers it became a British protectorate in 1868, leading to its exclusion from the Union of South Africa in 1910. On gaining independence in 1966, the country's name was changed to Lesotho.

Coming to the throne in 1990 was a baptism of fire for the 26-year-old Prince. His father, Moshoeshoe II, had been exiled by the army general responsible for a coup, who installed the Prince as King Litsie III. After a further coup he oversaw the country's first democratic elections in 23 years, but abdicated in favour of his father in 1995. However, Moshoeshoe II was killed in a car crash the following year.

I ask his opinion of his fellow Catholic African leader, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, but am told firmly that he would rather not comment. "He has a lot on his plate," is all the King will say. "The AU [African Union] is dealing with the Zimbabwe issues in its own way."

He has met members of the British royal family, with whom he got on "well enough", but surely such people must seem to live in a world entirely removed from the problems of southern Africa. "We do sometimes feel like the forgotten continent," he agrees, saying that one of the principal problems for the region is climate change. "We are deeply worried that there seems to be no consensus in the developed world about the causes of global warming and how to tackle it," he says. "The developed countries are the main contributors to global warming and it looks like the problem will just get worse while they are arguing about the signs and the politics of it."

As the interview ends we go out into the large entrance hall of the palace where a double staircase carpeted in red sweeps away to the upper floors of the building. A group of security men in dark suits standing around waiting for us abruptly break off their conversations and leap to attention. I walk back along the drive, wondering how often this African monarch's mind returns nostalgically to carefree summer days spent on the cricket fields of north Yorkshire.

CLIFFORD LONGLEY

'Creeping relativism has been the Left's bugbear since the overthrow of Marxism'



After Marxism, what? It is still not a question the left wing in Britain is willing to face. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons it has proved so supine against the onward march of Blairism. Take Iraq. What looked like the Left's principled opposition to the American-led invasion in 2003 turns out to be little more than disparate and incoherent prejudices. It is a hotchpotch of isolationism, anti-capitalism, pacifism and anti-Americanism, with even a dash of anti-Semitism and pro-jihadism. Add anti-Big Oil, and you could even include anti-globalisation (both climate and trade) in this left-wing syllabus of errors.

This mindset has at last been challenged by a group issuing what it calls the Euston Manifesto, published in the *New Statesman* a week ago. This declares that democracy is a universal value that the Left ought to support wherever it can. And the group had the courage to say the unsayable on the Left – "even in Iraq". It has produced howls of rage.

Among those still repeating the anti-war mantra "immoral and illegal" – many of whom are Catholics – I have yet to meet a single one who follows the logic of that position to demand the release and reinstatement of Saddam Hussein with an apology, and compensation. I have yet to meet a single one for whom the logic of "immoral and illegal" meant fighting on the Iraqi side against the British and American invasion. Yet if they were correct, the clear duty of the international community under the Charter of the United Nations was to rush armed force to Saddam Hussein's aid, to defeat the aggression against him. Why has no one said so, or explained why not?

The position is even worse now. "Illegal and immoral" translates as "bring the troops home". This ignores the fact that the nascent forces of democracy in Iraq are challenged by a form of Islamo-fascism bent on fomenting a sectarian civil war. It is true the withdrawal of Western forces would bring an end to their insurrection, but only because they would quickly emerge victorious, unleashing a worse-than-Taliban nightmare of terror and repression.

The same approach would soon have Israel negotiating its surrender to Hamas – for the Left in Britain is just as simplistic in its view of the Palestine-Israel conflict. There has been a strange left-wing taboo in discussion of Iraq that avoids the best possible argument for deposing Saddam Hussein by force. His supposed 600-mile-range rockets packed with WMD were never (if they existed) a serious threat to British bases in Cyprus, the line the papers followed. They were a threat to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. If Saddam Hussein was restored to power, the threat would return. Why is the British Left always so blind to the precariousness of Israel's position?

The Euston Manifesto has had a tough time among left-wing intellectuals, who have picked on minor inconsistencies while ignoring the contradictions in their own position. So far the ideological battle left of centre in Britain has been between the orphans of Marx, clinging by habit to old certainties such as "private bad, public good" (or "America bad, everywhere else good"), and the pragmatism of the Blair or Brown camps, both of whom have eschewed grand theory-making and made a virtue out of "what works" instead. Now that even the Conservatives have signed up to the same lukewarm social democrat package, the Left's job is to think out a coherent theory of its own, not just throw bricks at other people's windows. The Euston Manifesto, with all its faults, is not yet that theory; but it represents the beginning of the ground-clearing that is necessary before the real construction work can begin.

Above all, this ground-clearing exercise has to address and remove the creeping relativism that has been the Left's bugbear since the absolutism of Marx was thrown overboard. This relativism says that one belief system, and indeed one method of government, is as good as another, and hence to try to impose Western values – such as the rule of law, freedom and democracy – on other cultures is racist or colonialist. This would require the rebirth of the left-wing interventionism that saw it as its duty to fight tyranny and support democracy everywhere – like the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. We are a long way from the point at which an International Brigade of left-wing volunteers signs up to fight alongside the Americans and British in Iraq – the Euston Battalion, we could call it. Until that becomes at least plausible, however, the Left in Britain will have nothing coherent to say worth listening to.