

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS  
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

ADDRESS BY MR JOHN HUME MP, MEP  
AT A SPECIAL SERVICE

IN  
ST THOMAS' PARISH CHURCH  
BELFAST

SUNDAY 9 MAY 1993

If one were to judge Christianity and its values on the basis of the number of people who regard themselves as Christian of whatever denomination and who go to church, then Belfast would qualify as one of the most Christian cities in the world.

Yet in this city, in addition to the horrible atrocity of murder it has been necessary to build 13 walls to separate one section of a Christian people from another and to protect them from one another. Those walls are an indictment of everyone and if we are genuinely Christian then they should force us to think and to re-examine in depth our attitudes because it is our past attitudes that have built those walls. They are in stark contrast to the most fundamental of Christian beliefs, love thy neighbour.

My basic request to all sections of our people is therefore to begin a fundamental re-examination of our attitudes, for that we must do if we are to bring those walls down and put our common Christianity into practice. If we succeed, then in addition to achieving the lasting peace that so many of our people want, we can give an example to other areas of conflict in the world.

At the end of the day, all conflicts are about the same thing - the refusal to accept difference and treating difference as a threat. That attitude is in fundamental conflict with basic

Christianity because the God in which we all believe created every single human being and there are not two human beings in the whole world who are the same. Difference is of the essence of creation and should never therefore be the source of hatred or conflict particularly, in the name of the God that created the difference.

It is an accident of birth where we are born and what we are born. We are human beings before we are anything else. Humanity transcends nationality or identity. That is not only a fundamentally Christian statement. It is the basis of lasting peace anywhere in the world.

First, I ask the Unionist people, largely from the Protestant tradition, to re-examine their attitudes. The objective of the Unionist people - the preservation, protection of their identity, their ethos and their way of life is a totally honourable and worthy objective with which no one can quarrel. My question to the Unionist people is not about their objective but about their methods.

It appears to me and to the people that I represent that the basic methods used to achieve that objective is to hold all power in their own hands - "Ourselves Alone". To include anyone else is seen as a threat and as ultimately leading to the undermining of the Unionist ethos. What we have we hold, we do not share.

It seems to me that such an attitude reveals a deep lack of self confidence in themselves. This is underlined by what appears to the rest of us to be the persistent need for the British Government to repeat their guarantee of the Union. The fact that British Government Ministers have to repeat it so regularly reveals at the end of the day a fundamental distrust of the commitment to the guarantee by British Governments.

Indeed history confirms that distrust. Henry Grattan one of the towering Protestant figures in Irish history was guaranteed in 1782 that his parliament would last forever. Forever lasted 18 years. Your own Church, the Church of Ireland was then guaranteed that it would remain the Established Church. That guarantee lasted a little longer, 67 years. The sense of alienation which Archbishop Eames referred to recently is, I believe, based on a deep seated distrust of such guarantees.

The real strength of the Unionist people rests in their own numbers, their deep conviction and their geography. This problem cannot be solved without their agreement, they are their own guarantors and we will achieve lasting piece when their representatives stand on their own feet and negotiate an agreement with those other people with whom they share a piece of earth.

Such an approach would be totally in keeping with my understanding of the basis of Protestantism - the acceptance of plurality - which has been so effectively practised by the Protestant tradition in so many countries across Europe where the same religious differences existed.

Indeed I have often spoken of the role of the Ulster Protestant in the creation of the United States of America and its constitution. There they created a society in which the enormous differences are respected and they all work together in the common interest, - the real task of politics - improving the way of life of people. The philosophy could be summed up in the message that one reads at the grave of Abraham Lincoln, E Pluribus Unum, from many we are one.

The essence of unity and stability in any society is the acceptance of diversity. Paradoxically, the Exclusivism which Unionism appears to us to represent in our society is in total contradiction of those values that Protestantism represents in world culture: freedom of conscience, liberty of the individual, civil and religious freedoms.

The nationalist people largely from the Catholic community must also deeply re-examine their attitudes. Many of our young people

have become involved in physical force movements or armed struggle, as they call it, in keeping with a handed-down notion of Irish patriotism. Those who claim the right to kill and the right to die in the name of Irish unity not only contradict the meaning of unity but undermine the integrity of the concept for their philosophy is clearly not about unity of people but about conquest, assimilation or triumphalism.

To make the most fundamental human right, the right to live, subsidiary to a political principle is to undermine all human rights. Their political principle is that the Irish people have the right to self-determination.

That is the language of the League of Nations and of the United Nations but it derives from a period in world history when the nation state was the essential concept of government and is based on territorial interests. Territory was more important than people. That is the basic philosophy which fuelled 19th and early 20th century nationalism and led to two world wars and imperialism.

Thankfully the rest of Western Europe, but unfortunately not Eastern Europe, has moved away from that concept. The world is a much smaller place today not least because of development in

telecommunications and transport. Interdependence is today more important to peoples than independence. We cannot live apart.

What has to be accepted by everyone is that it is people that have rights and not territory. When a people are divided as to how that right is to be exercised then agreement cannot be achieved by any form of force or coercion. In fact as we know from sad and bitter experience, coercion in any form, particularly violence, only drives people further apart and deepens their divisions.

What we must achieve, if we are to have lasting peace, is agreement on how we live together on the island of Ireland. The terrible price of our disagreement does not have to be spelt out. We live with it daily in human, social and economic terms and it is an insult to the common Christianity of our island.

In order to underline our commitment to agreement, the SDLP have proposed, and it has been endorsed by the Irish Government, that any agreement reached should be endorsed in a joint referendum, held on the same day in the North and in the South requiring a yes from each.

This proposal is designed to reassure the Unionist people that we mean what we say when we talk of agreement. From a Unionist

perspective such an agreement would not just be validated by a majority of people in the North but would have the approval and allegiance of nationalist Ireland - North and South.

From a nationalist, point of view it would be the first time ever that the people of Ireland as a whole would have endorsed the institutions of government North and South. This is the true basis of lasting peace and order because for the first time ever institutions of government would have the total loyalty of all the people. It would also be a meaningful expression of self determination in a real situation.

For its part the British Government should make clear that it not only wants to see agreement between the people of Ireland as to how they live together but that it will do all in its power to facilitate such agreement and if agreement is reached that it will respect such an agreement. It goes without saying that any such agreement would have to concentrate on giving positive expression to relationships within Ireland but also to the unique relationships which exist between Britain and Ireland.

Such agreement should be much easier today than 50 years ago. We live together in a Europe which has sorted out much deeper differences and we have a duty to learn from the European experience. European peoples slaughtered one another twice in

this century alone. Thirty five million people died in the second world war. No one could have forecast 50 years ago that we would have European unity today, a unity which has respected the widespread diversity and dignity of the peoples of Western Europe and which has put its bitterness and distrust behind it. It is our duty to examine how it was done and apply the lessons to areas of conflict everywhere. How did they do it?

The people of Western Europe accepted that difference is not a threat. The answer to difference is to respect it and to build institutions which accommodate difference and allow the people to work their common ground together, the common ground being economics. That is precisely the approach that we should adopt and that is the approach that governed our attitudes and proposals to the recent talks process.

In keeping with that approach we defined our problem as the need to accommodate two sets of legitimate rights - the rights of the Unionist people to their identity, their ethos and their way of life and the right of the Nationalist people to precisely the same. We believe that in the context of the new Europe, in which sovereignty has changed its meaning and whose very existence is a proclamation that the independent nation state is out of date, it should be easier for us to resolve our differences.

Our situation today is totally different from the 1920s where our problem was a straightforward clash of sovereignties. Today both British and Irish Governments are sharing sovereignty over our most fundamental interests with 10 other countries and are committed by international agreement to "an even closer Union".

If we take the positive view, nationalists can take comfort from the fact that an even closer union applies to both parts of Ireland within Europe while Unionists can draw comfort from the fact that it applies to even closer Union between Britain and Ireland in the new Europe. What remains for us to do is to sort out our own relationships so that we can take responsibility for the matters that affect all our people and create the circumstances in which we will at last work together in our common interests.

That was the thinking that governed our proposals to the talks, the accommodation of both identities. We proposed that three commissioners be elected by P R and that they would, as in the American Presidential tradition, each appoint two experts from the community as a whole to administer the six departments of government in Northern Ireland. These elected commissioners would be joined by nominees from Dublin and London. In our view those proposals give strong recognition to the Unionist identity and minimal to our own. The Unionists would have six members in

the administration, we would have three. In addition Northern Ireland would still be in the United Kingdom with its representation at Westminster. The only expression of nationalist identity would be the nominee from Dublin who would be matched on the Unionist side by one from London.

We also suggested that the administration should, like the European Council of Ministers, act unanimously for a number of years thus ensuring that it would be common ground that we would be working together which would build trust and confidence and would rule out any take over possibilities.

In our view Unionist objections to our proposals and their misrepresentation of them were not to the actual proposals but to their distrust that there were longer term ulterior intentions and a hidden agenda. They seemed to ignore our total commitment to agreement as expressed in our joint referendum proposals or perhaps we are back again to the negative and exclusive mind that there is only one set of legitimate rights - the rights of the Unionist majority.

However, let us hope that the dialogue will resume and that we can have more direct dialogue such as we are doing today so

that there is a clearer understanding at grassroots level as to what we are about.

Our quarrel has gone on for a long time. It is out of date. Its very existence is a denial of our common Christianity and it poses a serious question about our Christian commitment. In the 6th century St Columba a forefather of both our traditions returned from exile in Iona to settle the 6th century version of our quarrel. It is still familiar today. The clans in Antrim were in conflict with the clans in Tyrone and Derry over their basic loyalties.

We are Dalriada said the Antrim people, we are part of the Dalriada in Scotland so we will pay our dues to the King of Argyll. You are living in Ireland said the Tyronemen so you pay your dues to our High Kings. St Columba was called to a convention at Drumceat outside Limavady. He settled the quarrel and a couple of other disputes of the moment ( epitomising qualities which the gospel perhaps commends to politicians - as wise as a serpent and as gentle as a dove.) What was his solution? Let them pay tribute to both. We need another Columba so that we can heal our divisions and achieve a positive answer to the Psalmists prayer :

"Peace be within they Walls".